



Reflections for the Journey

SAINT JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH • ELLICOTT CITY, MD

What Is This Season We Call Advent?

By: The Rev. Ann Ritonia



Years ago if asked about my favorite time of year, I would have probably said Christmas. This has changed however given all the expectations that surround Christmas. When I think about the expectations we place upon ourselves, those of others, and the pressures of a commercial and consumer culture to create the “Perfect Christmas”, those “Hallmark” moments our family will cherish for years to come, I am grateful for the traditions of the church and the invitation of the season of Advent to re-center our lives.

Advent comes from the Latin *advento*, to arrive, to approach. The noun form, *adventor*, also means guest, visitor. “Advent began sometime after the 4th century as a time of preparation for Epiphany, and not in anticipation of Christmas. Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Christ by remembering the visit of the wise men and, in some traditions, the Baptism of Jesus. At this time, new Christians were baptized and received into the faith and so the early church instituted a 40-day period of fasting and repentance. Later, in the 6th century, St. Gregory the Great was the first to associate this season of Advent with the coming of Christ. Originally it was not the coming of the Christ-child that was anticipated, but the

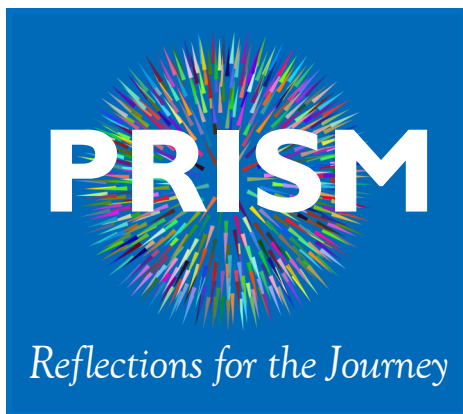
Second Coming of Christ. By the Middle Ages, the church had extended the celebration of Advent to include the coming of Christ through his birth in Bethlehem, his future coming at the end of time, and his presence among us through the promised Holy Spirit.

The original intent of Advent then was a time of

Continued on page 3.

Inside...

What to Expect from <i>Prism</i>	2
Longing for Christmas	4
Grieving at the Holidays	6
Discipleship	7
Why I Give	8
Our Faith in Action	9
History of the Crèche	10
Advent & Christmas Services	11



With the celebration of the birth of Jesus upon us, we found it a fitting time to celebrate the launch of our new parish journal, *Prism: Reflections for the Journey*. You will find *Prism* to be different from its predecessor, *Godsibb/Ministry Spotlight*, but it is our hope that you will find *Prism* to be meaningful in your journey as a Christian.

Why the change in format?

In its previous format, our parish newsletter was bringing you news, sometimes outdated, that you were already getting in bulletin announcements and *Blessings* e-news. Since spreading the word of the fantastic works being done at St. John's continues to be of great importance, those items will be spotlighted in a more timely fashion in special editions of *Blessings* e-news.

What can we expect from *Prism*?

You can expect articles that are theologically and formationally based, ones that will

get you thinking, reflecting on your journey of faith. Each issue will be geared toward the Church seasons. You can expect to receive *Prism* five times per year: Advent/Christmas; Lent; Easter; Summer; and at the beginning of the Program year (September).

Why the name change?

With the change in the content of the publication, we felt a name change was in order as well. According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of *Godsibb* evolved over time from "a person spiritually related to another, specifically by being a sponsor at baptism", to "a close friend or crony as well as for a godparent". From there it was only a short step to the "gossip" of today, a person no longer necessarily friend, relative, or sponsor, but someone filled with irresistible tidbits of rumor.

A prism, on the other hand, reflects light and optimism, in a sense, lighting the way on your journey with God.

Why is it in color now? Isn't that more expensive?

Thanks to a new copier contract we are able to design *Prism* in color at a cost even less than before!

So how do I reach the congregation with news I want to share?

We will continue to share timely news in the weekend bulletin announcements and *Blessings* e-news. In the near future, we will be rolling out a new communications plan outlining guidelines for how news will be communicated. Our goal is to disseminate information in the best way possible way — timely, succinctly, and easily accessible.

