

# Straw for the Manger

Creating a Matthew 25 Advent season

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*Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." — Matthew 25:34–36*

The story of Christ's birth speaks to us of the vulnerability of being human and the unfathomable humility of the Creator God. God, clothed with skin, a body with bones that break and a cry that pierced the night, utterly helpless, offers us a glimpse into Matthew 25 when God's people ask, "When did we see our king hungry, thirsty or naked?"

The stable where Christ was born speaks of hunger, thirst, nakedness and being alone in the world. It reminds us of our dependence upon one another and declares our universal need for shelter and care.

Mary — tired, hungry and thirsty — gave birth among the straw and the hay used for animal bedding and fodder. Perhaps Joseph gathered clean straw to soften the feeding trough that was used to cradle the newborn child.

During this Advent season, let us actively prepare the manger for the Christ child by each day adding a piece of "straw" to his bed — an act of love carried out in his name. Let us offer a sip of water to the thirsty, swaddle the naked with holy arms, care for the sick and the sick at heart, and set the captives free from prisons of isolation, loneliness, addiction and guilt.

We can do all of these things with grace and truth and the tender gestures of our bare hands. And as we do, we become kingdom people, birthing love in the world.

This Advent, let us explore the ways that we as individuals of all ages and as faith communities can be a "touchable God," offering one another the gift of God's presence and living our faith through the actions we do in Christ's name. Let us ready the manger with the straw of loving deeds and kindness.

Sherry Blackman



Getty Images



# Adding your straw to the manger

## How to use this devotional

I'm not quite sure where the tradition of adding straw to the manger during Advent originated. I've asked around and researched and from what I can gather it might have come from Eastern Europe. My friends of Polish ancestry have told me that as children they would take a piece of straw and place it in a feeding trough to prepare the bed for baby Jesus. Each piece of straw represented something good that they did, so that by Christmas Eve, Jesus' bed would be prepared with straw symbolizing acts of love and kindness.

I loved this idea so much that I introduced "straw for the manger" to the children in the first church I served. A young father with carpentry skills made me a manger, and since I was in a farming community, all I had to do was make a request from the pulpit for straw. However, I mistakenly asked for hay. The matriarch of a farm family shook her head in dismay at the former Manhattanite who was now a country pastor and shouted, in the middle of my request, that I wanted straw. Hay was the feed for animals, she explained later. Straw was the bedding.

With an ample supply of straw that was later donated, the children came forward during the Sundays of Advent and told of their good deeds. As the Sundays went by, more children would appear, with friends in tow. By the fourth Sunday of Advent, the manger bed was overflowing. It was a beautiful sight to see the children actively engaged in doing good deeds in their community. It was also a beautiful sight to see a small church filled with the laughter — and contagious passion

— of children again. As I think back on that Advent season, I see a perfect example of a congregation coming to life — filled with the vitality that is one aspect of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Matthew 25 invitation. And so, I encourage you to use this devotional with children, with teens and with others outside your church family, and together seek ways to live out Matthew 25's call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the lonely and set free the captives. Set up a manger in your church or home and add pieces of straw. If you don't have straw, cut strips of yellow construction paper and write on them acts of kindness and place them in the manger. Don't have a manger? Use a cardboard box or a deep bowl. The Rev. Sherry Blackman, this year's devotional writer, shares many wonderful thoughts and ideas on how to fill the manger.

This year's devotional also provides space each Sunday of Advent to write down your thoughts, your hopes, your prayers and your ideas for what you can do to be Christ to others. I call this time of reflection "your pieces of straw." You may even want to invite others to reflect with you.

No matter how you use this devotional, it's my prayer that this season of Advent will be one in which you will spend the days reflecting on Matthew 25, and that you become mindful of ways to be Christ to others, adding straws of love and kindness not just to a manger bed, but out into this world.

Donna Frischknecht Jackson, editor  
*Presbyterians Today*



# First Week of Advent

Sunday | December 1

*Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?" — Matthew 25:37*

## **GATHERING UP THE STRAW OF HOPE**

On this first Sunday of Advent, consider what gives you hope. Who took notice of you when you felt discouraged or alone in the world? What was done for you?

Now think about your neighbors. For many, it is the season of magnified loneliness and despair. How might you, your family and the church be the flesh and bone of Christ in your neighborhood and beyond?

Make Christ known through the sign language of kindness — it's the language that all people of every nation and tribe can understand.

Reflect on what you choose to do and how it affects you, your family, the church and the community at large.





## Monday | December 2

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*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

— *Isaiah 43:18–19*

Who do you know who has lost hope? Maybe someone who was recently divorced or separated, or someone struggling as a single parent. Perhaps you know someone who is facing the holidays for the first time as a widow or widower. For those who have lost a loved one, this can be the most difficult season of the year to endure. How can you bring hope to the downhearted?

Human beings are relational by nature, and hope is strengthened or weakened by our interaction with others. We find hope in abundance when we give hope to those who have felt no arms around them, who are thirsty for the human milk of kindness, and who ache to see the face and hear the voice of someone who cares. Where you bring hope, you bring Christ.



**Straw for the manger:** Help someone you know who is downhearted by offering to do a simple chore or errand. Engage the entire family. Shovel the driveway, take the garbage cans to the curb or offer to do a house repair. Knowing one is not alone will bring a person, or a family, hope.

*Jesus, we know that faith without works is dead. Through our simple actions, grow our hearts and the hearts of those we serve. Magnify our joy and the joy of those we care for. Renew our hope as we bring hope to others. Amen.*

## Tuesday | December 3

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*Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. — Colossians 3:13*

Sometimes friends betray us; sometimes we betray friends. We tell them there is no room in the “inn” of our life for them anymore. With every lost friend, the world is a lonelier and darker place.

