



Reflections for the Journey

SAINT JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH • ELLICOTT CITY, MD

Christmas Alternatives

By: *The Rev. Ann Ritonia*



In Advent, we prepare our hearts for a special gift. Someone once said that “The best way to send an idea is to wrap it up in a person.” Knowing us well, God did just that and then some. God sent us more than an idea when he sent us the gift of Jesus, God’s Self incarnate. A child put it this way “Some people couldn’t hear God’s inside whisper, and so God sent Jesus to tell them out loud.”

This season of the Church year we enter into at the end of November, Advent, is all about preparing ourselves to give attention to God’s great gift, Jesus Christ. It is a time

of waiting, hope and longing. In the coming weeks, our scriptures recall the longing for the coming of the Messiah in the words of the prophets, the conception of John the Baptist and the Savior himself, as well as the family history of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. During Advent as we recall and then relive these stories, allow them to reconnect you and your family with Jesus in a powerful way, strengthening the ties you have with him and each other and deepen your understanding of how Jesus is present and continues to work in our lives today. However, with all the responsibilities and activities that can overwhelm us during this time of year, particularly when trying to live up to the expectations of Christmas past while living into the reality of our various

economic realities, Christmas can be overwhelming.

If you feel that the celebration of Christmas – especially *your* celebration of Christmas – has gotten off track somehow, know you’re not alone. In many places people are seeking a Christmas that is more joyful, less harried, and more centered on things that truly matter – family, friends, service, and God. While it is not easy and will require conscious effort, it

Continued on page 2

Inside...

Tidings of Comfort	4
Holy Waiting	6
Visitation	7
Waiting is the Hardest Part	8
Advent & Christmas Services	9



Continued from page 1

is possible. As James Tracy points out in the introduction to *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, Americans “feel obliged to go through the motions of preparation for what they have been socialized to believe are Yuletide necessities”: spending more than they can afford on Christmas gifts that mean little to those who receive them, spending hours they can’t spare looking for parking places and shopping, and going into debt that they can’t easily get out from under.”

Critics of our American Christmas celebrations rightly attack the powerful consumerist basis of today’s holiday, and many of them say they long for a return to a time when the birth of Christ was the central reason for the season. Interestingly though, that time did not exist:

Christmas has always been, as Penne L. Restad notes in *Christmas in America: A History*, “a radically paradoxical mix of both the sacred and the profane.”

Christmas as we know and celebrate it in the modern West is a relatively recent invention, depending equally on the church; the literary productions of Charles Dickens, Washington Irving, and Clement Moore; and the mercantile establishment, which early on recognized that Christmas could be the source of a great profit for many. It’s worth taking a look at what Christmas has been since the time of Christ so we might imagine an alternative way to treasure the season when we celebrate Christ’s birth.

The early church has no tradition of noting Jesus’ birth.

In the Scriptures that became the normative texts for early Christian communities, the only passage that seems to have any correlation to our current mania for Christmas gift giving is the story about the presentation of ceremonial gifts in honor of the Christ child by the visitors from the East, the “three kings.” It’s important to note that these gifts were given to the glory of God, not exchanged among members of the family; Mary and Joseph did not fill baby Jesus’ stocking with fruit, nuts, and an iPhone XI on the first Christmas.

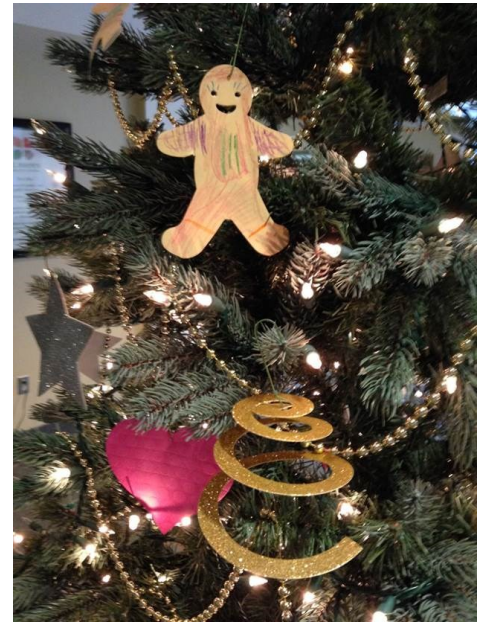
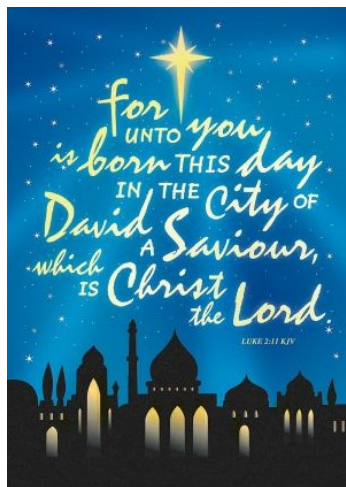
So, the Bible doesn’t have much to say about Christmas, neither in the Gospels nor in the Epistles. In fact, for the most part, the early church was not much interested in the nativity of Christ. Its members were more concerned with the question of when Jesus would return than when he was born or even whether it was important to celebrate that birth; early Christians looked down on birthday celebrations as pagan. But in the third century, as the speedy assurance of the second coming began to fade, some church fathers began taking a more historical view of the faith, and one of the results was that some

