

Advent at St. John's

God's  
Hands

2020



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# God's Hands

November 29 - December 25, 2020

November 29, 2020

## We Wait Expectantly

By Paul Huffman

My friend, Nhuih, fled his homeland in Vietnam almost 20 years ago to escape religious persecution. Now, because of societal and governmental changes in the country, he eagerly anticipates returning to his country and being reunited with his wife and family. Throughout these years in exile, his faith in God has not diminished as he has waited patiently and with hope for a new day to dawn in his country.

As we enter this period of Advent, we wait expectantly for the gift of the Holy One. While we wait, we are mindful that there are those who wait with us who are separated from family, who have been victims of the pandemic, who mourn the loss of loved ones, and for other reasons suffer pain and disillusionment. While we wait expectantly, may we offer hope and seek to be a blessing to those who wait with us. And to those who wait in chaos and despair, may they know a release from bondage and experience the peace that passes understanding.

In the words of author Jan Richardson:

“To all that is chaotic in you, let there come silence.

Let there be a calming of the clamoring,

a stilling of the voices that have laid their claims on you,

that have made their home in you, that go with you even to the holy places

but will not let you rest, will not let you hear your life with wholeness

or feel the grace that fashioned you.

Let what distracts you cease. Let what divides you cease.

Let there come an end to what diminishes and demeans,

and let depart all that keeps you in its cage.

Let there be an opening into the quiet that lies beneath the chaos,

where you find the peace that you did not think possible

and see what shimmers within the storm.”

As we wait in the stillness of this Advent season, may we hold each other close and comfort those who mourn, those who know pain and suffering during this time; may we seek the good of mankind as we anticipate healing and wholeness and the light of Christ in our world.

*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

*Jeremiah 29:11*

From the words of the 1879 hymn, “O Master Let Me Walk With Thee”, we offer this prayer: “In hope that sends a shining ray far down the future’s broadening way, in peace that only thou canst give, with thee, O Master, let me live.”

November 30, 2020

## Finding Hope in 2020

Bobbie Hinson

For many of us, finding hope in 2020 has been a daunting task. Few of us expected COVID-19 to inflict sickness, death, and heartache worldwide. We have been forced to stay at home, follow the three W's, and sometimes quarantine ourselves for the sake of others. Separated from family, friends, co-workers, our students, and church as we knew it, put us into a sort of forced exile. A sense of sadness, anxiety and despair crept into our lives. Meeting on Sundays at the corner of Hawthorne Lane and 5th Street ceased. Working from home, Zoom meetings, and virtual learning became commonplace. Parents became more active teachers as they struggled to manage their career responsibilities and homeschooling simultaneously. Healthcare workers and first responders risked their own health and the safety of their families to care for the sick and dying. Despite the dangers, essential workers continued to keep goods and services running.

Yes, we responded in unprecedented ways! Educators found ways to reach their students virtually. Scientists and researchers began work on therapies and vaccines, and our clergy developed strategies to reach their scattered church! Most of us listened to the experts....wear a mask, wash your hands, and wait six feet apart. Although difficult, we stopped hugging and holding hands when greeting friends and loved ones. Checking in on neighbors and loved ones was heightened to a new level...often requiring great effort. None of this has been easy!

In Psalm 40, David reminds us to put our "hope in the Lord. He leaned down to me; he listened to my cry for help. He lifted me out of the pit of death, out of the mud and filth, and set my feet on solid rock. He steadied my legs. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise for our God. Many people will learn of this and be amazed; they will trust the Lord. Those who put their trust in the Lord, who pay no attention to the proud or to those who follow lies, are truly happy!"

Job 11:13-19 encourages us not to give up during hard times and to have abiding hope. "If you make your mind resolute and spread your palms to him, if you throw out the sin in your hands and don't let injustice dwell in

your tents, then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure and not fear. You will forget trouble; you will remember it as water that flows past. A life span will rise brighter than noon; darkness will be like morning. You will be secure, for there is hope; and you will look around and rest safely.”

To be honest, there have been times when the events of 2020 have been somewhat paralyzing. When a friend shared on social media a conversation “Between God and Me” who has confessed to paralyzing fear, it really struck a nerve! Here is the conversation:

God: Remember how your daughter woke up the other night and came running down the hall to your bedroom?

Me: Yes.

God: You were still awake, so when you heard her running, you started calling out to her before she even got to you...remember? Do you remember what you called out to her?

Me: I said, “You’re okay! You’re okay! You’re okay! I’m here.”