Have more questions?

Contact Tracey Stone, Communications Director, tstone@stjohnsec.org.

**"Communication
leads to community,
that is, to
understanding,
intimacy and
mutual valuing. "**

– Rollo May

Advent

Continued from page 1

preparation, that involved not only getting ready but also waiting in anticipation for something that was unpredictable, Jesus' second coming. So as we wait for Christmas morning, to celebrate the incarnation of God, the presence of God made manifest in the person of a tiny and vulnerable infant, we are given the opportunity to practice holy waiting. In Peter's second letter, he describes to Jesus' early followers how they were to live as they waited for the second coming of Jesus. "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

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 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 entered into on the 2nd of December, 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, the scripture readings in our lectionary (*the three year cycle of readings appointed for Sunday*) 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 the 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.

With all the responsibilities and activities that can overwhelm us during this time of year, 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 for setting realistic expectations of family and friends, 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. This year when Christmas morning arrives may all of us be found ready, in the words of Anglican priest George Whitfield(1714-1770), "to celebrate and keep this festival of our church, with joy in our hearts: let the birth of a Redeemer, which redeemed us from sin, from wrath, from death, from hell, be always remembered; may this Savior's love never be forgotten!" May each of you have a holy Advent and blessed Christmas.



O, How Long We Have Been Longing (A Parent Reflects on Advent)

By: *The Rev. Jenni Ovenstone Smith*



As a parent this year, it seems I have had to work especially hard at holding Christmas carols and wish-list-talk at bay since pumpkin-spice starting appearing on the shelves at the end of summer. I hardly have the stamina (or the theological taste) for a four month holiday season.

How does your home handle all the trappings? Do you have Christmas decorations up and presents purchased before the Thanksgiving turkey has even been prepped? Do you dive right in to holiday cheer? Do you use the month of December as something of a “countdown” (or a ramp up) to Christmas? Do you draw on the rituals of Advent — the lighting of

wreaths and candles, and a restraint from some of the merriment — for a quieter reflection on the Light coming into the world? Or, if you are much like us, some combination of the above?

Whether you have welcomed this year’s especially early arrival of trimmings and tidings as a glimmer of hope (or at least a diversion) from divisive rhetoric, hateful speech and actions, and the heavy news cycle of an alarmingly broken world, or have held off to allow for the anticipation of the joy and healing of Christmas yet to come. Pay attention to the longing your response reveals: name the inner and

outer gaps and griefs the cheer is attempting to fill. Use the wishes and hopes children express. Encourage the daily wondering, and even lamenting, of “how much longer?” Play up the counting down to something more.

Pay attention to the longing; for longing has always been the reason for the season of Advent. The weeks leading up to the celebration of the Feast of the Nativity have become for the Church a time to remember that our hope is that Christ is yet coming into the world. Restoring, healing, making right.

This year, consider those in our world who most have cause to wonder “How long?” — the stuck, the sorrowful, the marginalized, the victimized, the fearful. In your Advent prayers and practices (perhaps gathered around the wreath, in your daily calendar opening, in the causes to which you give, in the stories that you read) weave the prayers and needs of those who most need a world set right into your own family’s longings.

Let’s use the longing with our children, in our families, and perhaps longing on behalf of others, and the actions this can prompt, to create something that will last.

Peace



Think about your calendar in the coming weeks. What's the craziest thing you have on the schedule? The busiest, most hectic time you have? Maybe it's a long day of travel, or a week filled with school activities, or an afternoon shopping for those last minute gifts on a budget, or a visit from a family member who is anything but easy to have around. Whatever it is, when you think about it, it probably leaves you feeling anything but peaceful. The truth is, it's easy to let the busyness and stress of the season steal the peace that's meant to mark it. Remember though that peace is exactly the point of the season; peace is what Christ came to Earth to bring us. It's not the peace that comes from an easy holiday, or a stress-free vacation, or a family who doesn't fight (though that kind of peace is certainly nice!).

