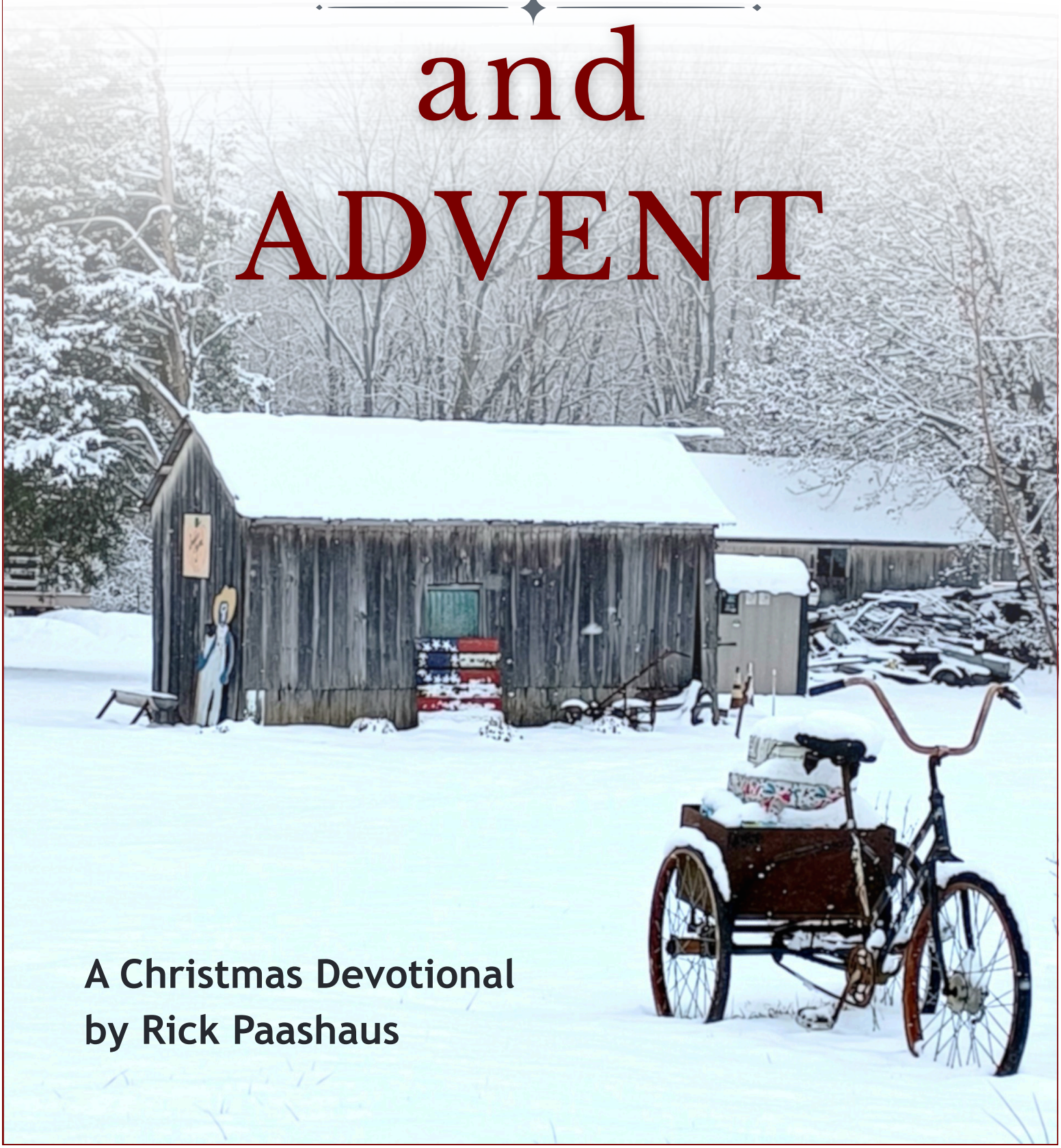
ADVENTURE and ADVENT



A Christmas Devotional

by Rick Paashaus

“We’re on an Adventure!”



The word “adventure” at its root means “something’s about to happen!”

We have one grandchild, Evangeline. Since she was just a toddler we’d take her on short trips, go on “creek walks” in the summer, explore parks and catch sunnies. Getting in the car her Dad would say, “Eva, you’re going on an *adventure! Let’s see where Grandma and Grandpa take you today!”* She’d love it…and so did we.

Something was about to happen!

In the middle of the night recently I woke up thinking about two words with the same root.

Adventure and Advent.

I looked them both up, and sure enough they have essentially the same meaning. They both indicate that something is about to happen, that something is coming, that there is a future and a hope. What wonderful words!

Today is beginning of Advent. Since the Fourth Century the Church has set aside four weeks of Advent to prepare for, to anticipate the coming of Christmas. It was and is a time of reflection, of preparation, of worship, and expectation that “something is about to happen!” As the Prophets anticipated the first Advent and the world woke to the sound of a baby’s cry that changed the cosmos forever, so we await yet another celebration of Christmas with renewed hope and joy and blessing.

Let’s consider what the anticipation is all about. Each day I have a Bible verse for you to read and some thoughts that I’ll share with you to make the conclusion of your year a meaningful, encouraging time of blessing and praise. Will you join me?

Let’s go on an Adventure!

Pastor Rick Paashaus

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Day 1: It's Settled

"Come now, let us settle the matter," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." - Isaiah 1:18

Arlene Mann, a friend of mine, told me of a winter walk she enjoyed with her favorite puppy. It was snowing hard and with a good six inches of untouched whiteness already on the ground she and her pup walked alone through the park near her home. Beautiful. And after a long trek through the snowy field she turned to head back. At first she saw her tracks and those of her furry friend, but as the snow fell and the wind blew even more, she noticed that her entire path was obscured, gone, not even a trace of where they hiked that winter day.

At that moment the words of Isaiah 1:18 came to her mind. "Come, let us reason. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." And there in the quietness of the falling snow, she thanked her Savior for His full forgiveness.

A ministry friend once sat across the desk from me and said something I'll never forget. "You know, sometimes I feel like I need a priest. I need someone to listen to my sin. Oh, I don't mean a mediator. Jesus is the one Mediator between God and man. I get that. But I don't always *feel* forgiven. I feel the need to confess to someone I can see. Someone who recognizes my true repentance. Someone who assures me that my sins are forgiven."

I listened. We talked. We prayed and were open and vulnerable before the One Mediator. I assured him that he indeed was forgiven, not because I was able to do so, but because the Word of God said so.

The NIV translates those first words of Isaiah 1:18 as, "Come, let's settle the matter."

I like that. It's settled. No more discussion. It's done.

Advent provides a new opportunity to remember that "The Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the World." The long-awaited Savior, our Priest, brought full forgiveness. He came to save us from our sin. It's gone. Be assured now and forever.

You. Are. Forgiven! It's settled. Hallelujah!

Day 2: Don't Ever Get Over It!

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! - 2 Corinthians 9:15



He was 31. Quiet, still not sure of what he wanted to do with his life, on the rather "portly" side. He dated a few times, but those relationships didn't go too far. He didn't own a house, still lived with his Pop. He was a good man but unclear about his future.

She was 18. Vivacious, beautiful, her long blonde hair and amazing eyes coupled with a winning smile that always caught your attention. Just graduated from high school, she was anticipating a great future, dreaming of a family including little ones of her own.

They met the first week in September 1947, both of them starting new jobs at J. J. Newberry's 5 & 10 in Middletown, NY. He got brave enough to ask her out and somehow the unlikely couple fell in love.