Many years ago, a friend turned away from me when my marriage was breaking apart. There was nothing but a thorny silence between us, and for me at least, a quiet sadness. What amplified my disappointment was that I had been there for him when he had gone through a similar time.

Twenty-five years later, this long-lost friend called me. We talked for a few minutes. I was cautious but glad to hear his voice. We promised to meet over coffee sometime in the future. After the call ended, the weight of rejection, hurt, fear and anger — a burden I didn’t know I was lugging around — began to lift from my shoulders. Ever since, I’ve wondered about the millstones of broken relationships we carry around; about the harms and injustices committed against us, and the harms and injustices we have committed against others that crush our spirits. Reconciliation brings health to our bones and encourages peace in the world.



**Straw for the manger:** Make that difficult phone call or write a letter to a friend who has hurt you or whom you have knowingly hurt. Offer, or ask for, forgiveness. If the person is no longer alive, if you don’t know where the person is, or if receiving such a letter would stir up greater hurt, write it anyway. You can store it away or burn it afterward. For younger ones at home or in the congregation, encourage them to draw a picture or make a card to give to a friend who has hurt their feelings.

*Forgive us for hurting and betraying friends, loved ones and strangers. Grant us the courage to reconcile, and be reconciled, whenever it is in our power to do so. Amen.*



## Wednesday | December 4

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*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. — Lamentations 3:22–23*

Advent occurs in the darkest month of the year. So how can we make God's light known? By showing mercy.

"If we are to love our neighbors before doing anything else, we must see our neighbors with our imaginations as well as with our eyes, that is to say ... the life behind and within their faces," writes Frederick Buechner.

But some faces, like Ethan Moyer's, we will never see. And yet, he has shown exceptional mercy to strangers. Ethan was 20 years old when he was killed in a drunk-driving accident one block from his home. He had signed an organ donation card, and today his heart beats in another, his liver saves the life of an 8-year-old girl, and one of his lungs gave breath to a teacher, Ellie Doerr. Ethan's gift allowed Ellie to spend another 7 1/2 years with her family, and before she died in 2018, she looked at a photograph of Ethan's face every morning and thanked him for the mercy shown to her.



**Straw for the manger:** Sign an organ donation card and encourage your loved ones to sign one, too.

*Lord, you said that there is no higher expression of love than that a person lay down their life for another. May we give life to others, in your name, so that the heart of our faith may beat in another whose heart has failed. Amen.*

Add a "straw" of kindness to the manger by surprising a neighbor with a freshly shoveled driveway.



## Thursday | December 5

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*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. — John 13:34*

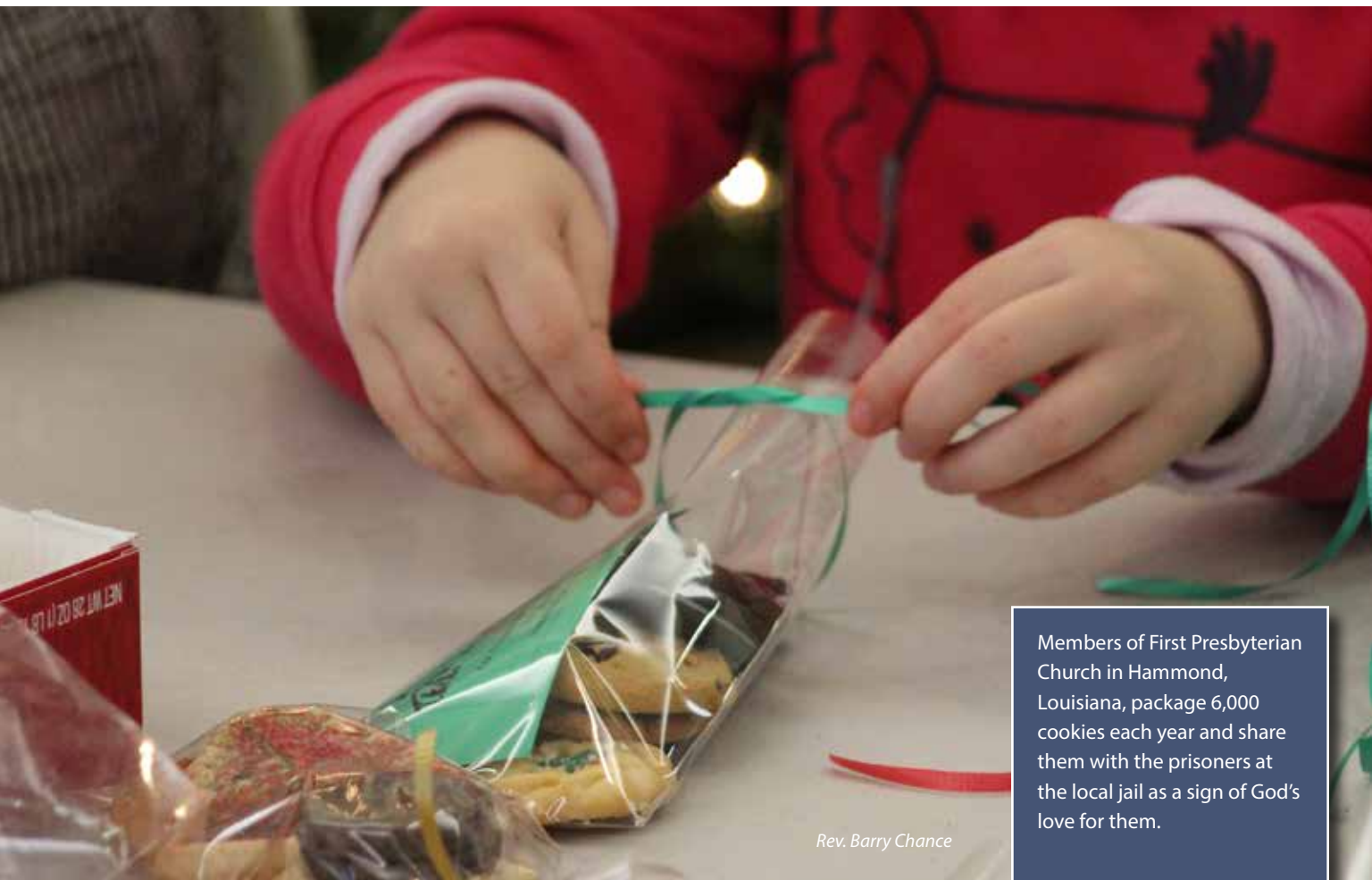
How do we love others as Christ has loved us? Most of the troops who serve our country in the armed forces are separated from their families this time of year. Mothers and fathers will not be home to hold their children or be held by them, nor will they be able to share in the wonder and awe of Christmas. Can we even imagine the longing these parents experience? Bring Christmas to them. Let them know their living sacrifices are not forgotten.