tried to settle on a date for Jesus' birth. (They weren't very successful.) It wasn't until the fourth century that the church began to celebrate the feast of the Nativity on December 25, and this date was largely chosen for pragmatic rather than scriptural or inspired reasons: in the old Julian calendar, the 25th of December was the winter solstice, when the sun god Mithras was honored with a festival.

The observance of Christmas spread throughout the universal church over the next thousand years. The Puritans struck down the observance of Christmas in England and some of the American colonies and it snuck back into mainstream culture in the nineteenth century through such literary works as Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and Moore's "The Night before Christmas." Entrepreneurs including F. W. Woolworth discovered, people would pay lots of money for Christmas gifts, ornaments, and decorations. Santa Claus was elevated to a secular icon of giving and generosity, the holiday was refocused on gift giving and family celebration, and we were on our way to the Christmas we have today. It's a Christmas with joyful elements, certainly,

but as Bill McKibben notes, encourages the year-round American cultural notion "that transcendent joy comes from things" and even sanctifies it by its perceived proximity to Jesus. If that bothers you, then it's good to know that some folks have seen an out. There are alternatives to the gift-giving treadmill.

This Advent and Christmas I invite you to slow down, examine your activities in light of your deepest values, express your love in more direct ways than gifts and use this time of Advent for personal and family gratitude, renewal and celebration, a time to be filled with the peace and love of Jesus, and a time for remembering all those people who truly need our gifts. May each of you have a holy Advent and blessed Christmastide.



Christmas Alternatives, continued on page 5.

Material for this article is from *Reclaiming Christmas, The thoughtful Christian* by Greg Garrett. Greg is a Professor of English at Baylor University, and writer in residence at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas, where he lives with his boys, Jake and Chandler.

Additional Resources

1. James Tracy, Introduction to *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, ed. Richard Horsley and James Tracy (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001)
2. Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
3. Bill McKibben, *Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).
4. Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli, *Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy Back into the Season* (New York: William Morrow, 1991).

Tidings of Comfort

By: The Rev. Dr. Katrina Grusell



Tidings of Comfort is an annual service at St. John's that takes place during the season of Advent. Created more than a decade ago for those struggling with grief, stress, illness, or other challenges that cast a shadow over the holidays, it remains a sacred space of healing and hope.

Last year, Tidings of Comfort shifted from a Service of Holy Eucharist in the Historic Church to a dinner and service in All Saints Hall. People gathered for caring conversation as they ate together and then shared Eucharist with the laying on of hands for healing. Sharing conversation, a meal, and communion touches our spiritual needs, feeds our bodies, and provides emotional support. It is a time to lovingly nurture our-

selves in the hurried, harried holiday season.

This year, Tidings of Comfort is sponsored by the Mental Health Ministry. Information and resources will be shared to assist people with processing the emotions associated with loss and change. From those who grieve the death of a loved one to those who wrestle with change and its emotional impact, those who gather will find concrete ways to move through loss towards healing. A time line of St. John's history will be displayed to remind us of the many celebrations and challenges through which our community has both endured and thrived. Alongside our parish history, we will honor our own personal losses or struggles and offer it all to God in worship.

Staying connected to others makes all the difference. When stress runs us ragged or mourning weighs us down, isolation often exacerbates emotional burdens. The Mental Health Ministry team has focused on Paul's words in the twelfth

chapter 2 Corinthians, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." Community is the presence of Christ. Through the Spirit that creates and binds community together, we find comfort and the strength to meet whatever life brings.