They married November 30 that same year. I'm sure some thought it an unlikely match and wondered if it would work out.

It did.

They were my Mom and Dad.

Their marriage was an amazing one, resulting in five children, providing care for 52 foster children over the years (many of them for extended periods of time), impacting hundreds of lives, and quietly living out their faith with joy. When Dad died at 63, they had been married 32 years. The stuff of life didn't matter much to them. They had family and friends, they had their faith, their needs were met.

Most of all, they had each other.

After he died, I reflected often on their marriage and wondered just what it was that made their relationship so impressive. This was my conclusion: I don't think Dad ever expected to have a bride like my mom, and I don't think he ever got over the fact that she was the most wonderful gift God ever gave him.

The Christmas Season is about the greatest Gift of all. Out of the darkness, in the still of the night, unto us a child was born. Unto us a Son was given. He was the greatest gift of all.

In 2 Corinthians 9 we read about "the surpassing grace God has given us." Grace. Undeserved, unmerited favor. It's beyond our comprehension! Then verse 15 captures it all: "Thanks be to God for his *indescribable* gift!"

Oh, to be continually overwhelmed with the Greatest Gift. To never take Him for granted, never let Him be "common place," to always live in light of the fact that we have been given this indescribable Gift!

"The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Amazing. But it doesn't end there! He is the Gift that keeps on giving. He promises eternal life along with eternal love, eternal hope, eternal joy, eternal peace, eternal grace.

Like my dad was with my mom, may we always be overwhelmed with the indescribable gifts we've been given in Christ.

Don't ever get over it!

Day 3: Wandering

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. - Isaiah 9:2

A few years back we said a final good-bye to my buddy, Jon Walters. Big Jon will be missed. He loved to sing, tell stories, and make you laugh. One of my memories included all three.

Jon was asked to sing as part of a Christmas program called "On a Winter's Night." The platform was set up like woods with "snow" covered trees and sparkling lights. His part was to simply step out between the trees and sing that eerily beautiful old favorite, "I Wonder as I Wander" and then step off.

On cue, he walked out and began singing. "I wonder as I wander…"

And then, Jon forgot the words.

So he sang again "I wonder as I wander," but it didn't help. So he repeated those five words several more times and graciously sauntered off the platform.

Just the picture of him wandering between the snow-covered trees, repeating the same words, then leaving makes me laugh every time.

But I guess wandering isn't always funny.

In the time of early Advent darkness the prophet Amos wrote, "They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it."

Wandering, aimlessly, headed nowhere fast. Actually, headed nowhere at all. History tells us that they wandered for 400 years. Four hundred years when the voice of God was not heard, when they longed for peace, for redemption, for something or Someone who would bring them hope.

Ah, but then in the darkness, after four centuries, a baby's first cry broke that silence. It was the One whom Isaiah wrote about: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Arise, shine, for your light has come!" With the prophet Simeon, we say, "My eyes have seen the salvation of Israel." The wandering is over. The Light has come. Redemption…at last!

But many still wander. Don Henley wrote the moving song, "Learn to be Still," in which he says, "We are like sheep without a shepherd; We don't know how to be alone. So we wander 'round this desert and wind up following the wrong gods home." So many are still wandering.

This Advent season, for those who are wandering, follow the right God home. He is still the only source of forgiveness, of hope, of peace, of joy. Light and life to all He brings.

Stop wandering and come home!

Day 4: Fear Not!

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. - Luke 2:10



May I be honest?

I've been afraid in recent years...often.

From the constant barrage of news updates to the ever-changing world situation, to the unknowns of AI. Yes, I've been afraid.

And it doesn't stop there.

The divisive grind of politics, the ever-growing racial challenges, a rollercoaster stock market (about which I know nothing) have all added to restless nights and preoccupied days. My first years of retirement, not worshiping with the church family I've loved for so long since I'm at a new church now, navigating change in our family, and reeling from saying tragic goodbyes to lifelong friends have all taken their toll.

As we face the end of yet another year, perhaps the most difficult elephant in the room is the fact that these issues are not over. They linger like the smell of cigarettes in a used car. They're not finished. They're not covered by laughter and parties and silliness. And forgive me, but they're not resolved by just blithely saying, "Don't you trust Jesus? You'll be fine. He's got it all in control."

He does. But it still hurts.

When one of our sons was just a toddler, he sliced his fuzzy little head open on our swing set. We ran to the pediatrician who said he needed stitches. Being too young to understand and too young for anesthesia, they wrapped him in a papoose with only his tiny tearful face showing, his eyes wide open and he was looking right at me! As the procedure began, I'll never forget those little eyes pleading silently, "Why Daddy? Why would you let them do this to me? Why are you just standing there?" And my words didn't really bring comfort at that moment, to him or to me.

He didn't understand then that it was necessary, that it was for his own good, and that I loved him and even shared his tears. When the straps were loosed, we held him close and comforted him. (Then we got rid of the old swing set!)

And so, in my recent year's anxiety I still turn to my Sovereign Father and say, "Help me to trust you, even when it hurts; even when we're lonely; even when we're afraid." I've learned that it's OK to ask God "why?" but accept it when He doesn't always give an answer.

And being the loving Father that He is, He reminds me that the angels' message from the hillside above Bethlehem is still ringing loud and clear. "Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good-will toward men."

Maybe when this is all done, we'll see His purposes. Maybe not. Either way, the loving Father will hold us fast, stilling us, walking beside us as we face tomorrow in His hands.

Day 5: Punch Somebody

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). - Matthew 1:23

It was enough to make a kid cringe. The youth group leaders arranged a "Pastor's Appreciation Night" and before the cupcakes and soda, they had the teens sit in a circle with Pastor Tom Shorb and me.

"Go around the circle and tell what you appreciate about Pastor Shorb," the teacher directed.

After a long silence, Brandin was first, "Ummm…I like it when he preaches." Andy continued, "Yeah, I like it when he preaches too." And most comments, of course, followed suit as Tom sat, his eyes looking at the floor. (Who would have ever thought that these 14-year-olds were so enthralled by expository preaching?!)

But I sat there thinking, "*I don't even preach*…what on earth are they going to say about me??" My heart went out to them.

Then, sure enough, "OK, now, let's do the same for Pastor Rick."

I wanted to slide under my chair.

Brandin began, "When he goes past me in the hall on Sunday he punches me on the arm and I like that." The next boy added, "Yeah, I like it when he punches me too!" And so on, and so on.

This memory still makes me laugh. I'd known most of the teens since they were toddlers and they didn't remember one thing I ever taught or said, just that I punched them!

Then it struck me; they got it. If all they remembered was that I noticed them, cared for them, made contact with them, that's enough.

Sometimes love is physical. Certainly, marital love is, but the hug of a Grandma, the kiss from Aunt Sue, a firm handshake from a neighbor, or the wrestling a Dad does with boys, they all say, "I love you. You matter to me."

The familiar crèche scene couldn't be accurate. Mary and Joseph didn't stand by their newborn, arms folded. Mary cradled her baby in her arms, held him to her breast, warming him in the darkness of the stall. Joseph touched his baby's tiny fingers with his rough carpenter's hands. The shepherds knelt, showing their respect. Later when the Magi saw him, I'm sure they bowed in honor of the King of Kings. Anna and Simeon couldn't leave Him alone. Simeon held Him in his arms and raised his eyes to heaven saying, "Now your servant can depart in peace for I have seen the long-awaited salvation of your people." My guess is that Anna kissed the tiny Messiah and then went and told everyone that He had arrived.