According to Operation Gratitude, an organization that works to deliver care packages, it was one such package that saved a soldier who wanted to die on the battlefield. He had no loved ones back home. As he watched his comrades in arms receive packages, he began to suffer a deep depression. Every day he would go to sleep, wishing he wouldn't wake up. He sought spiritual counsel with the chaplain, but nothing seemed to lift him out of his darkness. Then he learned there was a package for him. When he opened it, he started to cry, knowing someone cared.



**Straw for the manger:** Put together a care package for the troops. Include a handwritten letter and homemade treats. Add powdered drink mix for water — something men and women serving in hot, parched places love. Consider Operation Gratitude, which sends care packages to deployed troops, military families, veterans, wounded heroes and caregivers. More information can be found at [operationgratitude.com](http://operationgratitude.com).

*Lord, we want to bring hope to those who are far away from family and who will miss out on the joys of the season. We pray that you will keep our troops safe and bring them home soon. Amen.*



Members of First Presbyterian Church in Hammond, Louisiana, package 6,000 cookies each year and share them with the prisoners at the local jail as a sign of God's love for them.

Rev. Barry Chance

## Friday | December 6

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*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. — Matthew 28:19*

Humans crave community. For this reason, even for those who have little or no background in any faith tradition, there is a gravitational pull toward engaging in a community with shared values. Often it's the belonging to one another, and to the ways the church is serving the neighborhood, that attracts believers and unbelievers alike to a congregation. Even the skeptical are drawn in when they see the way that members care for one another.

Carolyn Celli owned an antiques shop next to a small Presbyterian church in Stillwater, New Jersey, where she was a member. I frequented her shop and religiously she would invite me to attend church with her. I had been on hiatus from church for five years after my failed marriage. During that time, I had remarried, had a son and moved to Stillwater in 1997. A year later, my cousin's 12-year-old son died in a house fire. A few days after that, I saw Carolyn and wept in her arms. Three months later, my father died shortly after being diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. On Father's Day the following year, I took Carolyn up on her invitation. From that Sunday on, I rarely missed a worship service. By 2003, I was enrolled in seminary, and was ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in January 2007. One invitation changed my life.



**Straw for the manger:** Invite someone to church this time of year, when there are children's pageants, musical celebrations and sing-alongs, which are less threatening for a visitor. Children can ask a friend from the neighborhood or a classmate to attend. Often parents begin to attend when a child has been invited and wants to return.

*Lead us, O God, to be bold in inviting others to experience the body of Christ, to witness the ways that we love one another. Lead us to those who are hungry for you, who want to belong to others, and who may not even realize it. Let us go into this world, taking this simple first step to make disciples. Amen.*

## Saturday | December 7

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*O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! — Psalm 95:1*

Music is all around us — a child's laughter, bells ringing from church towers and Christmas music lifting the spirits of shoppers. Music heals, gives us hope and reminds us of heaven and its presence on earth. It stirs our blood, ignites forgotten memories and wraps us with warmth. To hear music, and to sing, is to give voice to grace. Medical research has proven that music relieves stress, reduces anxiety, cultivates community and can ease physical pain.

A retired Presbyterian minister, Betsy, volunteers to play her harp every Tuesday for patients at the local hospital. One afternoon, Betsy entered the room of Danielle, a 30-something woman I was visiting. Danielle had suffered her second massive stroke. After her first stroke, her husband divorced her. She clutched my hand and cried as she struggled to speak. She was afraid of losing what custodial rights she had of her 3-year-old daughter. As Betsy played her harp, peace came over Danielle. Her grip loosened, her speech became less slurred and her eyes seemed to follow the glittering, drifting notes as if they were a visible prayer, reassuring her that God heard her cry and that no battle was too great.



**Straw for the manger:** Gather the family or a group from church and go Christmas caroling door-to-door in your neighborhood or at a nearby assisted living facility. It will bring joy and refreshment, and for many, will stir happy childhood memories.

*We sing, for we are full of joy as we anticipate the birth of the Christ child. May our voices, lifted high, uplift others. Amen.*

# Second Week of Advent

Sunday | December 8

## **GATHERING UP THE STRAW OF LOVE**

Start gathering the straw of good deeds for this week by spending this second Sunday of Advent reflecting on where you brought hope to someone last week.

What did you do as an individual, as a family and as a church to reach out to others?

Did you find hope for yourself in every act of kindness offered?

Now consider how you can bring love into the world this week. List the pieces of “straw” you will place in the baby’s bed that will show others the love of Christ.



Personal Journal

Lined writing area for the journal page.