This year's Tidings of Comfort will take place on Tuesday evening, December 3. Dinner will begin at 5:30 p.m. Entrees will be provided; please bring a side dish or dessert to share. During dinner, we will have a brief presentation on processing emotions, followed by Holy Eucharist. If you would like to attend Tidings of Comfort, please email Allison Gradwell at avcgrad@gmail.com. All are welcome.

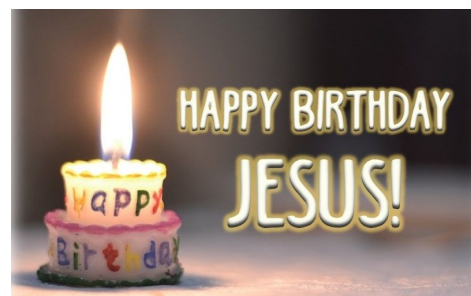


First, think about refocusing your gift giving. Instead of sweaters, ties, and video games this year, your family members could consider making a donation to a charity in the community or one that serves the underprivileged internationally. Talk with your family giving up tangible gifts and pulling resources to give the intangible, but very powerful, sense of helping others. If your family requires some weaning from the American tradition, consider giving gifts from the heart, handmade if you have that talent, or shopping in ways that benefit small business owners. In the spirit of charitable giving, consider volunteering to help those who are alone, underprivileged, or suffering at Christmas time. Adopt a family in need through St. John's Holiday Basket Ministry and provide Christmas for them. If you are alone on Christmas, ask around about opportunities—about how

to make someone else's holiday more joyful. There are lots of ways to enjoy family togetherness that don't necessarily require chaotic exchanges of gifts. Explore some of these possibilities with those you love.

There are also many opportunities for more spiritual immersion into the season, beginning with Advent as a time of religious preparation, not simply as a countdown to Santa Claus, and continuing with the idea that Christmas (like Easter) is a season, not simply a day. How might we connect with others, with God, with ourselves, in joyful anticipation of the central truth of Christianity, the occasion when God becomes human and lives among us? Christmas is one of those special times that offers us an opportunity to realize two essential spiritual truths: that what we desire and even acquire will never bring us true happiness, and that true happiness comes only when we place God at the center of our existence. What if we re-imagined Christmas as what it really is: a birthday party for the Son of God? Think about birthday parties you have attended. You

are not the center of attention, and the gifts are not intended for you. Remember that for Christians, this is the birthday party of all birthday parties, one that should spin us into a different place, not simply into exhaustion: "Christmas is a time for enormous celebration, but also a time for pondering, for reverence, for awe at our sheer good fortune that God sent his only child into our midst."



I Commit Myself To...

- ◆ *Remember those people who truly need my gifts*
- ◆ *Express my love in more direct ways than gifts*
- ◆ *Examine my holiday activities in the light of my deepest values*
- ◆ *Be a peacemaker within my circle of family and friends*
- ◆ *Rededicate myself to my spiritual growth*

From *Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy Back into the Season* by Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli.

Holy Waiting

By: The Rev. Joanne Tetrault, Associate Rector of Children's Ministries & Parish Day School Chaplain



Are we there yet? Is it Christmas yet?

It seems to come faster every year (or depending on your age, takes longer to get here every year!) No sooner are the Thanksgiving dinner dishes put away than we're expected to be in full-Christmas swing. But let's not forget the holy season of Advent, which we observe this year from December 1-24.

I encourage us not only to *observe* Advent – not, perhaps, to think of Advent simply as those weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas – but to be mindful participants *in* Advent! And that can be hard because what Advent is about is something we find so, so difficult ... waiting.

Like the faithful servant Mary did, after she said yes to God, to be the one to carry God's son and bring him to live among us. Between the time of her "yes" to God and the birth, she waited, not quite under-

standing how this could be. Like all expectant mothers do. Not quite clear about what will happen next. Not quite clear about how, but with a deep knowledge that life is about to change forever.

By the time we reach that holy, in-between time when Advent becomes Christmas, our time of preparation, anticipation, and waiting will be full, near to bursting. Such is the process of birth: anticipated with joy and eagerness. Yet each day leading up to that birth has been filled with mystery and unseen growth. Each day along the way counts. Each new life is completely unique; each gestation period and birth and process of bonding and growing is a holy process.