Advent is a time to love. It's a time to show it. The One who said, "Love one another as I have loved you," smiles when we do. The One who held kids in His arms and blessed them laughs when we care for the little ones as well (maybe even when we punch the older ones on the arm!) The One who touched the leper, the blind, the lame and brought them life finds joy when we too reach out to those different than ourselves, those in need.

Who needs to feel love from you this Christmas? What a great gift you can give, the gift of loving them, and telling them, and SHOWING them.

So, go punch somebody today!

Day 6: Humbled to Raise Us Up

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. - 2 Corinthians 8:9



My siblings and I grew up on 100 acres of beautiful farmland just outside of Middletown, New York. My parents rented the old stone house from Walter Garten, the farmer who lived next door. His rambling farmhouse and huge old barn were just a few hundred yards from home.

Christmas Eve when I was 16, I walked over to the barn to bring Mr. Garten a German Christmas card and tin of cookies for him and his wife Irma. He was just finishing up the milking, alone in the barn. He once spoke the "mother language" with my grandfather and told stories of growing up in Germany. But tonight he simply accepted the card and cookies, smiled, wished me a "Merry Christmas," spoke for a few moments, and said "Auf Wiedersehen" before turning to finish his work. The barn was dimly lit by a few naked light bulbs hanging from the dusty rafters, but I could see the tears in the old man's eyes as we spoke.

He had experienced tremendous loss. Christmas was another reminder of his namesake whose motorcycle veered off the road a few years prior, taking his life (and much of his father's as well). From that point on, there would be no more blue spruce trees on Christmas with branches lit by candles and adorned with the family's glass ornaments. The dark house was silent and sadness prevailed.

But that night my senses were accosted by the surroundings there in the old barn. I remember the bawling of the cows, the warmth of their 101 degree bodies heating the stalls even as the December winds howled outside. The earthy smell of the manure blended with the sweet aroma of last summer's hay. Barn cats skittered into the shadows chasing their dinner. And I thought of the first Christmas. In a place like this, a Baby was born to a frightened mother and a totally inexperienced stepfather. The smells would have been the same. The darkness similar. Perhaps a donkey or some sheep would have munched alfalfa beside the cattle. No midwife. No mama or older sister. No sterile sheets or gowns. Just a young mother who wept tears of relief, fear, and wonder at the first cries of her newborn.

Frank Houghton's carol captures best the sentiment of humble beginnings from 2 Corinthians 8:9:

Thou who wast rich beyond all splendor,
All for love's sake becamest poor;
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
Sapphire paved courts for stable floor.
Thou who wast rich beyond all splendor,
All for love's sake becamest poor.

Thou who art God beyond all praising,
All for love's sake becamest man;
Stooping so low, but sinners raising,
Heavenward by Thine eternal plan.
Thou who art God beyond all praising,
All for love's sake becamest man.

Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Savior and King, we worship Thee.
Emmanuel, within us dwelling,
Make us what Thou wouldst have us be.
Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Savior and King, we worship Thee.

Because He humbled himself, was born in that stable, died in humiliation, buried like a pauper in a borrowed tomb, and because God became man, you and I have hope and forgiveness and grace and a future. Jesus came to give life to you, to me, to Walter Garten, to those hurting and broken and wounded, to any and all who will respond to His grace. He was humbled to raise us up.

Day 7: Mystery and Majesty

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. - Revelation 19:6



Our dad loved music. From beautiful hymns to Gospel, Ernie Ford to the Blackwoods, Eddie Arnold to Enrico Caruso, he filled our house and our lives with a variety of song much of which sticks with us till this day.

Thanks, Dad.

He also loved Christmas. In June (yes) he would look at the calendar and say, "Six months from today will be Christmas." And by late November the Christmas music began in earnest. The old Philco record player would spin Christmas songs from Burl Ives to the Vienna Boys Choir.

But he went even further to impress us with the power of music. On the first Sunday in December, he packed us in the Ford Ranch Wagon after church. We made the 32 mile trip to none other than the West Point Cadet Chapel high above the Hudson where since 1968 the Cadets joined with a full orchestra and choirs from nearby universities to present Handel's *Messiah*.

It was magical. The soaring stone chapel with majestic stained glass and the historic American flags was amazing enough. But then out of the silence the opening strains of the Overture brought chills to the spine of even a preteen boy. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given." "Surely, He hath born our griefs and carried our sorrows." "He shall lead His flock like a shepherd." It was all mesmerizing and magnificent.

Then, the crescendo. As the renowned chords of the "Hallelujah Chorus" rang out, Dad would stand with the worshipers who had done so since (tradition tells us) King George II rose in praise to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who indeed reigns forever and ever.

And let me tell you; if Dad stood, we did!

Something was happening there. It was worship at its best, and we joined in awe.

Christmas is the time to remember that this child in the manger was not just a sweet story, not just about a baby in the hay. This was the One about whom the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good-will toward men." This is the One who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows. It was about the Good News, the Gospel, the best news. Unto YOU is born this day a Savior who is Christ, the Chosen One, indeed the KING of Kings and LORD of Lords!

Hallelujah!

Day 8: Not Dead, Not Asleep

I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. - Revelation 1:18

Not long after the devastating day in 2001 that we remember as 9/11, my friend Alan MacDonald met Joe Findlay, a New York City fireman. Joe's father, a fireman himself, was killed fighting a terrible blaze that had claimed the greatest number of firefighters ever in New York until 9/11.

Then the World Trade Center towers fell.

Joe and hundreds of his coworkers were called to the scene. It was more horrendous than you and I could imagine. The acrid soot filling the air, the horror of it all overcoming the strongest of the firefighters and emergency workers there.

Joe tried to help but was quickly overwhelmed himself. The evil that caused such pain was beyond comprehension. By late afternoon he and his crew were stepping through the rubble when he stopped and just stood on the outskirts of the wreckage. After the roar of the collapse was over and the sirens had been quieted, a deathly silence descended over the "City that Never Sleeps."

Then he heard it. Church bells from all over the city rang out loud, echoing off the New York's remaining skyscrapers. Since the din of the crowd, the noise of taxis and buses and limos, and the roar of the subways had all been silenced, those bells from Manhattan's Trinity Church, and St. Nicholas, and Our Lady of Victory, and St. Paul's seemed to fill the air with their sound. Joe was mesmerized as he stood and listened.

When he related all of this to Alan, my friend asked him, "Joe, do you know the old carol, 'I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day' by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow?'" Joe did not.

Alan shared it with this broken first responder:

I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep.
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men."

Longfellow experienced the loss of his own bride in a fire and then faced the devastation of the Civil War leading him to write these lyrics. He never dreamed that a New York Fireman named Joe would experience the same truth so vividly in 2001.

When times of darkness seep in, those words still ring true! The long-awaited "Prince of Peace" is with us. The angels' song of Peace on Earth is still being sung.

When we feel banished by life's struggles, maybe alienated from family and loved ones: God is not dead, nor doth He sleep!

When aging seems to take its toll: God is not dead, nor doth He sleep!

When we are treated unjustly, disregarded because of our race or heritage: God is not dead, nor doth He sleep!

When uncertainty and fear and loneliness abound: God is not dead, nor doth He sleep!

When we find it hard to pray, and when we do, we wonder if we're being heard: God is not dead, nor doth He sleep!

Day 9 : The Blanket

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. - Philippians 3:7-9



It has been more than 60 years since *A Charlie Brown Christmas* with its scraggly tree and simple recitation of the Luke 2 account of the birth of Jesus first moved us. Charles Schulz was not only a creative cartoonist, but he was also a man of faith who wove the Gospel into the expressions of Charlie and Lucy and Linus and even Snoopy. For many, every Christmas since 1965 included the spunky lines from Lucy, the funky piano playing, and Charlie's final realization of what "Christmas is all about."