## Monday | December 9

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*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.*

— *Isaiah 61:1*

When Jesus said to visit those in prison, he was likely speaking about those who were unjustly imprisoned, like John the Baptist. In the Apostle Paul's admonition to do the same, he was encouraging fellow believers to visit those who were imprisoned for the sake of the gospel.

Today, when we speak of the vulnerable, we need to remember the 2.7 million children of inmates in the United States, who themselves are prisoners of stigma and loneliness for having a parent in prison. For many, according to Prison Fellowship, an organization that works to bring hope and restoration to prisoners, families and communities impacted by crime and incarceration, these same children could easily follow their parents down the same destructive road to incarceration.

Angel Tree, a program of Prison Fellowship, reaches out to the children of prisoners and their families with the love of Christ. The program gives individuals an opportunity to share God's love by helping to meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the families of prisoners. The program was founded in 1982 by an ex-prisoner who witnessed the strained relationship between prisoners and their families.



**Straw for the manger:** Make a donation or buy a gift for a child of a prisoner. More information can be found at [prisonfellowship.org/about/angel-tree](http://prisonfellowship.org/about/angel-tree)

*Only you, Lord Jesus, can truly set us free from all of the chains that bind us and all of the prison cells that hold us. As we spread love to others, may they see your face and find grace to follow in the way of righteousness. Amen.*

## Tuesday | December 10

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*Bring me out of prison, so that I may give thanks to your name. The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me. — Psalm 142:7*

Prisons of all kinds engage us — prisons of loneliness, poverty, racism and grief. Memories of what once was, and of loved ones no longer with us, can be our wardens. These prison cells have invisible bars that keep the captive in and the visitor out. No other holiday season carries more emotional darkness than Advent.

Those imprisoned by loss, loneliness and injustice live in what may feel like solitary confinement. We can bring love into the lives of those who suffer through simple acts of compassion. With festive lights, a tree anchored in its stand or a shared meal, new memories are created and neighbors become loved ones.



**Straw for the manger:** Help decorate a home for Christmas for a neighbor who may have suffered a loss this past year, or who is elderly and unlikely to prepare their home for the holidays. You might even take a collection in church to help buy Christmas trees for families who you know are struggling financially.

*Open our eyes to see those who live in solitary spiritual confinement; who remain locked in prisons of loneliness, sadness or loss. May we reach out to help unlock prison doors and keep them open. Amen.*

## Wednesday | December 11

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*I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. — Ezekiel 11:19*

My class in seminary had a large contingent of students from South Korea. After exam week my first semester, only days away from Christmas, I felt compelled to invite one of the Korean students to my home for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. My husband agreed to pick up Dun Jin and take him back to his dorm later Christmas Day, about an hour from our house. Dun Jin was excited to not be alone on Christmas, so far away from his family.

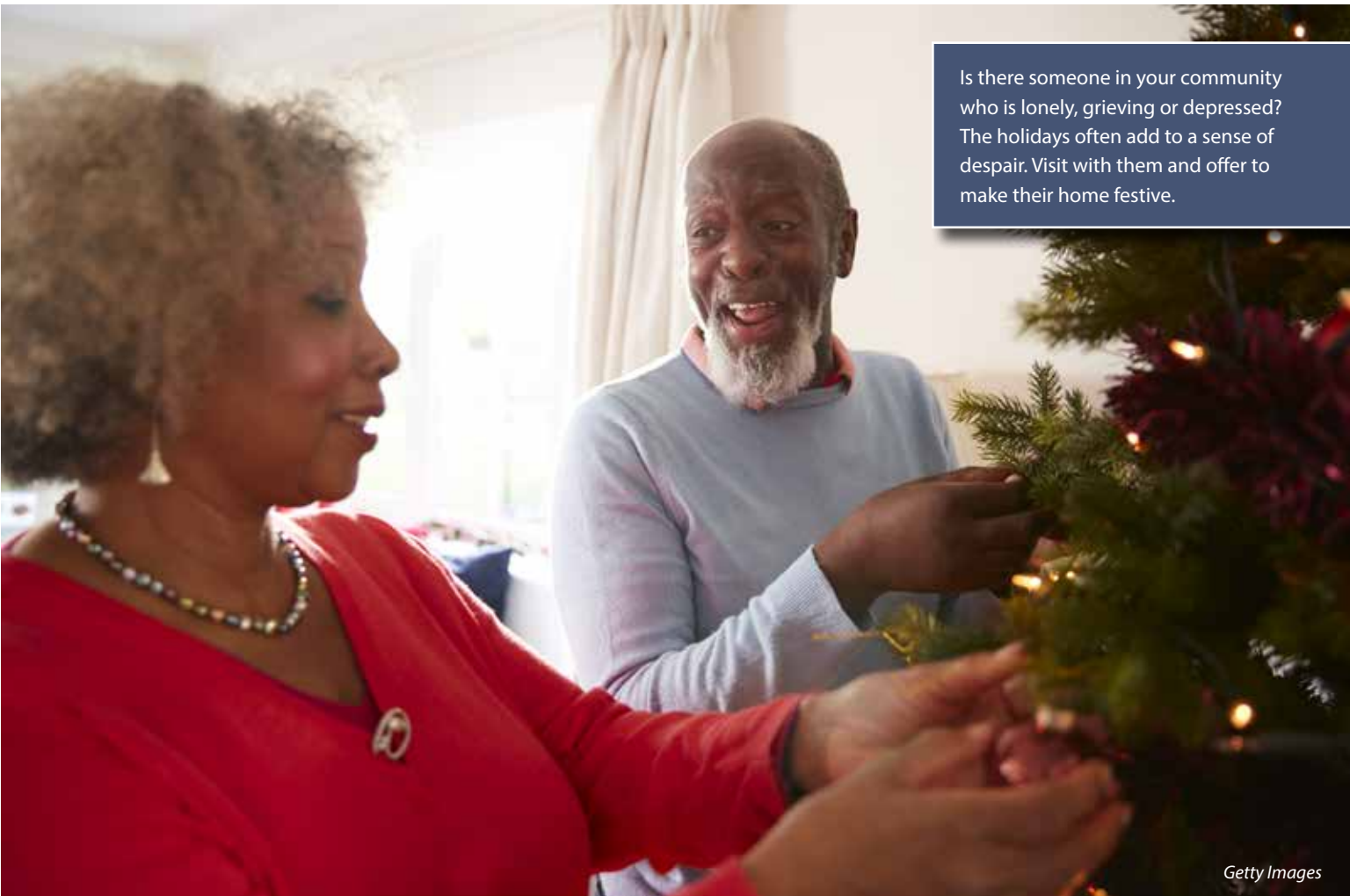
There was a luminosity about Dun Jin, who was in his mid-20s. He had a solar flare of a smile and a light-beam personality. He was simply fun to be around. It was a Christmas that I remember as one of our richest, having him around our table, sharing stories of his life and what it was like to live in the shadow of North Korea. My son was only 8 years old at the time, and he showed Dun Jin every toy he had as my husband and I prepared for our extended family gathering. Dun Jin was a “captive” audience.