God: Why did you call out to her? Why didn’t you just wait for her to get to your room?

Me: Because I wanted her to know that I was awake, and I heard her, and she didn’t have to be afraid until she reached the end of the dark hallway.

God: Exactly. I hear you, my child. I hear your thoughts racing like feet down the dark hallway. There’s another side to all of this. I’m there already. I’ve seen the end of it. And, I want you to know right here, as you walk through it all, you’re okay. I haven’t gone to sleep, and I won’t.

When we contemplate being on our own in dealing with the challenges we face, it’s easy to become afraid and discouraged. Right now, we are bombarded by so many unknowns, and fear can become a constant companion. But, if we trust in God’s presence in our circumstances and imagine God saying, “You’re okay! I’m here!” then we can look forward during this time of Advent with hope, knowing that we are okay and that God is holding us in the palms of his hands.

December 1, 2020

## Hope

By Lia Benton

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops at all,  
And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.  
I've heard it in the chilliest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.

-Emily Dickinson

When I hear the word “hope” I have two thoughts: Advent and this poem by Emily Dickinson. The Advent connection is obvious, especially as the hours of darkness increase and the number of leaves on the trees dwindle. Yet the persistence of this poem to jump to the fore each time I hear the word “hope” puzzles me each time. I can't shake loose these lines because the picture is enchanting. I love the image of hope like a bird, flitting and alighting. Hope is in constant motion to be found unbidden in the most curious places. It is a hummingbird, wings beating madly, feeding from a glorious flower. It is a hawk riding a thermal high above my house. It is a sandpiper scurrying to and fro on the sand with the rhythm of the surf. Hope cannot be contained or constrained.

For us Christians waiting in Advent, hope takes another form. Light is our metaphor. Hope is a purple candle in the wreath. It is luminaries lining the walk. It is the congregation lifting candles overhead, singing Silent Night. Hope is the star in the night sky over Bethlehem. Hope is what pulls us forward when the night is bleak and deep, and it would be so easy to succumb to despair. We desperately need hope. Hope draws us near. Hope envelops us. And hope arrives, as a tiny babe born in a barn to poor parents, wrapped in rags and placed in a food trough. Hope is the saving miracle of Christmas. May we all find “the thing with feathers” flitting around and keeping us warm as we light the candle of Hope.

December 2, 2020

## God's Hands

By Ashley and Wanny Hogewood

I had a winter coat that was not fancy, but it was warm. It was olive drab with a red, wool lining. Several years ago on a cold December night, I wore it to serve guests at St. John's Room in the Inn. The Seeker's Class had prepared a hardy supper and the night went well with the 12 guests and our class members eating and sharing thoughtful conversations.

After cleaning up, Dale Johnson observed one of the fellows - an ample sized guy - had only a sweatshirt as outerwear on that cold night.

Wanny remedied that in a minute saying, "Ashley, your coat will be a good fit. Why don't you give it to him?"

I said, "You are right," and gave him my coat.

That is as near a hand of God story as I have. I do not tend to think of God's hands. My mind does not process symbols well. I'm way more pragmatic. However, as a practical matter, I see our reaction to circumstance and our relationship to people as the reality and the image of how God is able to have hands. The suppers, conversations, and coats constitute my concept of how things will get better. Our world will be kinder and sorrow may be reduced.

I don't know how God uses our actions. That is left in God's hands. I do know we will not move toward a better, caring world without each of us acting with the love instilled in us by our God.

December 3, 2020

## The Helping Hand of a Professor

By Rev. Nate Dove

If you are around enough progressive Baptist ministers, you might discover a running theme. Many of us grew up Southern Baptist, and many of us have a story to share about how our faiths have changed.

For me, my evolution took place at UNC-Chapel Hill, where I encountered people, traditions, and perspectives that broadened my view of God.

Although many of my professors and friends supported me as I traversed my changing faith, one professor, in particular, went the extra mile. He had grown up in a conservative tradition too, and I guess seeing something of himself in me, he extended the offer of an independent study.

For an entire semester, we met to discuss books and articles written by theologians and biblical scholars who had diverging views of God. Through our conversations, I began to see that theology wasn't a monolithic enterprise. There were plenty of smart, faithful people who had views about God that differed from the Southern Baptist tradition that I had grown up in. In encountering those views, I became more willing to explore the depths of my own emerging faith.

Without that semester, I would not be a minister -- heck, I might not even be a Christian. So let me put it on record. I am forever grateful for the helping hand of a professor who was willing to invest so much time with a curious college student. I am where I am today because of him.

