

THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Candles of love to inspire all my living

Reflect: The season of Christmas has begun. For each of these 12 days, write down one way you will show God's world

the love of Christ. Consider this the start of your 2021 spiritual resolutions to carry with you throughout the new year.

Day 1 | Christmas Day, Friday, Dec. 25 A gift for God

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. — Titus 3:4–7

A worship service on Christmas morning was not a tradition in the little rural church I served, but one year I decided to offer such a service. The turnout was small. The worship was casual. “Make sure to bring the cookies that Santa didn’t finish,” I told the children beforehand. Truth be told, I didn’t have time to bake, and I was on the search for some homemade goodies.

Snow was gently falling as we gathered in the fellowship hall around the Christmas tree. We sang our favorite carols and did a candy cane prayer of praise, where I invited the person holding the piece of candy to say what they were grateful for. Of course, the children’s praises were for the toys that Santa had delivered.

After we were done, one perceptive child pointed to a beautifully wrapped present underneath the tree. “Who’s that for, Pastor Donna?” he asked. The children huddled close to me, eager to peek inside the box I was now holding. I told them this was my present to God for giving me the greatest gift ever — Jesus. I asked the children what they thought was inside. What could be the most perfect gift for God?

I had to suppress my laughter as the children shouted things like a cow, because God needed milk to go with the Christmas cookies, or a Barbie dream house, because God deserves some time off playing with dolls. When they were out of ideas, I showed them what I had given God.

The children’s faces scrunched with disappointment as they stared at the red paper heart in my hand. “What a lame gift,” said a teen sitting on the sidelines. “Is it?” I countered with a soft smile. I then shared with the children, the adults and that teen, all the presents of grace and love God has given me through Jesus. What could I ever give back to show my gratitude? I could promise God to love others — completely, without judgment, as Jesus loved.

Howard Thurman once said that Christmas is “the event above all events,” a turning point in human history, marking the moment “when a new meaning is given to ancient words: *The eyes of the blind are opened, the captives are set free.*” Christmas is here once again. It is the event above all events.

I just pray that this year it really is a turning point for us, because the world needs our eyes to be opened to hurts that need healing, to the lonely that need companionship, and to the hate that needs to be chased away with love. I still keep a present for God under my tree, and every Christmas morning I take out that now-faded, red paper heart and renew my promise to God — to love. What about you?

Pray

Gracious and generous God, you are the most amazing gift-giver. The gifts under the tree pale in comparison to the one that came wrapped as a swaddling baby. On this Christmas Day, I find myself awed and humbled that I can be loved so deeply. How can it be that you deem me worthy of such a precious gift as Jesus your Son? Thank you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take time this Christmas Day to make a paper heart for God. Write on it your commitment to love God’s children. Place it in a box and whisper, “Here’s my gift to you God. Merry Christmas.”





Day 2 | Saturday, Dec. 26

Remember those who are grieving

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

— Acts 6:1–7

In this passage from Acts, we see the early church flourishing, so much so that men and women had to be appointed to tend to the care of those who were lonely, sick or grieving. It was the start of what many of our churches now know as the office of deacons: those ordained to make calls, write letters, bake cookies and be with those who are hurting.

I find myself thinking a lot about the “ministry of presence” this time of year. The holidays can be hard for many. I know this all too well. It was the day after Christmas, and my parents and I went for a jaunt in the woods. I was a teenager who still liked hanging out with them, so when my friends darted for the shopping mall for the post-holiday sales, I declined their invite and put on my hiking boots instead. We returned home to a ringing phone. My father answered and began speaking in his native Swiss German. I didn’t understand what he was saying, but by the tone of his voice I knew it wasn’t good. Within an hour, my father’s bag was packed. He was heading back to Switzerland. My grandfather had died by suicide in the family farmhouse nestled in the Alps. Elderly and frail, his heart had never healed from my grandmother’s death

just months before. He was 84 years old, and they were married for 60-plus years.

I learned later that the minister of the village had visited my grandfather two days before his death. He was not looking forward to a cold, lonely Christmas morning, the pastor had told my father. He was not looking forward to any more lonely mornings. What was to be a festive holiday week was one filled with gray skies and tears. I was just a teen, but when I looked at the twinkling lights on the Christmas tree, I found myself praying for a greater light to shine on all those who were hurting.