Inviting the stranger home means being granted a view of the world that is likely to change the view of our own.



**Straw for the manger:** Is there someone you know who is of a different culture, whose mother tongue is not your own, whom you could bring home for the holidays? Perhaps it is someone from church or someone from your child’s class. Invite them in. You may just be entertaining angels unaware.

*Forgive us for treating strangers among us as if they were invisible. Open our hearts to see those we have made to feel unwelcome in our lives, our communities and our churches. Amen.*



Is there someone in your community who is lonely, grieving or depressed? The holidays often add to a sense of despair. Visit with them and offer to make their home festive.

## Thursday | December 12

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*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. — Philippians 4:8*

Last year, after we finished our Thanksgiving feast and gave thanks for all of our blessings, my 23-year-old son sat by the hearth, staring into the fire. He said, "Why is it that on this day we say how grateful we are for all that we have only to rush out tomorrow to buy, buy, buy?"

In this season of never enough, we are often blind to those who work so hard for us, behind counters, at cash registers, on the floor and in the stockroom; those who serve us our meals when we are too exhausted to cook at home. Whom do we not see? Whom do we not acknowledge by name, even though they are wearing a name tag for all to see? Whom do we dehumanize in our daily lives without any clue that we are doing so?



**Straw for the manger:** Acknowledge those in the service industry by name. Write a positive review online or wherever the opportunity is, giving those who serve you high marks. Encourage children to follow suit, and to say thank you for what others do. Consider leaving a larger-than-average tip. Waitresses, for example, make on average less than \$3 an hour. Children can offer their drawing or coloring work of art created on the backs of paper placemats as a way to say thank you to the waitstaff.

*Our Lord and our God, you have called us to think on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. May we willingly take off the blinders we wear and treat all those who serve us with dignity and respect. Amen.*



Give "straws" of kindness to those who serve others. Smile at the cashier who has been dealing with grumpy holiday shoppers or leave an extra tip for the waiter or waitress.



## Friday | December 13

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*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted. — Isaiah 61:1*

How does anyone bind up the brokenhearted? Grief shatters. No one can fix it or make it go away. Decades ago, I learned an unsettling truth about my father's life. I cried and confronted him. I had to share the revelation with my siblings and my mother, his wife of 25 years before he divorced her. I needed to grieve his lie and all of the ways it had formed and deformed me. Within 24 hours of this revelation, an acquaintance called me. Her marriage was falling apart, and she needed to talk to someone. I didn't want to listen to her story. I was too busy lamenting my own. But she came over to my house. She confessed that she had had an abortion and that her husband had been physically abusive. As I listened, as I worked to be present to her, the chokehold of my sorrow lessened. I came to understand something vital that day long ago. Sometimes the only way through the most downcast times of our lives is to reach out to others in their suffering and need. We are all broken. We all need one another.



**Straw for the manger:** Reach out to a friend or someone you know who is having a difficult emotional time. Maybe they are recently divorced, widowed or dealing with a troubled child. Have children or grandchildren draw or paint pictures for the person or family. Invite them to sit down and share whatever is on their minds.

*God, in and through our brokenness, help us to reach out for the healing of others. May we find in such willing acts of compassion healing for ourselves. Teach us to be a soft place for others to fall. Amen.*

## Saturday | December 14

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*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. — Psalm 139:13–14*

I'm watching as my 95-year-old mother ages about as elegantly as anyone possibly could. She didn't retire from nursing until seven years ago. I have witnessed through her fading vision and hearing, and her slower walk through this world, that these losses are God's way of loosening her tight grip on life itself, for there is too much beauty, wonder and awe to willingly leave behind.

A geriatric physician once shared with me that as we age, we are in a constant state of mourning. We might lose our independence and health. We might outlive our loved ones.

One way to offset these losses is to volunteer and bring comfort to others, which is something my mother does every day, in every way she can. Volunteering increases happiness and your sense of well-being.

For example, in many hospitals, neonatal intensive care units seek volunteers who are lovingly called "baby huggers" or "rockers." These volunteers simply hold infants and read, talk or sing to them when their families can't be at the hospital due to other commitments. The benefits of volunteering cannot be overstated, particularly for older adults. Research shows that such activities can reverse declining brain function, decrease depression and release dopamine in the brain — providing what is known as "the happiness effect."



**Straw for the manger:** If you know someone who is suffering the losses of age, encourage volunteering. Offer to help them enroll in such a program, and if they can't drive themselves, arrange for transportation.