December 4, 2020

## When Joy is Hard to Find – Enter Hope

By Eric McCombs

As many of us know, the third week of Advent highlights the spirit of joy that Christ brings into the world. Joy can surround us; it can wrap us up and hold us tight like a warm blanket. Joy can be found in the smallest aspects of life and fulfill us beyond our imagination; but so can tragedy, and sorrow. During the pandemic and this election year, depression has risen, loneliness has spread, sickness has ramped, relationships torn, hearts shattered, and the worst of people's character has surfaced. Unfortunately, this time of year is when frustrations are magnified, and despair turns routine. Yet, in the midst of trouble there is always a hope for joy. You know it is out there though it may seem hard to find. If joy is what you desire, then you must embrace hope. If hope deferred makes the heart sick (Proverbs 13:12), then hope is the key to making it whole. When we focus our eyes on God's character instead of our personal circumstances, He becomes the refuge in the storm of life. We have hope because we have God. And joy is the heart's response to hope (Proverbs 10:28).

Though we may not be able to control our circumstances, God can. We might not have a say in the length of our life, but He does. If our hearts are still beating, then God still has a good plan for us. And sometimes just that simple reminder, that God holds us in the palm of his hand, can slowly deliver hope and ultimately bring us joy!

Sometimes, to experience joy, we must endure hardship, and perhaps for many that's the pandemic. Joy, like all fruit of the Spirit, grows in the soil of suffering. When we encounter problems and tribulations, God uses them to produce faith, build perseverance, strength, and character within us (Romans 5:3-4). We can in fact joyfully embrace hardship because it's an opportunity for the fruit of the Spirit to grow in our life and spread for others.

Instead of focusing on what we are losing or the pain we may feel, let us be grateful for the blessings we are enjoying. We still have this church, St. John's. We have family that loves us, friends who make us laugh, and most have an abundance of gifts that only God can provide. Most importantly we have an amazing God who loves us and promises to give us hope; and because of that it should bring us joy.

(continued on next page)

The season of Advent is indeed a time of joy, and so I leave you a hymn that brings infinite joy to my heart... "Joyful, all ye nations, rise, join the triumph of the skies; with th'angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem." Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the new-born King!"

December 5, 2020

## **This Is Where I Need to Be**

By Keith Towery

When I came to St. John's, I showed up at the Beacon Sunday School class. I wanted to study the scriptures and get to know some of the men of the church. Our class began with going around the table sharing about the week, and then we would get to the lesson. We shared about golf scores, college sports scores, doctor appointments, travels, children, grandchildren, dogs and new restaurants. We read the scripture and discussed how it related to our lives today. I always left for worship feeling peace and joy. It was nice to be part of the fellowship of the Beacon Class.

At that time, I was experiencing great uncertainty in my career. The company I worked for was being sold, and I was working in a frustrating and unpredictable environment. One Monday, as I pushed the elevator button and the door opened, I decided, in my mind, to ask the entire Beacon Class to get on the elevator with me, and ride up to my office. I thought if I had all of these mentors helping me all day, albeit in my mind, maybe I could leave with some of that peace and joy at the end of the day, rather than disillusionment and fear. I decided to choose peace and joy. The Beacon Class members were God's hands working in my life.

During this season of Advent, I am grateful that the people of St. John's have been God's hands of hope, peace, joy and love. I am also grateful for the opportunities to stand beside other folks at St. John's experiences hope while making a bed for a guest of room in the inn, peace while watering the memorial garden, joy participating in a Bible study, and love while serving banana pudding at the men's shelter. This is where I need to be.

December 6, 2020

## Words

By Janet Wade

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

John 1:1 NIV

My father loved words. He loved the sound of them, the history and evolution of them, the feeling of them, the power of them. R. Gene Puckett spent a lifetime devoted to words and the Word. A powerful preacher, prophetic writer, and committed teacher, Dad devoted almost 70 years in ministry molding words to create a lasting message.

But it was not just in his professional life that Dad understood the impact of words. He possessed a determination to mark the milestones of life with letters, cards, and notes. Of course, his family received these communications, but so did countless others. Dad never failed to express heartfelt sympathy and offer encouragement and support to those experiencing difficulty, loss and grief. He crafted sincere and joyful notes of congratulations for accomplishments and life's celebrations. Gratitude and appreciation for gifts was always expressed in handwritten notes shortly after the gift was received. And there were always words of affirmation for courageous efforts and actions, especially to young people.