But an article by Jason Soroski opened my eyes to something I never caught in Schulz's classic Christmas Special.

We all remember Linus and his ever-present blanket. He couldn't face a minute, let alone a day without it. It brought him security, an ever-present help in times of trouble. You probably won't remember one comic strip since 1950, one animation, or one frame where Linus drops the blanket.

Until now.

In the middle of the dramatic conclusion to Charlie Brown's Christmas, Linus steps to the empty stage, the spotlight on him. In that innocent, memorable voice he simply begins the timeless story, "And there were in the same country shepherds, abiding in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, the Angel of the Lord came upon them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid."

Then it happens.

As he recites, "And the angel said unto them, 'FEAR NOT!'" Linus drops that ever present blanket to the floor and continues the passage, "For behold, I bring you great tidings of great joy. A Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

I never noticed it! The blanket, Linus's security, for once is dropped intentionally to the floor. Schulz wrote that detail into the script. I know it was just a cartoon, but it still gives me chills.

Whatever brings you security, whatever you hope in, put your confidence in, your job, your relationships, your abilities, your religion, your money, it is as worthless as Linus's blanket compared to knowing the One who was born our Savior, Christ the Lord!

Christ brings security. He who said, "I will never leave or forsake you" is good for His word. He is faithful to complete what He has begun.

Finally, we can let the blanket fall.

Day 10: Always Welcome

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. - Hebrews 13:2



The old stone house on the hillside outside of Middletown, New York was really pretty basic. Downstairs was an eat-in kitchen and a well-used living room. Upstairs you'd find the single bath, our parents' room, the "Boy's Room," and one heated bedroom. Of course, that room belonged to my sister Cheryl (being the princess in a house of boys had its perks.) Looking back, the house was small, far too small for five kids and Mom and Dad.
But we never realized it.

It was home.

And it was "home" as well to a lot more than the nuclear family. Mom and Dad opened their house and their hearts to 52 foster children over a 30 year span of time, some staying a few weeks, some, like our brothers Paul and Gary who joined us at 8 and 10 years old, stayed until they were adults. The babies who came were straight out of the hospital, newborns that would be with us until a "forever family" was found. They couldn't have started life better than being loved in my mom's arms.

But besides us kids, there were ALWAYS others at the old house. Not a week would go by without someone stopping to visit. Our Uncle Donald would come to take us fishing. Friends from town would stop by for a cup of coffee and to talk on the porch. Cousins would come for a week at a time. In summer dozens joined us in the back yard. In winter school friends would meet us for sledding on the best hills ever. Folks were always welcome at Doris and Harry's.

After we left for college, weekends home would often include buddies from school. During Christmas 1972, Mom and Dad welcomed our college friend Michio to stay for the holiday. It was all new to him, but not being able to return to Japan for Christmas, he loved it. Tom Moe from the dorm room next to mine made the Paashaus's his second family. There you felt loved, comfortable, included…never a guest, always welcome.

Our parents understood the true meaning of hospitality. They didn't entertain. They didn't impress. They hugged and fed and welcomed. They listened and included and cared. They prayed and encouraged and supported. Honestly, they didn't have much materially, but what they had was yours.

We learned so much from their example. When a 16-year-old pregnant teen squeezed into Dad's old Ford to join us for Sunday night church, we learned mercy and grace. When a neighbor stole the fully decorated outdoor tree right off our porch on Christmas Eve, Dad said, "They must have needed a tree more than we did," and we learned forgiveness. When a single Mom needed a babysitter so that she could work to make a living, we learned what it meant to put action to your words. We learned what it meant to love. No one was ever a stranger to them.

Had Mary and Joseph stopped at the stone house outside of Middletown rather than the Inn in Bethlehem, I'm totally certain they would have been welcomed in. "No room?" Not a chance. Mom and Dad would have welcomed them, cared for them, shared with them anything we had, made them feel at home. And oh, would she have loved cuddling that newborn.

There's always room when you live out Hebrews 13.

Day 11: Danny's Brother

But now, this is what the LORD says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. - Isaiah 43:1



I've always been "Danny's Brother."

Since he is two years older than me, when I was in Grade School I was always "Danny's Brother." At Middletown High School, my music teacher knew me as "Danny's Brother." We went to the same college, two years apart and, yep, "Danny's Brother." Dan was and is effervescent; I'm a little more reserved. Dan was and is Mr. Congeniality, very memorable; I'm the one whose name escapes most people. Sigh.

Truth be told, I LOVED being Danny's Brother and still do. (And, I should clarify, I've always loved being Budd's brother, and Cheryl's, and Leroy's as well.)

Now, I suppose on a "down day," I could have felt like I didn't matter much, like I didn't have any identity of my own. The truth is most of us won't have even "one minute of fame." In a world of 8,300,000,000 right now, it's hard to even think that you or I make even a speck of difference. Cheers!

But then I read again the familiar but beautiful story.

"There were shepherds abiding in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night." Nobodies. Ruffians whose entrance into the room was preceded by a whiff of wet wool and sheep dung.

Then the Angel of the Lord says something remarkable to THEM: "Unto YOU is born today in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto YOU: YOU will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

Unto YOU, Mr. Shepherd. Unto YOU, outcast. Unto YOU, simple, uneducated, everyday keeper of the flock. Unto YOU who don't feel like you matter. Unto YOU a Savior!

The God of the Universe; God of all time and space; God who has brought about the lives of not just the 8.3 billion who cover Earth today, but who also sovereignly designed that 107,000,000,000 individuals since Earth's dawning would call this globe home…to this God, the shepherds mattered. To YOU, a Savior.

Today, be reminded of this as well. YOU matter to Him.

The angel didn't say, "Anybody out there? Can you hear me now?" His message came through loud and clear, precise, direct: "Unto YOU…a Savior."

Inconceivable, but true nonetheless. YOU matter to Him. He knows YOU by name. He loves us.

Even Danny's Brother.

Day 12: The Guest of Honor

For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. - Colossians 1:16-17

George Healey was a police officer in Lynn, Massachusetts. He had an outstanding record, was known for his integrity and commitment to the force and to the community. In fact, the town chose to honor him with a banquet, commendations, and a plaque as "Policeman of the Year." The invitations went out and the response was wonderful. All of George's family, co-workers, town notables, and friends attended. There was only one problem.

They forgot to tell George.

Yes, he missed his own party, didn't hear the accolades, and his brother accepted the plaque on his behalf. Those who attended said the meal was amazing, the room and table settings were nicely decorated, even the words of affirmation were inspiring. All that was missing was the one being honored, the reason for the party: George Healey.

Makes you wonder. Sometimes in the busyness of the season, the Amazon deliveries and decorated houses, the parties and music over the sound system at Giant, is it possible that we've lost sight of the One being honored, the reason for the party? It sounds trite, but Jesus really IS the reason! The fact that "The Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world," is at the core of Christmas, at the center of its very purpose.

Yes, Christmas is about Him.

But please, don't take away one single decoration, one Christmas song on the radio, one wonderfully wrapped gift, or one family celebration. Let's not pride ourselves in our stoicism or austerity, frowning at the neighbor's inflatable reindeer, religiously reprimanding our public schools for having "holiday concerts." Instead, what would happen if we simply infused Him into all of the celebration?

Instead, let our songs, our decorating, our worship, our family gatherings, our gift giving, our relationships reflect that we didn't forget the One being honored. We didn't start the party without remembering the honored guest.