*God, let us not forget that we all need love to thrive, whether we are the smallest of infants or the oldest and most frail. When we hold others, let us feel your arms around us. When others hold us, let us feel their arms as your own. Amen.*

# Third Week of Advent

Sunday | December 15

## GATHERING UP THE STRAW OF JOY

On this third Sunday of Advent, reflect on the ways in which you showed the love of Christ to others.

What did you do as an individual, as a family and as a church?

How were these acts of love transformative to you, your family and the church?

Invite children to draw pictures of their “straws” of love.

As we begin a new week, think about joy. How does the world define joy? How does God define joy? And what ways might God be using you to bring joy to the world?





## Monday | December 16

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*I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. — Philemon 1:7*

How can we refresh the hearts of others in a season that claims peace and goodwill to humanity, but is more often characterized by short tempers, exasperation and anxiety? A simple conversation with a stranger can save a life — or your own. Sometimes it is only a matter of affirming something about the other, such as, “You are lovely.” It was those three words that saved Tanya Gold from continuing down the suicidal path of addiction, she writes in the newspaper *The Guardian*. Such conversations are often with someone we might never see again. Being hospitable to the stranger matters everywhere we are, wherever we go.



**Straw for the manger:** Pay attention to the Holy Spirit’s nudges as you see the strangers around you. Bring some joy to a stranger through striking up a conversation in the checkout line or as you wait for a cup of coffee. Initiating positive interactions not only will lift your spirits, but also raise theirs. Encourage children to talk to someone new at school. At church, seek out a visitor or someone with whom you’ve never spoken.

*God, may we be mindful of strangers and realize we are all struggling in some way. Help us to lift the burden of feeling alone in the world by engaging those in our path, by speaking life into them. Amen.*

## Tuesday | December 17

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*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. — Hebrews 13:2*

I’m no angel, and just about anyone who knows me will confirm that. But I was treated like one many years ago when my husband and I packed up our little orange Chevette with our 9-month-old daughter in the back seat. Everything we had, which wasn’t a lot, was stored in a friend’s garage. We didn’t know where to go. My in-laws were willing to take us in, as were friends from our church. We had fulfilled our commitment to renovate a historic house where we had also established a house church. Now we were walking by faith with no clue where to go next, or should I say, driving by faith. At the end of the long driveway, we turned around and said goodbye to the house and the life we had lived for the previous 18 months.

“Should we turn right or left?”

If we turned left, we’d head toward my in-laws, a half-hour away. We turned right instead, toward Sam and Vicki’s home, which also housed their two teenage sons and daughter, a few miles away. They welcomed us as if we were long-lost family and they insisted that my husband, daughter and I take over the master bedroom. I refused and kept refusing. They kept insisting.

“We can’t do that, Vicki,” I said.

She said, “If Jesus were to come to your house, where would you put him?”

I said, “I’m not Jesus.”

Sam and Vicki slept on their living room floor for the next 30 days.



**Straw for the manger:** Send a thank you note to someone in the past who showed you hospitality. Tell them how it has influenced how you express hospitality in your life. Encourage children and teens to write thank you notes to grandparents, pastors or teachers for the ways they have blessed them.

*Jesus, help us to see your face upon every face; to see your image upon every stranger, and on those who are so familiar to us as well. We pray for those we have considered our enemies, that we might see you even in them. Amen.*

## Wednesday | December 18

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*You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. — 2 Corinthians 9:11–12*

“I wish I had been more generous with my time,” Constance said, days before passing from this life — a life she had spent teaching American literature at Georgetown University, coaching pastors, acting, pursuing artistic endeavors and managing her farm.

Are we generous enough with our time?

Karen, a deacon at the church I’m currently serving, is in the habit of generosity. She pays attention to others, she practices gratitude and she shares it. Karen is famous for the notes she sends out regularly to members and visitors of the church, among others, including shut-ins, old friends, new friends and neighbors. I am a recipient of those cards, as is my mother, who periodically can worship with us. These little cards, with an average of three scripted lines, bring unexpected joy to all those who receive them. Such acts spur others to a habit of generosity.



**Straw for the manger:** Consider every letter or card you send a love letter of sorts. Instead of signing only your name on any Christmas card you send, add a personal note; it will bless the receiver. Everyone needs to know they matter. Encourage young ones to send a card to someone they don’t know, such as to a local fire or police department, and thank the men and women for putting their lives on the line every day for those they don’t know. Goodwill is contagious.

*Lord, teach us through experience the joy of being generous with our time. Show us all of the ways that it enlarges our hearts and the hearts of the receivers. Amen.*

It’s been said that the most powerful prayer to God is simply to say “thank you.” Share those words with someone this Advent season.



## Thursday | December 19

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*[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. — 1 Corinthians 13:7*