The entrance of God incarnate into our world happened in the birth and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth at a particular time in history – and it is not yet complete. God's work is not yet finished, in the world, or in us as individuals.

We human beings are constantly in a place of in-between,

always with an inner striving to move from one place to the next. Restlessness, longing, hunger, a sense of nostalgia, a feeling of wildness – however it shows up in you, it is all the same. This is our desire to give birth, both men and women. Not as a spectator, but as one striving and reaching for the new life that we are promised.

There is a Jewish legend that says just before God puts the spirit into a baby about to be born, that spirit is asked to forget its divine origins; so one of God's angels presses the baby's mouth shut, making that little indent above the lip that we all have.

The spirit of birthing; of making all things new, has already been given to us. It's implanted deep within. And somehow, we cannot forget it. So let us unwrap and uncover, bring forth and breathe new life into *our* place in the ongoing birth process.

In a sense it is always Advent, regardless of what the calendar says. When we live our days as if awaiting birth – with joy, eagerness, anticipation, hope ...for things not always seen but deeply felt, and always within us.

Visitation

By: The Rev. Stephen Hagerty



I distinctly remember my first visit to a county jail, where I was going to see a parishioner while he was awaiting trial. As you could imagine, the protocols were legion just to be approved to visit, to say nothing of the actual visiting ritual itself. And it was a ritual. But, honestly, I was mainly just nervous. I had never been to a jail or prison (didn't know that there was even a distinction between the two!). The environment was slightly chaotic, far from friendly, and I can still recall how loud a place it was (all those metal doors clicking open and slamming shut).

And then, of course, there was the actual visit. No one tells you how much waiting there is and how much of this is simply out of your control. Sometimes my parishioner would arrive in ten or fifteen minutes; other times I had to wait for an hour

and a half. And either way, this time was always deducted from the total visit time itself! You were quite simply at the mercy of the authorities

And though it was far from clear to me that my visits were helpful (I shudder at the stupidity of my platitudes given during those early first visits), I knew that a familiar, friendly face in the midst of a chaotic and uncertain situation was a balm for my parishioner (and, truth be told, for me). There is something in us that longs for a visit from someone—anyone really—who simply cares.

Visitation is a just a less fancy word for Advent. And Advent is all about waiting. And I am awful at waiting—impatient does not begin to describe the depths of my annoyance. But God has been very gracious by granting me daily opportunities to become more patient. And, I have learned something. That if we are not careful, we miss the opportunity of the season of Advent. And it is a season, not just an addendum to Christmas.

That is why I would like to focus on the beautiful hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," in particular, verse three:

*O come, Thou Day-Spring
Come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put
to flight
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, o Israel*

"Come and cheer our spirits by Thine advent here"—yes, God, please visit us with your presence. Amidst our doubts and confusions and griefs, please simply visit with us. Be present. Amidst the painful memories, families no longer talking; amidst things unforgiven; amidst the hurts and betrayals we often nurse and hold too closely to our hearts; God, please come and "disperse the gloomy clouds of night."

I love Advent because I just have to wait. I don't have to pretend I am happier than I am (no forced "Christmas Cheer"). I don't have to pretend that I don't need help—rescue even! I don't have to rush, though I am tempted to all the time. So what do I wish for you all this advent? Nothing really, except that you wait expectantly. No more and no less.



The Waiting is the Hardest Part

By: Colleen Citrano,
Director of Youth Ministries

As we enter into the season of Advent, we are reminded to center ourselves during this season that can so easily be overtaken with consumerism. It is the season of sales, parties, tree trimmings, Christmas songs, Christmas specials, and more. I love a good Christmas song, but let's not rush ourselves....

At the beginning of Advent, Tom Petty's "The Waiting" always come to my mind—"The waiting is the hardest part/Every day you see one more card/ You take it on faith, you take it to the heart/The waiting is the hardest part." We learn to wait in Advent. What exactly are we waiting for? As we read in Luke 3:15-16, "As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John (the Baptist), whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one

who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." We are waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus and the way his teachings changed the world. The waiting is the hardest part. We do so much preparation for Christmas day, that the spiritual lead up to Christmas (Advent) can sometimes take a back seat. During Advent, take time to remember how to love one another, prepare for our special guest (Jesus), and remember how Jesus' presence takes us out of the dark and into the light.