In June 2012, Dad was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Always one to want the truth, Dad was told he had eleven to fourteen months to live. On May 12, 2013 R. Gene Puckett died, at home, as he had wished. It was a long, difficult, and often painful eleven months. But despite those things, there were moments of unbelievable grace.

The words which Dad had so lovingly shared with so many for seven decades came flooding back in unimaginable numbers. At first, they came as a trickle as knowledge of Dad's illness slowly filtered out. Then they gathered strength until almost a day did not go by without a note, card, or phone call. The words came from those Dad had pastored, taught, supported, married, baptized, visited, and cared for. They came from people of all ages, races, genders, and faith perspectives. They came from around the corner and across the country.

As God's hands, the people whom Dad's words had touched wrote and spoke their own words of comfort, appreciation, care, and gratitude.

As a person who had devoted his life to words and the Word, Dad received an immeasurable and life affirming gift. A gift which would not have been possible but for the circumstances of his illness and the example he had set. Dad had devoted much time to finding and sharing just the right words with others. And he was given time at the end of his life which allowed the hands of God to send those words home.

The words of God from the hands of God. Thanks be to God.

December 7, 2020

*An excerpt from her book-in-process, Place, Sit, Stay – (not just for dogs!), by Janet Jones. A pondering on how training her dog has informed her spiritual growth.*

## **HANDS ARE EVERYTHING!**

By Janet Jones

“The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.”  
Psalm 145:15-16 (NIV)

A deepening insight is how the relationship between a dog and human has so much to do with hands! I begin to imagine how my dog Cookie pays close attention to my hands, watching to see what my hands will do next. Offer a treat? Give a command? A soft stroke on the head, a rub to the chest? Maybe a scrub down with suds and water?

For her, all these actions begin with this funny looking blob on the end of a long limb, and it has five - also funny looking - moveable sticks that are attached to the blob at the end of the limb. She watches these fleshy fingered blobs as they will signal what I want; they are a line of communication between us. One of my favorite games is “Touch.” In this game Cookie follows my hand with her nose and then a soft touch to my palm. My hand goes right, then left, and she dances with me back and forth, the soft, cool tip of her nose kissing my hand each time. This game always makes me smile! We are in the dance - my leading, her following, we are in sync! I laugh with pure delight at the end of this game and feel so happy. We have crossed the span between species and are connected in spirit! Joy! Hands can do so many things and communicate so much! James Howell, in his book, *Yours Are The Hands of Christ*, asks his readers to acknowledge the literal, physical hands of Christ. The enfleshed hands of Spirit. Hands that physically communicated God's Divine Heart as he touched eyes, washed feet, broke bread. What would it have felt like to have been touched by the flesh and blood hands of Jesus? The only way I know this is through flesh-and-blood hands in my own material world.

I give my imagination room to explore. It gives me pause and I recall how much I love to look at my brother's hands. They are beautiful hands to me. Strong, masculine, bony in places, soft in others. They contain the same DNA as mine. I see my father's hands when I look at them. They are such capable hands and I love when they enfold mine.

My brother's hands express his loving heart to me, but even more, they can be an expression of the loving heart of Christ. Am I open to this kind of reality? Will I allow myself to accept the love of Christ through human hands? Will I also be mindful of my own hands and allow them to be used for the love of Christ in the world?

“Take my hands and let them move, at the impulse of thy love, take my feet and let them be, swift and beautiful for Thee, swift and beautiful for Thee.”

*Hymn: “Take My Life and Let It Be”*

December 8, 2020

## **Cradled in God's Hands**

By Cindy McIntyre

I have a vivid memory of being frightened one stormy night when I was growing up in rural Idaho. I could not have been more than six-years-old. I was sleeping in the bottom bunk with my sister on the top bunk, sound asleep, and I remember the wind howling outside and snow blowing against the windows. Our house was a nearly 100-year-old farmhouse surrounded by sugar beet fields and I remember how creaky and drafty it was, and how pitch dark it was outside the windows. My parents' bedroom was all the way down a long, dark staircase. I don't remember what frightened me, other than the storm, but I remember thinking about the song lyric, "He's got the whole world in his hands..." and imagined being as small as a bunny cradled in God's cupped hands. That was a comforting thought for me. Over many years, I have returned to that image - curling up as a small being in the hands of a Parent God.

As a Christian, I feel that it is my charge to be God's hands here in the world. I would hope that I can, at times, be a comforting or hopeful hand. I hope that there are times when I can hold in my hands the needs and concerns of people around me, the way I see my Loving God holding my cares and concerns.