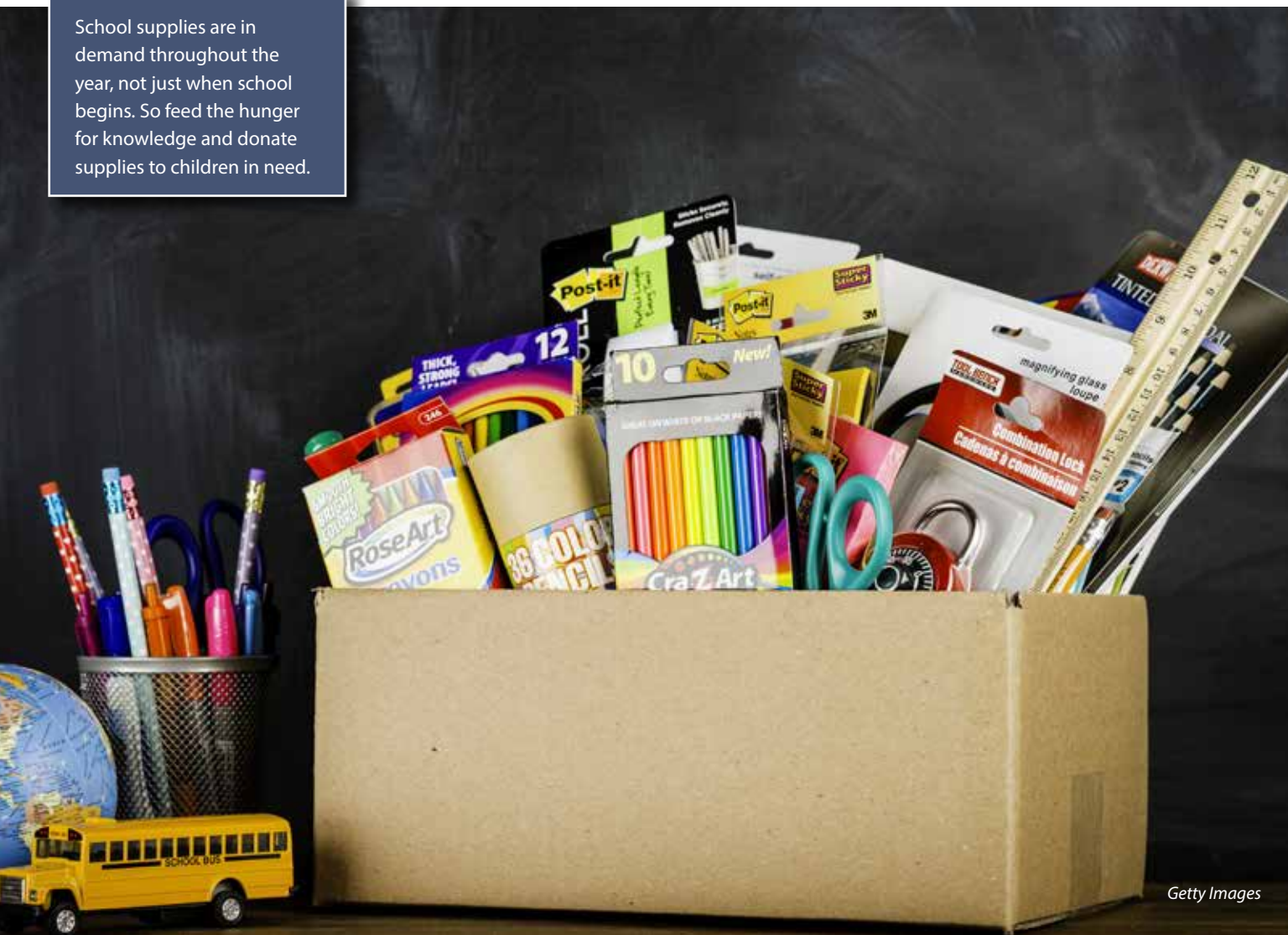
Sometimes we look outward to the ways we can feed the hungry, satisfy the thirsty, clothe the naked and visit the sick, yet we forget about those within our households. Children try their parents' patience; parents try their children's patience. But if ever there was an arena for love, it's in the home. We forget that parents have the most profound influence on a child's life for good. We forget that our children are the most critical work of our lives as parents. Remembering to feed our families the food and drink of love and affirmation, remembering to clothe them against the cold of the world, and being present in sickness and in health will impact every generation to follow.



**Straw for the manger:** Write a love letter to each of your children of any age, to your spouse or a valued friend, sharing with them all that you value about them. Ask your children to do likewise for their father, mother or grandparent, and have them wrap their letter up and place it under the tree for Christmas morning. These gifts are a part of our legacy and last a lifetime.

*God, help us be intentional about expressing our love and appreciation to those closest to us, knowing we are impacting the generations yet to come. Amen.*

School supplies are in demand throughout the year, not just when school begins. So feed the hunger for knowledge and donate supplies to children in need.



## Friday | December 20

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*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.*

— Genesis 2:15

If Jesus were to tell the Matthew 25 story today of the king and the inheritance of those who fed the hungry, clothed the naked and gave drink to the thirsty, he might have added, “Remember the first work God gave you to do. Care for Eden, be faithful and good stewards of the earth. If you are kind to the earth, you show kindness to me and to all who reside there.”

In a day when climate change plasters the news, and millions of species of animal and insect are added to the endangered or extinction list, let us love the earth. The earth is hungry and thirsty for care, and there are places on this globe where it was once clothed, but now it is naked. Commit acts of kindness for the land we tread, for the air we breathe, and for the streams and rivers and lakes and oceans we thirst for and refresh ourselves by their beauty. This Advent, give the best gift ever — your loving care toward Creation.



**Straw for the manger:** When you pass by trash on the side of the road, on a path or anywhere that it doesn't belong, pick it up. Recycle whenever possible. Also, go out as a family and make it a project to collect trash together. Start a movement. Examine the excesses of the way you live. Perhaps even aim for a simple — and green — Christmas.

*Forgive us, Lord. Forgive us for polluting the very paradise you created for us. Help us to hold ourselves and others accountable, and willingly care for this dazzling, remarkable world of rivers, streams, seas, forests, mountains and deserts that is our home, our shelter, our food and our drink. Amen.*

## Saturday | December 21

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*I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. — Psalm 32:8*

Our brains crave knowledge. Learning is like a transfusion into our blood that leads us to seek the One we call the mystery of mysteries. Breathing life into the minds of others through supporting education is one of the key tenets of our Reformed faith tradition. We can bring hope to the underserved, and to those who teach them, by donating school supplies.