My father flew back from Switzerland on New Year’s Eve. There weren’t any celebrations in our house that night. Rather, we gathered around the Advent wreath and lit only one candle: the white one in the middle, the Christ candle. As we ate our simple — and very Swiss — meal of soup, crusty bread and cheese, I noticed my father staring at the flickering candle. I’ve always wondered what he was thinking. Perhaps he was remembering Christmases past with his father. Or perhaps he was allowing the presence of that light to heal his grieving heart.

“We remember the old people,” Howard Thurman wrote about Christmastime. “Those whose fires have been banked, and who sit in their solitariness . . . who cannot be comforted by the memories of other times.” May we not just remember those “whose fires have been banked.” May we be the ones to rekindle the flames of hope and love.

Pray

God, for all those who are grieving, whose hearts have been shattered by lost dreams or lost loved ones, I pray that they feel your healing presence so strongly that it gives them not only strength and courage to face this day, but also hope to face tomorrow. Help me, as well, to become a light bearer to those still walking in darkness. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

If you or someone you know is depressed or has expressed thoughts of suicide, contact the National Suicide Prevention lifeline at 800-273-8255. The lifeline provides 24/7 support that is free and confidential. You can also learn more at suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Day 3 | Sunday, Dec. 27

Don't discard Christmas so quickly

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. — Matthew 1:18–25

There's nothing that makes me sadder than seeing discarded Christmas trees thrown to the curb right after Dec. 25 has come and gone. Yet there they are, stripped of all their tinsel glory, proclaiming the fake news that Christmas is over. It isn't. If anything, Christmas has just begun.

I'm not talking about being mindful of observing the 12 days of Christmas. While doing so is a great start (and a reason why I wanted to extend this year's Advent devotional to include Christmastide), I'm talking about the challenge to keep Christmas in our hearts — always. We have just been given the most amazing gift — Jesus, God's Son, to be by our sides through thick and thin, the ups and downs, the trials and the tribulations. Now it's up to us to use the gift.

There's no exchanging Jesus for something better, because there's nothing better out there.

Day 4 | Monday, Dec. 28

Jesus, my refuge

Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us." He who

There's no putting Jesus on a shelf to collect dust, either. So, what will you do with this gift? How will you allow such a gift to change your life? For me, Christmastide is a perfect time to reflect on those questions.

The frenzied build up to the big day, Dec. 25, is over, and there's stillness in the air that gives my racing mind permission to slow down. With all the "must-do's" for the secular Christmas celebration — mask-wearing, last-minute trips to the store for eggnog or butter for cookie making — off of my list, my spirit can now breathe in God's Spirit.

Howard Thurman always saw Christmastime as a time for us to remember the graces of life. "It is important to seize upon the atmosphere during this period, to let it tutor our own spirits in kindness," said Thurman.

When we are quick to discard the trees and pack away Christmas as the secular world tells us we ought to do, we are missing out on this precious, holy season that can indeed tutor our spirits in how to be the light-bearing children of God. But sometimes God whispers to us: "Don't be so quick to discard something that has grown old or just doesn't serve a purpose anymore. Don't rush to move on. Linger a bit. Trust some more. Enjoy the Christmas lights. Let the significance of the gift of Emmanuel really sink in, for it is a gift that changes lives. Just ask Joseph."