As a Granny now, I look at my granddaughters' hands in mine - theirs all fat and dimpled and mine with way more age spots than I wish were there. I love helping guide their little hands to do and to learn (and occasionally to correct - though I leave that mostly to their parents).

I still find comfort in the image of being held in God's hands and strive to be the type of person who holds others in my hands when I can physically demonstrate the loving hands of God.

December 9, 2020

## **We Are God's Hands**

By Carol Poole

We are God's hands. He uses us to help others in many ways – sharing our food, clothing those in need, lending a helping hand when others need assistance, an up-lift, a pat on the back, a hug, or just a tender touch.

### **HOPE FOR A BETTER LIFE**

Sometimes God uses our hands to build things for others such as Habitat House or a ramp for those who can no longer use steps.

### **PEACE OF MIND**

He uses our hands to help others by cooking food for those who can no longer do it for themselves. He uses our hands to drive our cars to take people to the doctor or to purchase supplies when they can no longer drive. These acts can help people to feel relieved and peaceful.

### **LOVE TO END LONELINESS**

He uses our hands to write letters, notes, cards, or text messages to show love and concern to others to let them know that they are not forgotten.

### **JOY AND A HAPPIER LIFE**

He uses our hands to bring joy into people's lives by letting them know that life is better because JESUS came and we can show HIS compassion and concern which brings hope, peace, love, and joy into their lives.

Over the last 20 months of our homebound care of my husband Gene, we have experienced God's loving concern for us as we have been the recipients first hand of many acts of kindness bestowed on us by the people at St. John's. You truly have Christ-like hands and hearts.

December 10, 2020

## Extending Hope

By Todd Stillerman

2020 marks the fiftieth holiday season of my life. Debbie's parents live in New England, and she decided when we got married that we would not be traveling northward for holidays (we visit in the spring and fall). Thanks to her generosity, I have spent 49 consecutive Thanksgivings and Christmases with my parents. That's 49 turkey dinners, 49 stockings hanging from the mantle, and 98 family photos for the archives.

2020 also marks a historic pandemic that continues to rage across the country. Infection is spreading and physical contact is dangerous. My parents are in their 70s, and Debbie has a vulnerable immune system. I wasn't surprised when Dad called last week to let me know he and Mom couldn't host Thanksgiving or Christmas this year. With my three brothers and their families, we now have 20 Stillermans to accommodate, and that's too many people for an indoor gathering. I wasn't surprised, but I was still disappointed. If there is anywhere I feel the warmth of God's hands reaching out to me, it's when I can celebrate with family. The fellowship that comes from in-person gatherings is hard to replicate through a webcam. While I am sure God can reach us through Zoom or WebEx if she chooses to do so, I was still feeling pretty low.

Perspective was revealed in short order, however, when I logged into a presentation from our friends at Legal Aid of North Carolina about an expected rise in evictions coming to our community and around our nation. I will still celebrate my holidays in a warm house with Debbie and the kids. Others will not be so lucky. Many pandemic relief programs, including several moratoriums on evictions, are scheduled to expire in January. Legal aid providers expect a surge in evictions in Mecklenburg County in the New Year, and countless families will lose their homes. The cost of evictions for families, neighborhoods and the community extends beyond just the physical removal from a dwelling. Evictions impact the well-being of families and children, create residential instability and perpetuate patterns that lead to disparity rather than upward mobility.

Maybe those were God's hands reaching out to me, or at least poking at me to count my blessings. My family is safe and healthy. We do count ourselves lucky that the only burden we are bearing is inconvenience. I resolved to use my hands to make a difference in the community by volunteering to represent

tenants facing eviction in court. If you're a lawyer, you can join me. There is no right to a lawyer in a civil eviction case, so almost all tenants are unrepresented. Studies show that tenants who have a lawyer are much more likely to secure relief (even when that lawyer is a volunteer).

If you're not a lawyer, there are lots of things you can do to support families in our area as they face eviction:

- You can regularly contact your state and federal representatives to encourage them to pass legislation that extends pandemic relief efforts and expands social safety nets for your neighbors.
- You can get involved and volunteer with local organizations (and you should also give them some of your money whenever you can). Legal Aid of North Carolina (<https://www.legalaidnc.org/give-help/donate>) represents tenants around the state; the Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy (<https://charlottelegaladvocacy.org/donate/>) represents immigrants and non-citizens in eviction matters in Charlotte.
- You can support and, if you are able, join those who are working for racial equity (<https://racialequity.org/racial-justice-organizations-and-resources/>). Unsurprisingly, people of color are even more vulnerable to eviction and other consequences of poverty.