One writer who comes from a clearly universalist non-biblical foundation, a skeptic who questions the historicity of the incarnation, amazed me when he stated, "Even if one accepts the story of Jesus and his birth and his life to be true, the true power lies in how we integrate what he represented into our lives. In other words, to paraphrase that traditional Christian statement, even if the Christ presence is born a thousand times in Bethlehem, if that same presence is not born in us, it has no meaning."

What wonderful words, from a skeptic! It is when the Christ of Christmas and all that He represents is infused in, integrated in, lived out in our lives that the world will begin to understand and have faith in His coming.

For many years we used these familiar words from Phillips Brooks carol as the benediction to our Christmas Eve Service:

O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend on us we pray.
Cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell.
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.

May Emmanuel be the very heart of all that you do this Christmas. Let your joy be exuberant, your celebrations be grand, your gifts be generous, your decorations be beautiful, your hearts be bright, and may every moment bring glory and praise to the Guest of Honor.

Day 13: The Best Gifts

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Romans 6:23



It was Christmas 1961. The large wrapped box was overwhelmingly intriguing to a 7-year-old.

Now, let me tell you this. The chances of a Paashaus EVER snooping or opening a gift early were slim to none. A Christmas gift given, opened or even peeked at before Christmas was criminal.

But I waited and wondered about the package. Then in the early light of Christmas morning, we waited some more, three boys sitting at the top of the stairs until the light from the Christmas tree seeped under the living room door and Mom called out, "OK, boys. You can come down!" (Cheryl was only 2 and Leroy wasn't born.)

After hugs and Christmas greetings all around, it was time to get down to business. There were piles of gifts, but I knew the one I wanted to open. Waiting for my turn, I unwrapped the other treats and surprises and finally held the large flat package in my hands.

It was better than I even hoped. Inside was my first Lionel train set. "The General" with its smokestack and cow catcher along with its two yellow passenger cars was a little boy's dream. It was the best gift that Christmas. Dad bought it from the Smoke Shop in town. I found out later that he had the $25 set on layaway for many months until it was paid for.

Our family tradition has not been "expensive" gifts, but special gifts, personal gifts that were just right for that loved one.

When we married, Arlene brought with her a box of childhood treasures that included the sweetest china baby doll you've ever seen. The 4" long black baby doll had been well loved. Its hair was gone and its tiny arms and legs were separated from its naked body, but it was hers.

One Christmas when the boys were very young, unbeknownst to Arlene we took the doll to a "doll hospital" on Emmaus Ave where a woman lovingly restored the doll to its original condition. Tiny pigtails were replaced, a little white nightie was added, and her limbs were reconnected. Plus, our beloved friend Eddie Wolfe added a beautiful cradle and dear Nancy Dunham added a tiny quilt. It was perfect.

I told the boys, "Watch. Mom's going to cry when we give her this!" And we waited.

I was right. She did. One of the boys said, "Dad, you were right! She cried like you said." It was a tender Christmas moment.

Oh, the memories go on and on. Our family gifts were unique, fun, and meaningful. Each gift was chosen and given with love and received with joy. It's a Paashaus thing.

Traced back to the first treasures given to the Christ child, Christmas gifts are more about the expressions of the heart than they are about extravagance or excess. The gold spoke of the kingship of Jesus, the myrrh a symbol of His coming death on our behalf, the frankincense the fact that He was worthy of our worship. The Baby Himself was the ultimate gift sent because of the Father's love.

May the memories of Christmas past, the joy of family love today, and the Greatest Gift that lasts for eternity be yours today and always. Now, I'm going to go play with my Lionel. (Yes. It's still under the tree 60 years later!)

Day 14: The Night the World Begins Again

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. - John 15:11

Recently I mentioned Charles Wesley's theology-packed carol, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." Beautiful and powerful.

John Reznik, lead singer for the Goo Goo Dolls, isn't quite the theologian that Wesley was, but his song "Better Days" certainly hits home during this Advent Season.

And you asked me what I want this year;
And I try to make this kind and clear,
Just a chance that maybe we'll find better days.
'Cause I don't need boxes wrapped in strings
And designer love and empty things;
Just a chance that maybe we'll find better days.
So take these words and sing out loud,
'Cause everyone is forgiven now,
'Cause tonight's the night the world begins again.

Further on, the lyrics speak of "the one poor child who saved the world."

I don't know that the lines of Reznik's song are all quite theologically sound, but the thought that "tonight's the night the world begins again" certainly captures my heart.

A new start. The world begins again tonight.

You've messed up, made bad choices. This One gives you a new start, your world begins again.

You've broken relationships, hurt others who hurt you. This One brings restoration and forgiveness.

You've been so alone. This One who came, never to leave, this One will be with you always…ALWAYS!

Admittedly, I'm not a great systematic theologian, but this I know: In the Garden we walked with Him, talked with Him, face to face, nothing between. Then in our selfish stupidity we fell for the deceit, accepted the lie, and our sin separated us from Him, the saddest night of all. But He had a plan. He loved us so much that He sent a Baby, "this one poor child who saved the world," His Son in human form to be the only substitute for us. He was and is the only One who could and would bring us back into relationship with Him.

Romans 5:8 is the key. "God showed his love for us in this that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." I may not understand it completely, may only have a limited grasp of His cosmic plan, but that doesn't matter. What I know is that in this One there is peace and hope and reconciliation and forgiveness and joy.

In Him, the world began again.

May the God of new beginnings bring you hope, today and always.

Day 15: It's Not Christmas without the Halvah

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." - 1 Corinthians 11:25



Dad drove a delivery truck for Wise Potato Chips in our area of New York. He had large accounts like Lloyds and Shoprite, but most of his time he delivered to every Ma & Pa grocery store for 20 miles around. From Gobeo's Italian Market with their barrels of olives to the Jewish Deli, from Waizenegger's to Larkin's 5 & 10, if there were Wise Chips, Dad was the source.

Because of the variety of places he visited every week, he'd come home with tastes and samples of every kind of food imaginable, especially at Christmas. That's how we ended up with Halvah from the Jewish Delicatessen. Every year he'd bring home bars of this unusual "candy." Made from crushed sesame seeds and honey with a bit of flavoring, you definitely had to acquire a taste for it. We loved it. Arlene still thinks it tastes like straw and sawdust mixed with sugar.

Every year Dad, being the traditionalist that he was, made sure that we had a bar of Halvah for Christmas. Mazel tov! Every ornament his parents had on their tree had to go on ours every year. He had to make springerle and pfefferneuse because we always had the German favorites. The yard and windows and every room in the house had to be decorated. The cards had to be sent out by a certain date and the village under the tree had to have the cast iron train and WW1 Trumpeter he had when he was a boy.

Sometimes it would be too much to keep up with and on Christmas Eve he would say, "We didn't get to make the springerle…," "We didn't decorate the porch…," or "We forgot to get Halvah…," and then he finished with the dreaded words: "…It just won't be Christmas!"

He didn't really mean it, and he got over it quickly; but he took his traditions seriously, perhaps too seriously.

Traditions are wonderful. They bring us history and stability, joy and reflections on our past, and can be great fun. They should strengthen the celebration, but they should never become the celebration. If we get caught up in the necessity of tradition and feel the self-induced pressure to get every detail right, find the perfect gift, make every cookie, attend every concert, send every card (even to the couple you met on vacation in 1997 and haven't seen since then) then maybe we've let tradition gain the upper hand. If traditions steal the joy rather than lead us to celebrate with family and friends, maybe we need to rethink them.