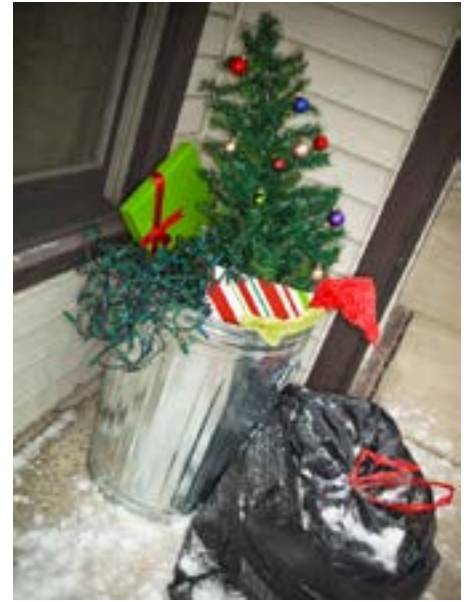
Pray

God of light, you who shines brighter than any string on the Christmas tree, help me to embrace this season of Christmastide. May these days be ones in which the gift of your Son truly enters into my heart, creating a new one that beats with more love. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Keep the Christmas candle of love burning bright — make some cookies for a friend, cook a festive meal and deliver it to someone who might have celebrated Dec. 25 alone, or simply call someone you haven't spoken to in a while.

sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of



iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Happy are all who take refuge in him. — Psalm 2

One of my favorite childhood Christmas movies is the 1968 claymation production of “The Little Drummer Boy.” I still remember being a five-year-old wearing pink cowgirl boots and watching the holiday classic on the shag rug of my grandmother’s living room.

I also remember bawling my eyes out when the drummer boy’s lamb got hit by a Roman chariot while rushing towards the crowd gathered at the stable to see a newborn baby. It’s a scene that gets me every time. The little drummer boy gently cradles his hurt lamb, desperate for someone to save it. He spots the Magi who are on the scene and thinks, since they are wise, they will know just what to do for the lamb.

When the drummer boy gets the attention of one of the kings and explains the dire situation, the king breaks the news to the little boy: There is nothing he can do to help. The boy cries and insists. “You are a king,” he says. And here’s the part where my tears stream down my face. The king points to the baby in the manger and tells

the grieving boy, “I am an earthly king, but there is a king above all kings who can save your little friend.” Perplexed, the drummer boy gazes upon Jesus. He gives the baby a gift by playing his drum. The lamb is healed. All is well.

Life isn’t that simple, though, nor does it always have a happy ending of a hurt lamb miraculously jumping up and down with joy. Sometimes our prayers for healing are not answered as we want them to be. Yet, no matter what life’s circumstances, I learned that Christmas on the shag rug in my grandmother’s home to take my sorrows, my fears and my pain to Jesus first, rather than seeking answers from the limited wisdom of the world. Jesus, the babe, can help? Yes, Jesus, the babe, can help. Happy are all who take refuge in him.

Pray

Mighty and amazing God, on this fourth day of Christmas, I come to the side of the manger and gaze into Jesus’ eyes, for it is in your Son, where I will find the healing and hope I am seeking. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

What is it that is troubling you this day? Is there a “little lamb” in your life who is hurt? Are you perhaps that little lamb needing healing? Imagine Jesus’ arms cradling you or your loved one.



Day 5 | Tuesday, Dec. 29 Let the light of love shine

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. — Matthew 5:14–16

Sometimes the most beautiful works of art are born out of one’s deepest pain. Vincent van Gogh’s oil painting “The Starry Night” is such an example. The Dutch post-Impressionist painter created the painting in 1889 while he was a patient at a French asylum near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Even though he suffered from paranoia, Van Gogh was allowed to leave the hospital grounds. He was also provided with his own studio so that he could continue painting. His improving mental health was short lived, though, and soon spiraled down into the depths of depression.

This depressive state is captured in the darker colors that one sees in “The Starry Night” with blues dominating the canvas, blending hills into the sky, and a village painted in browns, greys and blues, with each building outlined in black. Such a dark background makes the stars in the in the starry night sky stand out even more.

What I notice the most in Van Gogh’s painting is that while the village houses are illuminated with yellow windows, indicating light shining within, the windows of the white steepled church are darkened — there is no light inside. Art critics, art historians and psychiatrists can all have a field day analyzing why this is so. But a pastor friend helped me to see the darkened church windows not as disturbing, but as hopeful.

After all, the light of Christ is not to be contained in a building. It is meant to shine brightly in our homes, on the streets of cities, towns and villages, and, as Matthew’s Gospel reminds us, we are the light of the world, carrying the Christ light wherever we go.