By taking action, we, like the hands of God can extend hope to others in our community. I will try to focus my thoughts on that hope during this unusual holiday season.

**December 11, 2020**

## **Offering the Powerful Spirit of Your Hands**

By Nancy Fuller

“But I only have two hands!!!” sighs the tired and overwhelmed Mom (might have been me).

From my perspective, the problem isn't that we only have two of them. Instead, I think it is the disconnect between our heart, brain, and hands. How in the world can we take care of it all?

We can't, so we need to honor and value the importance of the two hands we're given.

Take a minute to really look at your hands. They carry the journey of your life. All of the clenched fists of anger, twiddling thumbs of impatience, outstretched fingers asking for help, open palms waiting for gifts of love. We carry many experiences through the miracle of our hands; the touching of skin and fur, of earth and water, of heat and cold. The feel of all the wonderful things that God has provided for us.

Now, look at your hands again and see them as the extension of God's hands. They are still the same hands but with added awareness of their power and purpose and responsibility. During this time of Advent, consciously feel your hands absorbing the love of others and the peace of our earth. Try to send out the energy of hope and joy to others.

This Advent season will be different from those of the past but it is up to us to make it wonderful and meaningful. Don't be afraid to offer the powerful spirit of your hands to others.

December 12, 2020

## Mary's Hands

By Amy L. Chilton

*“Mary said, With my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. He has come to the aid of his servant, Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants forever.” Luke 1:46-55*

A young woman, unmarried when she conceived and from the no-account town of Nazareth, had been chosen to be the God-bearer, the theotokos who would take over religious imagination until we Protestants left her behind. She seems an unlikely candidate, no matter how glowingly she is painted or how many Christmas creches she fills. And yet there she sat in that stable, her thin hand moving methodically up and down the newborn’s back, feeling his heart flutter like a butterfly under his wrinkled-up old man skin. Her face resting on the peach fuzz of his head, breathing in his new scent while marveling that she had known this child from before he took his first breath. I have always wondered if she initially marveled or feared. Did she resent the intrusion on these first tender moments as they lay skin to skin, the intrusion of a future far outside her control? Or even then did she know God’s mercy surrounded her, giving her strength now to hold this fragile God-child in her hands and strength later to open those hands and let him go? Was her fierce mother-love born that night, the love that enabled the same hands that stroked his tiny back to reach up to her man-child as he died in front of her? Her hands were the hands of a disciple, hands that served alongside her son and God, hands that wiped away his childhood tears, hands that held him close, and then hands that let him go.

If God’s hands are our hands, if we are the ones through whom God’s love and mercy is made real in this imperfect world, then may our hands be like her hands – the first hands to cradle the Christ-Child’s fragile infant form. May we use them with kindness and wisdom, with compassion (continued on next page)

toward the most vulnerable, and with courage for the hard tasks of discipleship. May our hands serve the God lifted up in Mary's Magnificat, the God who reverses the fortunes of the powerful and the oppressed. And like Mary, may we sing out with joy and hope even in the darkest of winter nights: from the depths of who we are, may we rejoice in God our savior!

December 13, 2020

## God's Hands Show Love

By James Laney

### GOD'S HANDS

- . . . can support
- . . . can heal
- . . . can send retribution
- . . . can comfort

but mostly, GOD'S HANDS show LOVE.

I was eating lunch one day last week at a quick-service pizza restaurant, and the staff behind the counter were pleasant when I placed my order and paid, but they were no more or less engaging than any average restaurant employees. They knew what they were doing and seemed efficient, busying their hands with many tasks while assembling multiple single-serve pizzas and salads - I didn't think too much about it. When my pizza was ready and one of the women brought it to me she said "this was made with love". I was pleasantly surprised and was reminded that even when our hands are performing routine or repetitive tasks, we can share love through our handiwork.

God is the basis of all we know about love – and what a strong foundation that is! His love is all-encompassing, never ending, deeper than we can imagine, and wide enough to cover all of our faults. I don't believe that God has actual hands, or that he physically reaches out, but his love flows through us as his physical hands, to comfort, inspire, support and love. For some hands it is easier to see the connection to God – nurses and doctors healing the sick; nursery workers soothing infants; grandparents hugging their loved ones. But all hands can show God's love – bakers kneading and baking a batch of perfect yeast rolls; construction workers directing traffic safely through the orange cone maze; architects designing attractive and inspiring buildings . . . pretty much everything we do can (and should) be an expression of God's love through us.