But remember as well, God's people are people of tradition. It helped them to recall. A pile of rocks on the Jordan's banks caused the next generation to ask, "What do these stones mean?" Then they'd hear again the miraculous story of the day God dried up the river. When they ate the lamb and unleavened bread, it reminded them anew of God's protection as death "passed over" them. The Psalms they sang on their way up to Jerusalem were taught generation after generation. As Paul gathered on the first day of the week for worship, so the church continues to do so. As the Corinthians took the bread and sipped the cup, so we do the same today and the tradition reminds us anew of His sacrificial love.

He who created our senses knew tradition would seal it in our memories.

This Christmas, don't be overwhelmed by the traditions. Just enjoy them. Let them remind you of from where you've come. Let the twinkling candlelight remind you of the Light of the World who has come at last. Let the gifts remind you of His blessings. Let the songs lead you to worship. Let the special foods remind you of His abundant provision.

Day 16: Always Winter; Never Christmas

Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." - Revelation 5:5



There's something about the first snow, about how it makes even the dead, brown earth beautiful. I love it. Some others cringe when the news reports that another big one is coming in a few days. Snow before Christmas is always wonderful. Right away we can hear Bing Crosby singing. But snow that continues through late February into March. That's another thing.

Reminds me of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* It's been a favorite ever since I was a pre-teen and a teacher, Carol Cook, read it aloud to us at Bible Club. C. S. Lewis was amazing. Hearing Mrs. Cook's reading I felt the stinging cold of the winter snow in that place where it was "always winter but never Christmas," the land where darkness and gray, icy cold went on and on without hope. I felt my heart pound when the children heard the whispered words, "Aslan is on the move!" (Aslan is the lion, clearly symbolic of Jesus.) I cringed in fear when the White Witch arrived in her dwarf-driven sleigh, and wept when Aslan's mane was unceremoniously clipped from his head. I felt numb when the muzzled, rope-tied lion gave his life on the stone table, all of evil declaring victory.

But it was that moment at the Stone Table, broken in two; the very spot where the dastardly deed was accomplished and the howls of Hell filled the air, that the children turn to the sound of a wonderfully familiar voice. In their grief and through their tears they see Him, Aslan, more alive than ever. At the sound of his roar the snow melts, springtime arrives. New life begins. Joy replaces sorrow. Stone statues are quickened and breathe again. After the long cold of a Christmas-less winter, Aslan restores what was broken, reconciles what was lost, wins the battle once and for all over death and Hell and demons and powers.

Winter meets its death!

Maybe life for you recently seems like it has been "always winter; never Christmas." Maybe you ache in the darkness and long for the morning. Weary of the bleak grayness, you long for the springtime, long for the joy. There's good news: Aslan is on the move! The season of longing is almost over and the Lion of Judah is about to appear! Hope is reborn. As the Song of Songs says, "See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come."

Revelation 5:5 says it clearly: "Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered!"

The winter will be gone.

Aslan is on the move.

Just wait!

Day 17: The Ravert Family

And provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. - Isaiah 61:3

My Mom was a Ravert.



Nana married Arthur Ravert and had seven children before he decided to leave on a bus during the Depression to find work. He never returned. My Mom was there to kiss him goodbye. She never saw him again.

Now Nana had six of the seven children to care for on her own. My sweet Uncle Gene had already left home. Times were tough, to say the least. But Raverts were survivors, and Raverts had each other. And my, did they love each other.

After losing yet another house, unable to pay the rent on Long Island, Nana faced the family's darkest days. She had reached the point of inability to care for her entire brood, so she did the unthinkable. She sent three of the boys temporarily into foster care, promising them she'd return for them.

Just before Christmas she was good for her promise.

Nana and the remaining children had moved into an inexpensive, very humble cottage outside of Goshen, New York. The boys returned and it was their first Christmas in Goshen together as a family.

On Christmas Eve it snowed and the fire in the woodstove was dying out. Nana sent the boys out with hatchet and saw to find wood for the fire. They came back with a sled full, perfect logs, chopped to size for the fire, in record time.

A knock on the door Christmas Day was from the farmer who lived across the field from the cottage. He had one question: "Last night someone stole a number of my fence posts. Would you have any idea what happened to them?" Mom remembered it as being the best Christmas ever. They had nothing. But they had each other.

The woodstove burned brightly that Christmas morning. Yes, Raverts were survivors.

There are dozens more stories, but here's the final chapter. Of those seven Ravert children one became a United Methodist Pastor, one was married to a Southern Baptist Pastor, two were elders in the Presbyterian Church, four served in the US Armed Forces, the six of the seven Raverts who married were loving spouses and amazing parents until they breathed their last and one of those was my mom.

They were not only "survivors," but they were also trophies of God's amazing grace. He took the brokenness and brought blessing. He gave beauty for ashes.

Day 18: All of This, and More!

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. - Galatians 4:4-5

All of This and More
A poem by Richard Paashaus

Mary's baby, shepherd's wonder, angels sing for joy;
Peace-provider, fear-remover; Joseph's little boy.

Child of promise; Lord of glory, laid now in a stall;
Humbled Godhead, helpless earthling, Savior of us all.

Full of purpose. How amazing, Jesus, King of kings!
Who would think this little newborn, Lord of everything?

Yet He comes to save His people, break our bonds of sin;
Through the cross the gates of Heaven call His people in.

Substitution, resolution; hope for helpless men;
Gentle healer, dead-man raiser, giving life again.

Now He stands before the Father, praying for His own;
Interceding, ever-living, leads His children Home.

This the baby born that Christmas; raised on Easter morn;
By His living, loving, dying, dead men are reborn.

Ever-living; ever loving Adam's sinful race;
Now the perfect, only Savior; full of truth and grace.

This the cause of celebration; this of whom we sing;
This, the baby in a manger; now our Sovereign King!

Day 19: The Belsnickel

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. - Matthew 1:21

From the days when old timers welcomed each other at church by saying, "Wie bischt du?" and the other responded, "Simmlich gute!" I've loved Pennsylvania Dutch and the people who speak it. In the early days of Calvary Bible Fellowship Church in Coopersburg, PA where I was pastor for decades, the hymns were sung in Dutch. Some of us from Calvary BFC can still remember Wilson Meyers, Mildred Mussleman, Errol Weaver, Dorothy Mann, and others singing, "Gott is die Liebe" (God is Love). The songs were sweet, and oh, how we loved the people who sang them!

The Pennsylvania Germans are good people. Hard-working, strong-willed, committed people who still claim to have sauerkraut in their blood and brag, "If you ain't Dutch, you ain't much." You can count on them, trust them. If you respect them, they'll respect you. They might even grow to love you (but don't expect them to tell you so).

We ate schnitz en knepp with them and dandelion greens on Easter (with hot bacon dressing. Truth is, hot bacon dressing on cardboard would be enjoyable.) They tell stories from the Grunsau Lodge on Groundhog Day, and we smiled when our boys grew up saying, "They want rain but it's just spritzin' now, say?"

They must exit through the same door by which they entered. Their teens tick-tack on mischief night in October. They like their scrapple, dippy eggs, shoo-fly pie, and must eat pork and sauerkraut on New Year's Day. The list goes on of traditions some of which have long lost their meaning, but are still always fun to follow!

Except for one. The Belsnickel.

For the life of me I can't figure out why this counterpart to Santa for the Pennsylvania Germans wasn't eliminated long ago. Instead of a jolly old man in a red suit who brings toys and treats to "good children" everywhere, the Belsnickel is a whole different matter.

Arriving after dark and bursting into houses at will, he is frightening, wears old fur and carries a switch. Children are questioned as to their behavior, whether they've done their chores; and if they or their parents answer in the negative, the switch gets applied (or at least the threat of it) to the backside of the little ones.