One year, I received a print of Van Gogh's "The Starry Night" as a Christmas card from that pastor friend of mine. An artist herself, I wasn't surprised to receive such an unconventional holiday card. She had a unique way of seeing the world. But it did make me wonder what she was thinking in choosing such a card. And then I read her message inside. Along with Christmas greetings, she added a postscript that read: "May the light of Christ never stay inside a church building."

Pray

Ever-radiant God, thank you for the starry nights

Day 6 | Wednesday, Dec. 30

Angels still dance with joy

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. — Psalm 139:1–6

I held the tiny pink felt Christmas stocking with an angel clothed in blue felt glued onto it. It was the stocking an aunt on my mother's side made for me on my first Christmas. Some 50 years have passed since it was thumbtacked onto our wooden TV console because we never had a fireplace mantel to hang our stockings on.

I eventually graduated to a bigger Christmas stocking. The pink baby one was packed away, soon forgotten until the year my mother gave it to me, along with other childhood memorabilia overflowing in a box. That warned me there were more boxes to come. She and my dad were decluttering their house.

Since then, I find myself every Christmas retrieving the stocking from the bottom of the ornament box and wondering: "Was I really once that little? What was put inside the stocking my first year of life? Should I hang it on the fireplace mantle I now have as an adult?" Some years, I hang it up with a bit of nostalgia in my heart. Some years, I don't. Those are the years I find a tear falling down my cheek thinking about the children I never had.

This year, though, I held the stocking in my hands a little bit longer than usual. I found

that give me hope when my world descends into darkness. And thank you for seeing in me, the ability to be a "Christ-light" to others. May I shine Christ's love brightly beyond the safety of organized religion and beyond the comfort of a familiar building.

Go deeper

In what ways can you carry the light of Christ beyond traditional church things such as Sunday morning worship, Bible study gatherings or the occasional mission project? If Van Gogh was to paint your house, would its windows be illuminated with Christ's light?

myself taking a prayerful pause as I stared at the blue felt angel on the stocking. I remembered a song I had heard on some Christian radio station once about how the angels dance around God's throne at the birth of a baby and how they will dance again the day we return home to God.

Angels danced for joy over me being in the world? I never really thought about it. But now with the angel staring back at me, I wondered: "Have I lived my life so far for God? Have I done my best in reaching to the least of these — the lonely, the hungry, the captives, the naked? Are angels dancing with joy at the life I am leading now? What about the God dreams in my heart that are so uncertain and scary I just don't follow them? What about those crazy ideas to do some things — things so against what the world says we should do — that I ignore them? Are the angels dancing each time I whisper to myself that I am too old to do something or that I don't have what it takes to tackle a dream?"

Howard Thurman knew how much God loves us. Thurman knew deep down that each of us is indeed God's beloved. God, Thurman knew, sees our potential. And so, Thurman advised that each time we doubt our abilities to shine brightly, we should pray, "God make me big." "And then a strange thing happens. Strength comes from somewhere. Deep within the task, something is released that eases the load; and the quality of your performance pervades your spirit with the assurance that God has answered," said Thurman.

Yes, the angels danced when you came into this world. They will dance again when you return home. But until that day, don't ever stop living boldly for God.



Pray

God, my prayer is short and simple: make me big. Help me to glorify you this day. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Reconnect with your inner child. What gave



Day 7 | Thursday, Dec. 31

Led by the light

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." — John 8:12

I was never one for ringing in the New Year by attending boisterous parties. Nor was it my idea of fun to be in a jostling crowd in New York's Time Square to watch a ball drop — even though I lived just blocks away from that crazy scene. I preferred a quiet, contemplative start to the New Year: light a candle, finish off the last of the holiday eggnog, or watch an old movie.

When I moved to Vermont as a pastor, I had the opportunity to offer others my dream contemplative New Year's Eve celebration: snowshoeing through the woods at night. With a friend on board, encouraging my crazy idea, we plotted the trail we would take, opting for a shorter one as temps would be in the single digits. We would have flashlights that strapped to our heads to help illumine the snowy path. When we emerged from the woods, we would start a large bonfire in the field and ring in the year with hot cocoa.

Later I added to the evening's festivities. Along the path itself, I planned on hanging battery operated lanterns. When we got to the first tree with a lantern, we would stop, and I would read Scripture or an inspirational poem about letting go of the old and welcoming the new.