December 14, 2020

## God's Hands

By Bert Green

Do we offer ourselves as God's hands in the world hoping that God will find us worthy, or do we offer ourselves with the joyful realization and thanksgiving that God so loved the world that God sent us God's beloved Son to show us how to love one another.

Our community of faith here at St. John's Baptist has a history of offering ourselves as "God's hands in the World." We support our youth and adults, who over the years have served our brothers and sisters from Canada to Puerto Rico. We have served the homeless through Room in the Inn, coordinated locally by Roof Above (formerly Urban Ministry Center). We also serve the homeless or those facing homelessness through our local partnerships with Crisis Assistance Ministries, Charlotte Rescue Mission, Hope Chapel, Salvation Army, and Center for Community Transition. In addition, we serve those who seek permanent housing through Charlotte Family Housing and Habitat for Humanity. We continue to serve our Raising South Sudan Ministry through Mothering Across Continents. We will serve local, state, national and international efforts to be Christ's hands, feet, and voices throughout the world.

When we offer ourselves, we invite God into our hearts, we make ourselves vulnerable to being served by those we serve, and we make ourselves open to the presence of the Holy Spirit, and its transforming power. Or maybe we have been blessed to experience the presence of God through the Holy Spirit, and the intensity of that experience has empowered us, and made us realize that all that we have and all that we are belongs to God.

The ministries inside and outside our community of faith have spent decades honing their skills. We have volunteers who have supported these same ministries and have shared their gifts and talents generously in the process. We have youth and adults who have and will experience the good news of Jesus Christ as we offer ourselves to the world.

I hope we all do the following in the coming Advent Season:

Pray and give thanks to God for this wonderful community of faith at St. John's, and the many other blessings in our lives.

Pray and give thanks to God for the leadership we enjoy here.

Pray and search our hearts for how we can continue to offer ourselves to the world, and support our brothers and sisters around us by sharing our gifts and talents abundantly.

Pray and search our hearts for how we can contribute toward the financial needs of St. John's to support the outstanding work that goes on here every week of the year.

St John's is a rock in my life. This community of faith has shown me how to love and be loved. It has taught me and admonished me as occasion may require. I can never begin to repay you all and those saints we have lost for sharing God's presence and being God's hands in this world. Thank you very much.

December 15, 2020

## Being a Blessing to Another

By Rev. Lee Gray

I met him in the summer of 1991. I was selling educational books and Bibles door to door in Monroe, Louisiana. One day, I knocked on a door and an African American in his early sixties answered it. This gentleman named Sam James looked at me through kind but discerning and inquisitive eyes. He invited me inside and we drank coffee. As we did, he sought to understand me, what I was about, and what I was doing. After about an hour he bought a large print Bible for his wife, saying this would make it much easier for her to read. I made it a point to go back by and see him before I returned back to college at the end of the summer.

As luck would have it, the next summer I sold books, I was sent back to Monroe, Louisiana again. And, again, Sam bought another Bible from me. This time it was a Children's Bible for his two newly adopted daughters. At the end of the summer, when I came to say goodbye, I told him about a neighbor across the street. I could never catch this neighbor at home, and he had ordered a Bible with his wife's name on it. Having her name on the Bible meant that I couldn't return it to the company if it went unsold. Sam told me that the man was out of town, and Sam wanted to know how much the man owed. Sam paid for the Bible, and told me that he would get the money from the man when he returned.

In the summer '93, when I didn't go back to Monroe, Sam called my house and wanted to know why I hadn't come by to sell him any books that year - like he really needed some more books.

Some years later I thought about Sam and decided to give him a call. He shared with me about his two adopted girls going off to college. And he also said to me, "Lee, my oldest daughter passed away from cancer and that was sad; but God is still good." I asked him if the guy across the street ever paid him back for that Bible with his wife's name on it. He said, "You know Lee I can't remember, but he is always doing work on my kid's cars, and he has really been a blessing to us." If I had to bet, I'd bet Sam just gave him that book some 28 years ago. The \$30 or so dollars I might have lost on that Bible doesn't matter at all today, but the fact that Sam James reached out to me years ago does.

I've shared this story several times over the years, and every time I do, I call Sam. I spoke to him last week. He now has 30 grandchildren, 30 great grandchildren, and one adopted, grown up child that lives in Charlotte. He is a reminder to me that sometimes you do something nice for someone just because you believe in something more. Sam taught me what it means to be a blessing to another person. That lesson influences me to want to bless others as well.