Merry Christmas.

OK, so he often distributes tasty treats, nuts, even wrapped gifts to the children or promises to return with something enjoyable for Christmas Eve. I'd keep the door locked and not answer if it was me.

While we need not get too carried away philosophizing or theologizing the long history and reason behind the Belsnickel, it is interesting that responsibility for our actions, payment for our sins, and merit-based reward are reflected in the switch-carrying Santa counterpart. How opposite of the "good news of great joy which will be for all people." The Son promised to Joseph and Mary, the One called Jesus, Savior, is the one who indeed would save His people from their sin, not bring retribution.

The joy of Christmas is that the fear of punishment for our sin is removed because the One born in Bethlehem would pay the price, laying down His life for our forgiveness. The silliness of a switch-bearing anti-Santa or, for that matter, the folklore of a chimney-entering benevolent old man with a beard BOTH miss the point of a Savior who understands our hearts, knows our sin, and loves us enough to take our place.

Day 20: While You Wait

In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly. - Psalm 5:3



For a number of years, I played Santa for Lights in the Parkway and loved it. The light display is wonderful and goes on for more than a mile, bringing smiles to thousands in the Lehigh Valley to end the year.

But if you ever go see the lights, you might not want to go on a Saturday.

One Saturday night the wait for some families wound around the west end of Allentown for block after block, hindered by cross traffic at intersections and "line-cutters" who took advantage of the side streets. While many waited patiently with their families, singing Christmas songs in the car and drinking hot chocolate with extra marshmallows, not everyone was as gracious.

Some waited three hours to get to the entrance. Three hours with impatient dads, frustrated kids, moms that had to find a bathroom. Horns started blowing. Windows rolled down and what was being yelled between cars was not "Merry Christmas!" Some confrontations ended up face to face and children in car seats watched wide-eyed while mom's heart pounded.

Not everyone is good at waiting. We get cranky and lose sight of the joy. When it gets cold and the weather doesn't cooperate, we get tired and stressed instead of smiling.

Then, I realize that the Psalms say a lot not just about waiting, but also "how" we are to do so. Consider these:

Psalm 5:3 "In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait EXPECTANTLY."

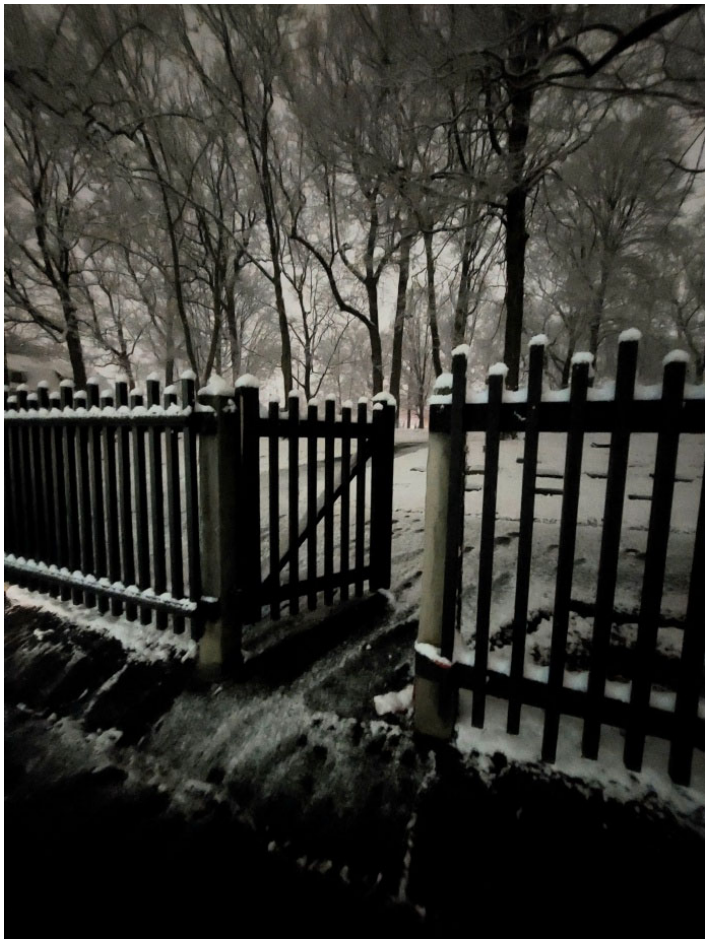
Are you waiting "expectantly?" The result will be worth it.

He's not done yet, but I'm waiting for His final result.

Just wait; the end is in sight.

Day 21: The Longest Night

For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning. - Psalm 30:5



Being a pastor has been a tremendous privilege. Having as your calling, your vocation, to love others and share intimately in their lives has been a profound joy. I've been there just shortly after a baby was born, sometimes the first besides family to hold a little one. Then there was the joy of dedicating them, praying over them and their parents for God's blessing. Later there was the honor of baptizing them when they professed faith and often welcoming them into church membership. For many of them we stood before God and loving witnesses to share their vows in marriage. And later we stood in tears with some of those same folks, dedicating their little ones to the Lord. What privilege.

But ministry also means praying people through the dark nights. We sit through emergency room visits, waiting for the report from the biopsy, holding them close when their mom is facing her last hours. It means sharing tears when vows are broken and when children leave. And more than we care to remember, it means being with them when they close their eyes here, exhale their last labored breath, and have their first vision of Heaven. (My eyes are tearful now as I write.)

Today is December 21, the Winter Solstice, the day the sun appears the lowest in the sky. It's not just the shortest period of daylight; it's also the longest night of the year.

You will always remember your longest nights.

For me, it was the Good Friday evening when at 63 years old Dad's heart gave way. We spent the night with Mom. I can still hear her quiet weeping in the darkness. And there were many more. Long nights. Difficult. In the darkness the worst possibilities seem to dominate our thoughts. The monster under the bed never bothers us in the daylight.

But, the morning came. It always comes.

The Prince of Peace who is there in the darkness will bring restoration and renewal in the light of day. Oh, it might not be right away. It may be quiet, gentle, even slow in coming; but He who holds us in the palm of His hand still whispers, "Peace. Be Still. I will never leave or forsake you."

And the longest night will end. I promise.

More importantly, HE promises.

Day 22: Still, Still, Still

He says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." - Psalm 46:10



Sledding and tobogganing were the best in the fields back at home. I always felt bad for the "town kids" who didn't have their choice of hills or ponds for sliding. On occasion they joined us on the farm. The 100 acres had plenty of options and we enjoyed all of them, dressed from our snow-covered buckle boots to our furry-flapped hats. When Mom said, "Go out and play," she meant it regardless of the temperature.

But there were those times when it was just the quiet that beckoned me to those snowy fields. Dressed warmly I'd cross the back yard, climb over the fence boards, and walk. Ancient stone walls lined the alfalfa field and the woodchuck lot, the cornfields and the big meadow. Now the dormant fields were silent and beautiful. There as the old song says, "You could talk to God and listen to His casual reply." There you could dream and think. There you could shed a tear if need be. There you could just be silent. There in the beauty of His creation you worshiped.

From the fields of home the view included no roads or traffic, no telephone poles or houses; just acres of fields and trees in garments of white. It was as if no one had ever been there before you.

But I think it was the silence that moved me the most. Except for the caw of a crow or screech of a blue jay that wintered over you heard nothing. Nothing. Beautiful.

An old hymn says it poetically:

Speak, Lord, in the stillness, while I wait on Thee;
Hushed my heart to listen, In expectancy.