New Year's Eve came, and a fresh snow had fallen that was perfect for snowshoeing. We entered the woods and found ourselves being enveloped by darkness. The lights from our flashlights were feeble, and I soon began to feel a bit nervous about being in the woods at night. It was darker than I thought it would be.

But then, I saw it: a tiny speck of light way in front of us. It was the most beautiful speck of light that I had ever seen. With each step I took,

you joy when you were younger? What are some dreams that you have let go of that still dance in your mind? It doesn't matter how old you think you are. With God, all things are possible. Today, dream, act and live with great faith.

that speck grew larger and brighter until we were standing at the first tree with a lantern, listening to God's promises of guiding us always, of being with us always, of always providing light on our paths. And so it continued. After the readings and a moment to reflect on what it was that we wanted to leave behind in the old year, we stepped forward back into the darkness until the light of the next lantern appeared.

Howard Thurman observed that "to continue one's journey in the darkness with one's footsteps guided by the illumination of remembered radiance is to know courage — the courage to demand that light continue to be light even in the surrounding darkness."

A new year is about to begin, and while we pray earnestly for it to be better than 2020, we can't help but feel apprehension about the unknown tomorrow. We have been walking in thick, scary woods it seems. But remember this: "To walk in the light while darkness invades, envelops and surrounds, is to wait on the Lord."

Pray

God, you hold my days in your loving hands. As I say good-bye to a year that has been trying in so many ways and for so many people, I thank you for being there by my side always. I know you are guiding me. I know that there is a divine lantern burning brightly along my snowy, wooded path. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

You don't have to go for a midnight hike in the woods to experience the light of God guiding you into a new year. You can create a lighted path in your home, placing candles throughout your home and creating mini prayer stations at each candle that is burning. "Travel" to each station and let go of something you need to let go of, or lift a prayer of praise, or simply pause and soak in the light and say the greatest prayer ever: "Thank you, God."

Day 8 | Friday, Jan. 1

A New Year's resolution

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. — Colossians 2:6–12

I'm not one to make New Year's resolutions. I used to, but it always seemed by January 31 I lost my resolve to do any of the things that I vowed I would see through. If I were to revisit this tradition, though, I cannot think of a better resolution than the one Paul writes in Colossians: "continue to live your lives in him." This is exactly what Howard Thurman has been encouraging us to do all throughout Advent and now Christmastide when he penned, "I will light candles."

Through these last few weeks, we have been reflecting on how to live our lives in Christ by lighting candles of joy, hope, courage, peace, grace and love. But the challenge is coming for us to continue being candles of light in the world, long after this devotional is over, and the new year gets into full swing. Will we remember what we have been reading through, reflecting on and praying over? Will we remember that the most beautiful light that can shine from us is the light that seeks to illumine another's darkness? Will this be the year in which we live not for ourselves, but we live to serve others? And I think there lies the problem I have with most New Year's resolutions. They tend to be focused on self: to get fit, look better and make more money.

Howard Thurman, though, reminds us that there is something "very important that belongs in the New Year." That is, the chance to "relate

to something beyond our families, our cares and our responsibilities." Thurman suggests selecting one thing outside your own needs to focus on. "Give a part of yourself" to some cause, some purpose or even someone. God gave a part of God's self to the hurting world, by taking on human flesh and blood. It's a Christmas gift that ultimately saved us from ourselves. If I am to live my life in Christ this year, that means looking beyond my own comfort to help another.

I have a friend who is a pastor of a struggling church. In the winter, they often meet in a small fellowship hall to save on the oil bill for heating a large, mostly empty sanctuary. Her church is still meeting in person, with masks, in spite of rising COVID-19 infections. In order to keep meeting in person, they would have to use the large sanctuary, which allows sitting six-feet from one another, but they worried about paying the heating bill.

The pastor had hoped this would be the very thing to open her congregation to try virtual worship. It didn't, though. Rather, a member made a generous donation to heat the sanctuary. My friend saw the goodness of the member's heart, but it didn't stop her from feeling sad. While the church is filled with wealthy retired people, the congregation doesn't reflect the just-scraping-by reality of the community they are in. There are many who will not be able to afford heat for their homes, but the church's mostly empty sanctuary will be heated. I think this is the year I will invite everyone to make a resolution: Live in Christ.