When my children were younger, we would mark Advent with a count-down of the days until Christmas with "Advent Envelopes". Instead of a hidden treat each day, they had a special note. I would pull out my

December calendar with all their school activities, church activities, and any other items and create notes to give them to open either every morning or evening during Advent. The notes included items like praying for someone in need, helping others (which could be combined with a shopping trip to the grocery store for Holiday Basket items), reading a favorite Christmas book, sharing joy with others, making joyful noise ourselves, or sharing our hopes for the season. I also included fun items like breakfast for dinner or they selected our dinner menu. Even though our days were usually busy, like I'm sure yours are, we were always sure to open an envelope. The last envelope always had "Look for baby Jesus" as we never put Jesus in the Nativity until Christmas morning. Yes, on Christmas morning, I made my children run around the house looking for baby Jesus to add to our Nativity before opening any gifts! Isn't He the best gift?

Both my daughter and son are now in college and they still ask for these Advent Envelopes to count down the days to Christmas while they are away at school. *The waiting is the hardest part. You take it on faith, you take it to heart.* This Advent season, what are you waiting for?



2019 Advent & Christmas Worship

Sunday, December 1: The First Sunday of Advent (*Regular Sunday Worship Times*)

5:00 p.m., Choral Evensong in the Historic Church *A short organ concert to follow.*

Tuesday, December 3: Tidings of Comfort & Holy Eucharist

5:30 p.m. in All Saints Hall

For those experiencing grief, or sadness, or loss, the holiday season isn't always bright. Come rest with us in the abiding hope of God's promises for a faithful future. Join us for a pot-luck dinner, facilitated conversation, and Eucharist with healing prayer.

Sunday, December 8: The Second Sunday of Advent (*Regular Sunday Worship Times*)

7:00 p.m., The Compassionate Friend Worldwide Candle Lighting in All Saints Hall

Sunday, December 15: The Third Sunday of Advent (*Regular Sunday Worship Times*)

Saturday, December 21: The Fourth "Sunday" of Advent

5:00 p.m., Holy Eucharist in Resurrection Chapel

Sunday, December 22: The Fourth Sunday of Advent (*Regular Sunday Worship Times*)

10:15 a.m., Christmas Pageant and Holy Eucharist in the Historic Church

Children in 1st-5th grade will embody the Christmas story through costumed tableaux and processions, while youth narrate the tidings of great joy! Includes traditional Christmas hymns.

Tuesday, December 24: Christmas Eve

3:00 p.m., Joy and Wonder: Christmas Eucharist with Crèche and Carols in All Saints Hall

Wonder at the mystery and meaning of Christ's birth in this worship offering designed especially for families with young children and open to all. Children will assemble the Crèche for Christmas.

3:00 p.m., Christmas Eucharist with Carols in the Historic Church

Wonder at the mystery and meaning of Christ's birth in this simple worship service with Carols. Open to all.

5:00 p.m., Living the Light: Candlelight Christmas Eucharist in All Saints Hall

Experience the living love of God among us as the Christmas story comes alive in silhouette, shadow and light.

5:00 p.m., Story and Song: Christmas Eucharist in the Historic Church

Rejoice at the message of the angels as the Christmas gospel proclamation is enlivened through scripture and music. Features the musical leadership of the St. John's Youth Choir.

8:00 p.m., Festival Holy Eucharist in the Historic Church

Traditional Christmas music by Adult, Handbell, and Brass Choirs, pipe organ and tympani. Prelude begins at 7:30 p.m. English and Korean speaking congregations.

10:30 p.m., Festival Holy Eucharist in the Historic Church

Traditional Christmas music by Adult, Handbell, and Brass Choirs, pipe organ and tympani. Prelude begins at 10 p.m.

Wednesday, December 25: Christmas Day —The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ

10:15 a.m., Holy Eucharist with Hymns in the Historic Church

Sunday, December 29: The First Sunday after Christmas Day (*Regular Sunday Worship Times*)

Lessons and Carols at all Sunday services (*No Formation Classes*)

Saturday, January 4: Epiphany "Sunday"

5:00 p.m., Holy Eucharist in Resurrection Chapel

Sunday, January 5: Epiphany Sunday (*Regular Sunday Worship Times*)

(*Formation Classes Resume*)