So often we can't hear His voice because it is drowned out by the rush of life, the noise of busyness, the constant barrage of ear buds and car radios and the crowd at Red Robin. Sometimes it is even the sound of our own voices. But in the stillness, in the silent night, it's so much easier to hear Him speak.

Simple truth:

"Be still, and know that I am God." Ps 46:10

"Listen to Me in silence." Is. 41:1

"The Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him." Hab 2:20

"In quietness…is your strength." Is. 30:15

This week, find a place to be still, to listen, to be silent…to find your strength in His presence.

Go find a field to walk in.

Day 23: Forgiven…Completely!

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. - Psalm 103:12

For years on the first Monday of the month, I'd have a 2:00pm service with the folks who called the Mannco Manor nursing home their residence. We'd sing a few songs (always "Rock of Ages" and "The Old Rugged Cross" if I asked for requests), pray, share a devotional from the Scriptures. Every other month I'd bring Communion. I loved being there with old friends. Their smiles when I arrived made it all worthwhile.

One of the residents would sit in silence from the moment I arrived to the time I left. Even when I made the loop around the room with hugs and handshakes she barely responded. She didn't sing and never smiled. It was very sad.

One of the Mondays when I brought the Communion elements, we sang and I helped them prepare for the Lord's Table. It was always a tender moment when I circled the room, placing the bread and cup in their trembling hands one by one. When I reached this dear woman I saw tears on her cheeks and heard her mumbling. When I leaned closer, I heard her whispering, "God could never forgive me. Never."

Facing her final days this woman who struggled to be cogent at times carried the weight of her past, the guilt of 80 plus years of life, never grasping the grace of God. In those moments I tried to assure her that He was the one who forgives *all* our sin, who is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness, who frees us from the past and gives us bright hope for tomorrow. I don't know if she ever grasped the fullness of His grace, but I do know that after I spoke to her she reached for the communion element, ate the bread, drank the cup. She died just a few months later.

In 1863 an Irish Anglican poet, Charitee Lees Smith wrote a most powerful hymn, "Before the Throne of God Above." The second verse says so beautifully:

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Savior died
My sinful soul is counted free;
For God Himself is satisfied
To look on Him…and pardon me.

This Christmas, remember that the One who we celebrate brought full forgiveness, for you, for me. Don't carry the guilt any longer. In Him, YOU are forgiven…completely! It's why He came!

Day 24: Within the Veil

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. - Hebrews 6:19-20



www.Gherardi.com, Photo used with his permission.

New Jersey painter, Bob Gherardi, has become one of my favorite artists. He sees beauty in the everyday, finds a story in the commonplace.

One Christmas Arlene purchased a beautiful signed print from Bob as my Christmas gift. The first time I saw the painting, I was moved to tears. A tiny bungalow sits alone in an early morning mid-winter scene. It is common and would normally be unnoticed, but what captured Gherardi's thoughts was a lit lamp glowing in what he surmised to be the bedroom window. Who lived there? He pictured an old couple who had faced life together for decades, perhaps the husband keeping vigil over his beloved while they faced yet another difficult night. To me, the image communicates the deep, lifelong love between the two, even with the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

When I saw the title, "Within the Veil," I immediately knew its source. Bob's title is from the second verse of "The Solid Rock."

When darkness hides His lovely face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.

The book of Hebrews speaks of our great High Priest who enters the very presence of the Father, interceding for us in our time of need; even when words can't express our prayers.

The phrase could also refer to the veil of tears, hours when we walk through the valley of the shadow with those we love even as the Great Shepherd says, "I am walking through the Valley with you." And the hymn continues with those beautiful, affirming words:

On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.

Maybe you're facing particularly hard times this Christmas, perhaps caring for (or remembering) one who you've loved who is "heading Home." Your tears are seen and felt by a Father who truly understands. There is One who says, "I will not leave or forsake you. Rest in my unchanging grace."

May your anchor hold within the veil.

Day 25: The Wait is Over!

For many years I had the tremendous joy and privilege of leading worship on Christmas Eve. Our amazingly talented musicians gave their best on this special night when church and community gathered, the whole "freindschaft," shoulder to shoulder, chairs in the lobby and aisles, to worship the long-awaited Newborn King.

The memories flood back. The beauty of our gently lit sanctuary. The hushed wonder. Hannah's melodious fiddle, gifted guitarists Mary-Helen and John on their Martin guitars, Michael and Ryland's magnificent piano playing, a host of others participating in the music. The harp, the flute, the cello. Beautiful isn't enough of a description; heavenly is more accurate.

The simplicity of the Scripture readings and a few lines of poetry, unannounced vocalists ministering, and of course, the children's nativity brought smiles and tears. (Oh, those lamb costumes!)

Sometimes I sang. It was always a joyful challenge to get through Michael Card's "How Could It Be?" without tears. "How can a man be father to the Son of God? How can I raise a King? How can I raise a King?" I had to keep my eyes off Jim Trommetter, an old friend who sobbed every single time. And I certainly didn't even glance in Arlene's direction, three little boys by her side!

In 1992 we had faced a particularly challenging year as a family. There was hurt and sadness. Then in November, Mom died. That year I sang with the choir, "Emmanuel, Our God is With Us! There's hope for all who will embrace His warm humanity. Emmanuel. Our God is with us! And if God is with us, who can stand against us? Our God is with us, Emmanuel!"

I finished the last line with our beautiful choir. Then I sat in the front pew and wept.

Ah, then came those closing moments of our traditional Christmas Eve Worship. Only a handful of us, just the musicians and I looked out over the faces basked in candlelight and sang. Then as the notes of the instruments faded, the tearful eyes reflected the candlelight and the flames were raised high and it was as if Heaven's Choir was singing, "Silent Night; Holy Night. All is calm. All is bright."

As the evening concluded, my friend Jessie's angelic voice gave the most beautiful benediction, the Getty's Christmas Benediction:

Now may the fragrance of His peace
Soar through your heart like the dove released.
Hide in His wings oh weary, distant soul;
He'll guide your spirit home.

And may His love poured from on high
Flow to the depths of your deepest sigh.
Oh come and drink from the only living stream
And on His shoulder lean.

And may the hope that will not deceive
Through every pain bring eternal ease.
There is no night that can steal the promises
His coming brings to us.

So may His joy rush over you
Delight in the path He has called you to.
May all your steps walk in Heaven's endless light
Beyond this Christmas night.

That is still our Christmas blessing.

There is no night that can steal the promises His coming brings to us. May His joy rush over you. Delight in the path He has called you to. May all your steps walk in Heav'n's endless light beyond this Christmas Night. Merry Christmas and good night.

About the Author



Rick Paashaus pastored at Calvary Bible Fellowship Church in Coopersburg, Pennsylvania for over 40 years. In his retirement, he began serving at Finesville Bible Fellowship Church in Finesville, New Jersey and delights in the love and faithfulness of the church family there. He and his wife Arlene still put up their Christmas putz each year. You can contact Rick at RickPaashaus@gmail.com

Bible Fellowship Church

"An Expanding Fellowship of Churches United to Make Disciples of Jesus Christ"

About the Bible Fellowship Church

The Bible Fellowship Church denomination is an expanding fellowship of churches united to make disciples of Jesus Christ. It is a fellowship of local churches, centered upon the Word of God, and committed to reaching the lost through the transforming power of the Gospel. Over 10,000 people gather for worship in our churches every week. We plant churches in the United States and Mexico, share the gospel with kids and teens through camping, and reach individuals for Jesus Christ all over the world through missions. Find out more at BFC.org.