No, the peace that we remember at Advent is a peace that goes much deeper than that. It's a lasting peace—the kind that is only possible in and through Christ. His call is to not just let peace be in our hearts, but to allow it to rule in our hearts. In other words, the peace of Christ should be the guiding force in our lives. And when it is, we'll be the kind of people who spill that same peace out to everyone we come in contact with, no matter what is going on in our lives. As your calendar fills up and the hectic days of the holidays threaten to take over, remind yourself of the peace that we celebrate at Advent. Do whatever you can to be a person who pursues and reflects that peace this holiday season.



Family Time

Make an effort to teach your children what it looks like to share God's love with others this season. Together, come up with ways you can demonstrate the love of God in your community, in your family, or in your church this season. Maybe it's through serving together, giving to those in need, or simply being kind. Brainstorm your ideas for sharing love together and create a list. Then, choose just one thing from your list that you can do together as a family to show the love of God to others this holiday season. Make plans to do it before the holidays are over. After you do, talk with your kids about what it felt like to share the love of God with others through service, action, or words. Then, pray that God will continue to show you ways you can share His love with those around you in the coming year.





By The Rev. Dr. Katrina L. Grusell

Grief is the normal and natural emotional reaction to loss or change of any kind. Whether a loved one has died, a job has been lost, an illness is ravaging a body, or life is just unsteady, grief is in the aftermath of it. Deep sorrow creates a vulnerable woundedness. Like a large scrape across the skin, our spirit becomes exposed and raw. With life changed, darkness may overcome us or confusion as to how to move forward may envelope us. It is not unusual for the grieving person to feel overwhelmed and uncertain.

Grief at the holidays is especially difficult. While those in grief sort out how to mark the holidays, the air is filled with songs of joy and playfulness. Images of nostalgic Christmases fill our screens. For the grieving, Christmas is a reminder of all they've lost and what can never be again.

For some who grieve, participating in long held traditions may be too painful with a loved one's absence. For others, clinging more tightly to traditions fosters a sense of connection to those who have died. Self-compassion is an important practice for the sorrowful as choices are made about what activities to participate in how to observe the holidays.

Advent is a gift to the grieving in so many ways. It is a season of preparation that invites us all to be real about the darkness around us, the sinful nature of humanity, and our own regrets. It is a time to reflect on our life and examine the chasm between the world as it is and the world as it should be, and our role in it. Yet, in the midst of our brokenness, we trust that God will intervene on our behalf. Despite everything, we are truly beloved of

God. This is why Advent is a season of expectation and hope. For the grieving, it is hope that makes each day possible.

If you have suffered a loss of any kind or had a major disruption that has changed your life, be kind to yourself. Make the choices that are right for you and trust your instinct as you make decisions in how to engage others this holiday season. Know that in the midst of your loss, God is still with you. Life is never the same after significant loss. Yet, we hold on to the hope that Christ will come again and make all things new. That is the true joy of Christmas, God's unfailing love comes to us anew. That is the light that shines forth beyond the season of darkness.

Tips for helping those who are grieving

- ♦ Be supportive if the person wants to break tradition and do things differently this year.
- ♦ Offer to help with baking or cleaning. These tasks can often seem overwhelming.
- ♦ Invite him/her to attend a religious service with you.
- ♦ Let him/her know you care and are there to listen.

Christmas: Through the Lens of Discipleship

By: The Rev. Stephen Hagerty

I wonder if you have ever thought of Christmas through the lens of *discipleship*? And if not, why not? If discipleship is simply learning to see Jesus' story as your very own, Christmas could not be a better time to make this kind of connection!

To help you make this connection, I would like to focus on one very small action that the shepherds take (at least in the version we find in Luke's gospel). If you remember, they are just told the most amazing story and from an angel no less (!):

"I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord."

(Luke 2:10-11)



And what do the shepherds do with this news? "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." (Luke 2:15) The shepherds learn of an amazing event—an event that might be too good to be true—and they want to confirm this for themselves. *Don't just take the angel's word for it; let's see for ourselves if this could possibly have happened!* A course of actions that sounds eminently practical and spiritual all at the same time.