Pray

God, I thank you for my daily bread, for a bed to sleep in and for the ability to heat my home. But I want 2021 to be a year in which I live in your Son, Jesus Christ. I want to commit to comforting others. I want something more beyond my own comforts. Show me the way. Work through me. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

List all the comforts you have. Now take an honest assessment of those in your community who are struggling. What do they need the most? What can you do to help? Could the money to heat one sanctuary be used to heat more than one home instead?





Day 9 | Saturday, Jan. 2 Snow angel

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." — Hebrews 11:1–12

I've always loved this passage in Hebrews which is often referred to as the "great roll call" of faith. We are told of men and women who, by faith and nothing but faith, trusted God completely, even when God didn't give them all the information up front as to what to expect or equip them with a detailed roadmap showing every twist, turn and pothole. It was simply, "by faith" that led them forward into a life they never would have experienced if they had chosen not to take that proverbial leap.

It was by faith that I said "yes" to God's call to pastor struggling rural churches — churches

that few pastors would get excited about. I didn't intend on a life of being a country pastor. I still smile remembering when the head of a pastor nominating committee of a rural church reached out to me after reading my profile on the national church search site. She wanted to know if I was interested in talking with the committee, even though I didn't mark "yes" to being open to rural ministry on my profile. I didn't realize I did that. We spoke. I was called. And the rest is history.

What would have happened, though, if I had kept the rural door closed? I would never have experienced the most amazing moments of grace. I never would have seen the love of a community pulling together to raise money for a family in need. I never would have discovered how beautifully God does provide our daily bread if I never had a church that always struggled for money, yet always had enough. I never would have met my husband who, after years of unsuccessful dating in Manhattan, was waiting for me in Small Town USA. I never would have met my snow angel, Alice, who taught me to see hope in tomorrow even when there seems to be none.

It was one of those January Sundays where the wind whipped through the valleys and hills. It had snowed the night before, and so I expected church attendance to be even lower than usual. It was a small church of silver-haired seniors, and I was sure they would not want to venture out on slick roads. I was wrong. They came.

I opened our time of worship commending them and then joked that they were now expected to join me after worship to make snow angels in front of the church. There was laughter, and I thought my invite was forgotten by the time coffee hour rolled around. Imagine my surprise when I felt a tug at my clergy robe. Alice, one of the oldest of the older members, was standing there with her winter jacket on. When she told me to "get going," I had to ask, "Get going where?" "I'm ready to make snow angels with you," said Alice. I was shocked. So were others. But soon, by faith, they, too, got into their coats, and we made our way out into the frigid air.

Alice was the first to plunk down into the snow, flapping her arms to make angel wings. Helping hands were reaching out, pulling one another back up off of the ground. I couldn't believe my eyes. There was still life in this church. There was still hope. There was an angel named Alice who "by faith" did one of the most

exceptional things I will ever see in ministry. She took a crazy pastor's invite and showed that pastor that all things are indeed possible — possible by faith.

Pray

God, forgive me when I hesitate to step out in faith. Forgive me when I doubt your limitless love and your perfect guidance. Help me this day to see that all things are possible with you. May my steps this

Day 10 | Sunday, Jan. 3

More gifts to come

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. — Matthew 2:10–11

Historians say that we can thank the Victorian period for catapulting Santa and his sack of toys into stardom. It was during this time that “A Visit from St. Nicholas” was published anonymously in 1823. Later, in 1837, Clement Moore was given credit as the author, having renamed the poem, “’Twas the Night Before Christmas.” Cue Santa coming down the chimney, and the holidays have never been the same again.

But prior to the 19th century, gift-giving was done on Epiphany, Jan. 6, the day which remembers when the Magi presented their gifts to Jesus. I've always joked with my family that I was going to revive the tradition of exchanging gifts on Jan. 6 for two reasons: (1) December is a busy month for pastors, and I never have time to shop; and (2) I can take advantage of all the merchandise marked “50% off” on Dec. 26. This year, though, I am exchanging gifts on Jan. 6 because COVID-19 has meant more people have ordered gifts online, and UPS and FedEx have not been able to keep up with the demand. Many of the gifts ordered are still delayed.