DonorsChoose.org is an organization that empowers public school teachers from across the country to request much-needed materials and experiences for their students. In fact, 81% of all of the public schools in America have at least one teacher who has posted a project on the website, and 83% of schools that have participated were schools where half or more of the students hail from low-income households.

Mrs. Burns, a teacher at Robert Boeckman Middle School in Farmington, Minnesota, posted a request for \$350 for paint, brushes and organizers to help create a “Kindness Rocks” garden.

The garden is the project of a small group of students who paint inspirational quotes or pictures on rocks and then place them in a garden in front of the school.

“We talk all the time about how one small little act can really make someone's day. Students are encouraged to think of sayings that are meaningful to push others to believe in themselves,” Mrs. Burns said. But these words of kindness go even further, as students bring their creations into their neighborhoods to begin their own gardens, planting seeds of hope and generosity wherever they go.



**Straw for the manger:** Serve the underserved by making a donation to schools for supplies, feeding the hunger for knowledge.

*Our Lord and our God, the more we learn, the more knowledge we obtain, the greater our sense of awe and wonder, and the deeper our faith can grow. Bless our teachers who work so hard and often with so little. Amen.*

# Fourth Week of Advent

Sunday | December 22

## GATHERING THE STRAW OF PEACE

With just days to go until Christmas, how much straw have you filled Jesus' manger with?

Where did you bring joy to someone? How did this joy brighten the world?

There is still more straw to add to the manger — the straw of peace. And so, on this last Sunday of Advent, ask yourself, and your family and friends, about what ways peace can be brought into your community.





# Personal Journal

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*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. — Matthew 5:9*

If ever the world needed peacemakers, surely it is now. Yet how can we be peacemakers in the world if we are not at peace with ourselves, with God and with others?

Grace has to go all the way down into the very marrow of our bones, into us at the cellular level, to that place where we forgive ourselves and where we are intent on loving our enemies. If it doesn't, then we'll likely focus on those who are against us; we won't "work out our salvation with fear and trembling." Might that be why the Lord prayed: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"? And might "working out" mean that we live in nonviolent ways in all areas of our lives — in our thoughts, conversations, discussions about politics, work relationships and when dealing with challenging people and situations? To have peace, and to make peace, we must have active compassion for friend and foe, know ourselves and walk humbly with God.



**Straw for the manger:** Practice being an active listener. Sit down with a friend or a member of your community in your workplace, classroom or home, and listen attentively. Resist the temptation to turn the conversation toward you or attempt to persuade the person to agree with your position. In this way, we will work toward genuine peace.

*God, work in us to become better listeners, to be compassionate with others by listening to their stories, their grievances and their concerns without imposing upon them our own stories, concerns and complaints. In this way, may we be peacemakers in the world we live in. Amen.*



### CHRISTMAS EVE

*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

— Isaiah 9:6

I stood on the hilltop overlooking Bethlehem where the shepherds once stood watching their flocks at night. There were cave-like depressions in the stony ground where the shepherds were said to have camped at night. I imagined a host of angels proclaiming to them — the lowliest of men in that age — the good news of the Savior being born. How the stars must have swirled! How the silence must have been shattered with the heavenly proclamation, breaking the sound barrier between heaven and earth forever!

What could they bring but themselves and their flock to the stable? They went, down the hillside, to the place where they found the Lamb of God asleep in a manger. Around him were the beasts of burden who worked the fields and the other creatures of Eden. There was nothing more to do than to kneel before the King of Kings, the vulnerable child, the Christ, the One who came to save humanity, the Word made flesh.

The greatest act of kindness we can do for others is also the greatest act we can do for ourselves: to kneel before the Savior, going awestruck throughout our days and to shepherding the sheep.

**Straw for the manger:** There is still time to add straw to the manger. Find time this day to give hope to the hopeless and love to the loveless. Bring joy to those who mourn. Bring peace to a place of chaos. Let the question in Matthew 25 whisper to you, "Lord, when did I see you ... ?" Now open your eyes and truly see the many ways you can share the gift of Jesus with all.

*Our Lord and our God, on this holiest of nights, let us come to you as children ourselves, full of wonder and awe. We kneel humbly before you. Let us behold the mystery of love, as we live out our love for you by feeding the hungry, giving drink to all who thirst, clothing the naked and freeing those in prison. Amen.*

### CHRISTMAS DAY

*But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." — Luke 2:10*

One Christmas morning years ago when my children were young, we woke up before dawn and hurried downstairs to see all of the gifts shimmering under the tree. We started with the stockings that hung on the fireplace, as was our tradition. Three were stuffed to overflowing. Mine was empty; my husband didn't think to fill it. Utter horror contorted my daughters' faces. They never forgot that Christmas when I was forgotten — the one who had been busy for weeks doing all of the baking, cooking, decorating, shopping, planning, wrapping and sending Christmas cards.

It's Christmas Day. Whom have we forgotten? Whom have we refused to see, to acknowledge and to serve, not just during Advent, but in the comings and goings of our everyday life? Which child lays his head against the hard earth, with no crib for a bed? Which mother rejoices over the birth of her son or daughter with no way to protect or care for him or her? Who is cold against the night?

What straw we bring to the Christ child we bring to the world. If we live our faith out loud with deliberate, full-throttle love and compassion, then Christ will be born in us anew and into the world afresh. God never forgets any of us.

*Jesus, you are the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all Creation. May we see you in all that is visible, in all people and throughout the earth, and forget no one or anything you have made. Amen.*



## ABOUT THE WRITER

The Rev. Sherry Blackman is an award-winning journalist and poet, whose work has taken her around the globe and has appeared in dozens of publications and several books. She currently serves as the pastor of the Presbyterian Church of the Mountain, in Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania. In her “free” time, she also serves as a truck stop chaplain and Pennsylvania State Police chaplain.

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