Which leads me to ask a question of each of you: Have you ever thought about your commitment to attending and participating at St. John's as a kind of spiritual *Continuing Education Unit*, i.e., *CEUs in Discipleship*? A place where you encounter a story that asks you to do no less than make it your very own!

And though this is not easy work by any measure, it is work that rewards our focus and time in immeasurable ways. If we make a conscious decision to bring that same kind of focus and enthusiasm in "confirming this for ourselves" to every worship service, to every encounter with fellow parishioners, we just might (*might*) be able to do this in the world into which God sends us out each week. The world that needs to hear this story and it needs to hear it from you and me (how else will they hear it, if we don't confirm and share it as the shepherds did?).

I wonder if, in the midst of the beautiful pageantry, the glorious Christmas hymns, and all the various celebrations, you might consider **confirming** (maybe for the very first time!) how the Christmas story might just become your own.

GIVING TO GOD— THE TITHE



Why I Give

By: An Anonymous Giver

For at least half of my life, I was not a joyful giver. On Sundays, I put whatever money I had left in my wallet in the collection plate. Some Sundays it was a dollar or two. If all I had was a twenty, I would throw that in the plate wishing I had a smaller bill. It was an obligation. One year however, I was challenged by my priest to consider tithing, giving back to God a percentage of what God had given me. This was a totally new concept to me. It never occurred to me that the money I had earned, in fact worked hard to earn, actually belonged to God. It never occurred to me that I was able to earn a living because I was given gifts and talents and resources from God. On that day, I realized that everything comes from God and I was a beneficiary of those gifts, especially God's unfailing love and mercy, and that in

gratitude I actually had a desire to give back a portion of what God gave me.

Something in my heart changed after that conversation with my priest, and I made a decision to give a portion of what God have given me back to the church as we are commanded by scripture to do as people of faith. It did not mean that I had to stop giving to charities that I supported, but I gave to God first, to the Church, God's instrument on earth, from my abundance rather than from what I had left over. I started giving a percentage of my salary, two percent (2%), and over the years I increased that amount and am almost at the tithe (10 % of annual earnings).

As followers of Jesus we are called to give sacrificially in all aspects of our lives. Some years I have gone without something I wanted in order to give to the church so

that a child could go on a mission trip, and our priests could visit sick parishioners and lead us in worship. I continue to give that so our music minister, who brings her gifts to make our worship beautiful, is paid a living wage, and that our children have the materials needed to learn about God's love through our love and care of them. I give because the church only receives support from our membership and because people who came before me, who did not know me, gave in order that the church would be here for me and my children. I give because it helps me be less self-centered and more generous in other parts of my life. I give joyfully not because I am holier than anyone else but because it feels good to give knowing I am making a difference in the life of someone else. I give joyfully because I want to do my part and pull my weight in this amazing community that not only enriches my life but helps me live as the person God has called me to be in a world that would have me do otherwise. I give because I want to be a blessing to others. That is why I support St. John's and why I am a joyful giver.

Our Faith in Action: St. John's Partners with Kenya Connect

Contributing writers: Sharon Runge, Steve Sharpe, Chris Cochran, and Paul Cochran

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." ~ Margaret Mead



The Kenya Connect (KC) team has been busy changing the world for thousands of children and families in Kenya, and the St. John's community is proud to be a part of that change. Since St. John's Parish Day School and St. John's Episcopal Church began their involvement with KC in 2006 and 2007, respectively, more than 53 parishioners have traveled to Kenya on missions, and over \$100,000 has been raised. Kenya Connect is now supporting 55 schools through donations and hard work, making a serious impact on the lives of over 17,000 students.

Following St. John's most recent trip to Kenya, Steve Sharpe, Chris Cochran, and Paul Cochran shared their impressions of their visit. Steve Sharpe, on his third trip in six years, shared: "I was really impressed at the progress since my first visit in 2011 when there was no Learning Resource Center (LRC). There is

now a solar-powered LRC, computers, a bus and a library. Driving down a back road I saw SunKing solar lights being charged outside a mud brick hut—a KC initiative so students can read at home at night. The village's positive, supportive response at seeing over 200 kids parade through town to start the 5K to celebrate literacy, and the first-ever library card program within 100km was incredible."