While some might be disappointed by this, I am not. For once again, it seems this pandemic is making us reframe and rethink everything that has been taken granted for too long. And in the reframing and rethinking, something amazing is happening. We are being given the opportunity to experience God's story of salvation in a new way, with new traditions emerging.

Can you imagine your loved one's surprise when you give a gift to them during these 12 days of Christmas or even on Jan. 6, rather than the traditional Dec. 25? And can you see how

year be steps of great faith in you. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

What are the things in your life that you think aren't possible? What have you been hesitant to do? If you are feeling stuck, close your eyes and imagine standing on a path. Now move your foot one step forward and whisper, “By faith, I will ...”

this can be the perfect opportunity to share the story about the Magi with another as you explain why the gift is being given now?

A few years ago, I did this with the church I was serving. I noticed that there was flurry of gift-giving to nursing home residents from November to mid-December. What about after Dec. 25? Isn't that when many begin feeling the post-holiday letdown? Now imagine if you are in an assisted living home and all of a sudden no one and no treats are showing up? So that year, I suggested to our session and deacons that we keep the gifts flowing throughout January. The children made Epiphany gifts for those in the nursing home. There were smiles of joy and tears of surprise by the residents. The church's Christmas mitten tree, collecting warm items for children who might not have winter weather gear, soon became the Epiphany tree. The local school was grateful for the items to be given to the children.

Howard Thurman wrote, “There is nothing more exhilarating to the spirit than to be able to minister to the needs of others at the time when a particular need is most acutely felt.” The needs of others continue well after Dec. 25 has come and gone. Perhaps an unexpected gift this day will be the very thing to fill a particular need for someone who is struggling today with hunger or a case of the holiday blues.

Prayer

Most merciful and caring God, forgive me for being so tied to traditions that I miss what is really important. Open me to new ways of doing things, of serving others, of worshiping you, of being Christ's hands and feet in this world. Work through me, God. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

What are some Epiphany mission ideas you and/or your church can do this month? How can you keep the candle of love burning brightly?





Day 11 | Monday, Jan. 4

The candles we burn

Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. — Matthew 2:11

We take light in our lives for granted. A room gets dark, we flip a switch and voila: Light! We rarely worry about the lack of it until there is a power outage or — as many will be facing in a COVID-19 strained economy — an electric bill goes unpaid.

Light was not always an easy thing to come by. For centuries, the advent of light in one's life was the result of much toil. Trust me. Have you ever tried making candles? I have, and I failed miserably. My interest in mastering 18th-century living skills led me to buying a hunk of beeswax and a tin candle mold. How hard could it be? Pull the wick through the mold, melt the wax, pour and let harden. Then pop out the candles. The candles, though, didn't pop. They had to be yanked. And even then, many refused to come out of the mold. I couldn't imagine having to make 400 candles, the average number of candles American colonial women were tasked to make annually for a household.

When I got to the store to buy candles that I had failed to make on my own, I wasn't prepared for the assortment available: soy, paraffin, coconut and beeswax. Did the material really matter? I did some research and discovered the wax used did indeed matter. In early days, many houses depended on light from a rush dipped in tallow (animal fat). Later on, the rush was replaced with a wick that was dipped in tallow. But tallow produced a horrible smell, especially if it was made from pig fat. The tallow candles didn't burn cleanly either, producing a thick black smoke. There was the problem as well that many people couldn't afford to eat a lot of meat, and so tallow was not readily available for all. Thus, candles were a premium item.

History records a servant's terms of employment in one wealthy household to include a daily ration of one candle, to be used only to find their way to their room at night to get ready

for bed. Only the wealthy had the means to burn candles made out of beeswax, which had a pleasant scent and a longer burn time.