Chris Cochran reflected: "After watching many St. John's friends and groups of our college youth return from Kenya with photos of giraffe kisses, baby elephants, and joyful school children, I was determined to one day visit. My son Paul and I were fortunate enough to travel with a group of 12 volunteers in October to visit some area schools, lead some class lessons and help with the Kenya Connect 5K Race to Read. We were greeted with songs and smiles at each school we visited. The students were so gracious in welcoming us, and they enthusiastically engaged with the books we read and the songs we sang together. With library books and the computer classes at the LRC, and now with the school bus that can reach more distant schools, KC is a beacon of literacy, health, and education, sending out rays of hope and learning for miles throughout the countryside."

Paul Cochran, a recent JMU graduate commented, "This trip was life changing and really put my life in perspective, especially showing me how fortunate and blessed I am. It was incredible to see how friendly all the people were. Even the staff who prepared amazing meals, tea, and snacks with limited resources were kind and welcoming. There is a true sense of community in Wamunyu and they welcome all visitors with open arms. I would definitely recommend this trip to everyone and would go again in a heartbeat."



The History of the Christmas Crèche

The following is an excerpt from “The Real Story Behind the Christmas Crèche” by Arthur E. Zannoni.
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St. John's families bring the Christmas Crèche scene to life.

“There is no more familiar scene to Christians than the crèche — with its mother and child and the father bending over protectively. They are in a humble stable, watched by animals and kneeling shepherds. Above the tableau is a hovering angel. In the background are the twinkling lights of the little town of Bethlehem. But, wait, a star now rises in the night sky. Shortly, a caravan of camels arrives, the treasure-laden entourage of “three kings”. Elements from Matthew’s Gospel have been mixed with those of the Gospel of Luke.

The origin of the Christmas crèche comes from St. Francis of Assisi. In 1223, St. Francis presented a kind of panorama of Christmastide near a village of Greccio, Italy. Because the Gospel according to Luke mentions the child was placed in a manger (an animal feedbox), one of Francis’ company said there must have been oxen, horses and mules in a stable. And because the Gospel according to Matthew specifies a visit of an undetermined number of soothsayers or astrologers (the meaning of “magi”), and

Luke mentions the presence of shepherds, St. Francis asked friends to represent them, them too. From this devout spirit came the picturesque crèche iconography of Christmas night. Taking Francis’ lead, artists representing the nativity scene since his time have often combined all of the Gospel elements into a single lively scene. This has given rise to an overly literal interpretation of these stories.”

Join us in continuing our wonderful tradition of the Living Crèche at St. John's. Visit www.stjohnsec.org to sign up your family.

2018 Advent and Christmas Worship

Tuesday, November 27: Tidings of Comfort & Holy Eucharist

6:30 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 Eucharist, a pot-luck dinner, and facilitated conversation.

Sunday, December 2: The First Sunday of Advent (Regular Sunday Worship Times)

Sunday, December 9: The Second Sunday of Advent (Regular Sunday Worship Times)

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

7:00 p.m., Advent & Christmas with the Theodicy Jazz Collective in the Historic Church

Sunday, December 16: The Third Sunday of Advent (Regular Sunday Worship Times)

9:00 a.m., Crèche Service in All Saints Hall

During our worship, infants/toddlers through Kindergarteners will assemble the Crèche for the Christmas season with help from some children and teens in the older grades. Participating children gather in the Auditorium before 8:55 a.m.

Saturday, December 22: The Fourth "Sunday" of Advent

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

Sunday, December 23: The Fourth Sunday of Advent

11:30 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.

Monday, December 24: Christmas Eve

3:00 p.m., Joy and Wonder: Christmas Eucharist with 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.

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

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. Features special music including the Marriotts Ridge High School Madrigal Singers.

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 10:00 p.m.

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

10:00 a.m., Holy Eucharist with Hymns in the Historic Church

Sunday, December 30: The First Sunday after Christmas Day (Regular Sunday Worship Times)

(No Formation Classes)

Sunday, January 6: Epiphany (Regular Sunday Worship Times)

(No Saturday 5 p.m. service.)



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