Then there was the bayberry candle. In New England, women discovered that boiling bayberries would produce a wax-like substance that would burn cleanly and smell beautifully. It would take 15 pounds of bayberries, though, to make one pound of wax. So, bayberry candles were often reserved for special times — holidays — and special places — inside a church. There is a folklore that burning a bayberry candle on Christmas Eve will bring health and wealth in the new year. I have brought this tradition to my 18th-century home, burning a bayberry candle throughout Christmastide.

Throughout Advent and Christmastide, we have been invited to light candles. But did we even stop to think that the very act of lighting a candle could be an act of social justice? Who is burning tallow? Who has the means to burn beeswax? Have we ever stopped to think that the ability to have a candle is one of privilege? Do we realize the amount of work it takes to create a candle to burn?

If we are to be candles in this world — the lights of Christ to others — then we must realize that light is not to be taken for granted, that light comes with work and responsibility. And the "wax" we burn for God should be the cleanest and the purest. Just as the Magi presented their extravagant gifts to Jesus, we, too, need to give our best.

Pray

God of light, illumine my world to see those who are sitting in darkness. Help me to not only be a candle of hope and love for them, but to give freely the light from my own candle. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Try your hand at making candles. Go online to research candle making instructional videos and where to buy the supplies needed. The candles you make can be used in the celebration of Candlemas, Feb. 2, a church feast that marks the presentation of Jesus in the temple.

Day 12 | Tuesday, Jan. 5

Stay the course

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. — Matthew 2:11

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. — Isaiah 60:1–6

We have come to the end of Christmastide on a day that is called “Twelfth Night” — a celebration on the eve of Epiphany that prepares for the Magi’s arrival and the presentation of their gifts to Jesus. I find myself reflecting on the Magi’s account in Scripture. Matthew tells us that when they saw Jesus, they presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Three gifts that over the years inspired greeting card artists to depict a Magi carrying each one.

But were there only three travelers from afar? In Isaiah we read about a “multitude of camels” on the journey. Now maybe these Magi didn’t master the art of packing lightly for a trip. What if, though, there were more than three Magi

following that star?

The word “multitude” means a large number. If there were a large number of camels, then I believe there were more than the three learned men on this trip. What if there was a multitude of travelers, eager to see what this new star in the sky meant? What if the arduous journey led some to fall by the wayside? What if some in the multitude decided the journey just wasn’t worth it and turned back? What if some got side-tracked along the way by something better — a better village to stay in perhaps? What if, out of the many who wanted to see this thing God had done, only three faithful, die-hard travelers were rewarded and saw Jesus?

On this Epiphany Eve, I wonder about our faith journeys? How committed are we? I wonder about the candles that will continue to light the world long after the star in the sky has vanished? Will we grow weary on the road serving God and turn back, never seeing fully God’s manifestation in the world? Or will we have enough faith to stay the course and be one of the few who will one day fall on our knees in awe and adoration, for before our eyes, we have seen the Christ Child?

Pray

God, I want to see your Son, Jesus. I want to pay him homage. I want to stay the course and not grow weary on this journey of faith. Give me the strength and courage I need so that I do not give up or give in. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Celebrate tonight by lighting the Christ candle from the Advent wreath. If you have white Christmas lights, string them somewhere in your house. With the three gifts the Magi gave to Jesus in mind, think about what three gifts you would give to the Christ Child this day.



Epiphany | Wednesday, Jan. 6

Candles that will burn all year long

Our time together ends with the celebration of Epiphany, a church feast on the calendar commemorating the Magi’s arrival with gifts for Jesus. Epiphany comes from the Greek word *epipaneia*, meaning “appearance” or “manifestation.” Christ has appeared to us and his divinity has been revealed. It is now time to take action and commit to burning candles of joy, hope, courage, peace, grace and love all year long. To-

day is a great time to start an Epiphany journal, recording daily where you have seen Christ’s light in the world or where you yourself have been that light.

Howard Thurman has graced us during Advent and Christmastide with the words from his poem, “I Will Light Candles This Christmas.” It is only fitting to journey forward now with Thurman’s message to us in his other notable poem — a poem that captures beautifully the work of so many congregations who are actively working in their communities to become



Matthew 25 churches. May it be like a shining,
guiding star in your life.

The Work of Christmas

BY HOWARD THURMAN

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.