December 16, 2020

## The Unexpected Gift of Peace

By Sara Vavra

*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” John 14:27*

This scripture reminds me of a time when I did not know my heart was troubled, or how badly I needed God’s peace, and yet God came to me, in the shape of a middle-aged nurse from Ohio who happened to be the teacher at a continuing education program I was attending. She was the one who brought me this unexpected gift of peace.

A few years ago, my massage therapist friend, Lisa, and I were attending a continuing education program at a lovely retreat center in Chatham County. During our second day, Lisa called the teacher over for help on a technique. The teacher shared a few tips and then demonstrated by placing her hand over the center of my chest and very gently, but firmly, directing that pressure towards my heart center.

Everything seemed fine until suddenly, out of the blue, I was overcome with emotion and started to cry. At first, my tears were polite, stoic tears, barely noticeable to anyone else in the room. I struggled desperately to control myself, but they would not stop.

Soon my chest was heaving and shuddering with waves of unexpected emotion, and big, fat tears poured out of my eyes, streaming down my face. I was so embarrassed. Where was this coming from? I wondered, still trying to make it make it stop. Eventually I gave in, and let whatever it was that was happening, happen. After a while, the sobbing stopped and my tears dried and I was filled with a sense of lightness and ease.

Our teacher stayed with me throughout this strange event, her hand resting gently on my heart center, until it was clear that I was well. And I was well. I was at peace.

I have thought a lot about that experience over the years and wondered what it all meant. My teacher was not a good friend or trusted advisor, and I didn’t attend the course with any deep existential angst. And yet something extraordinary happened.

My teacher became God's vessel to allow a great healing in my heart. All the things I had buried deep in my center, things I thought I had resolved and things I no longer have conscious memory of, were pulled up and out of me, freeing me from the heaviness that had been hurting my heart. My soul responded to this great kindness, this great maternal love, and was able to let go, until I was left with nothing but love and a deep peace, cradled in God's hands.

**Exercise:**

Remembering that our hearts are always in God's hands, take a moment today to place your hands on your heart center. Notice how your chest lifts up into your hands as you breathe in, and how it falls as you let the breath out. After a few breaths, pray to let go of all the things you want to let go of, all your worries, your fears, your losses, your loneliness, deep sadness, envy, anger, grief. Things you know you have inside your heart and the things you don't know you still hold there. Pray to let them go, with each exhalation, letting go. And then, after a little while, pray to bring in God's peace, God's love, God's Joy, God's grace with each in-breath. Letting go of the things that close your heart to God's peace as you let the breath out, and drawing in all the gifts God has for you, with each in-breath. Breathing in and breathing out. May you find God's peace in your life today.

December 17, 2020

## **When Peace Like a River Attends My Soul**

By Ken Sanford

I owe the peace of my spirit to the enlightened churches I attended over the years. At Clyde Baptist Church near Asheville, I didn't know what ministers there were practicing, but later learned it was ecumenism. The Methodist Church was next door, and because both were small, they saw the need to partner. We had joint Bible schools, some shared services and many social activities together.

Next came West Asheville Baptist Church where the Rev. Nane Starnes was a successful minister, in addition to serving as a leader of the Baptist State Convention. There my father modeled church lay leadership for me by serving as a deacon. Then came my college days at Mars Hill and Chapel Hill where I broadened my knowledge and understanding. Some dedicated Christian professors taught Sunday School at both campuses.

When my first work as a journalist took me to Winston-Salem, I became involved in Knollwood Baptist Church which had just been founded under the leadership of Dr. Jack Nofsinger and quickly became one of the fastest growing churches in our state.

Arriving in Charlotte for my career at UNC Charlotte I discovered St. John 's Baptist Church, at which it was my great privilege to have Dr. Claude Broach as my pastor. There were other dedicated servants over the years culminating in the Ministry of Dr. Dennis Foust. Over the years, these inspiring leaders have brought peace to my soul.

December 18, 2020

## A Place to Call Home

By Norris Frederick

As Christmas approached in 1945, my parents were having trouble making ends meet and would soon have no place to live. Like Mary and Joseph, they needed someone to house them and their children for a while. My grandparents offered to be my family's innkeepers.

Recently I gave some financial help to a woman whose family is struggling due to coronavirus layoffs. A question wandered into my mind: why did I offer to help this person? I could think of some good theories about why and who we should help, but a better answer popped into my mind: it's because my mother who – even with very limited resources of her own – did the same thing. I'd not thought of that in a long time.

A little later I wondered, why did my mother help others? Because of her parents, Bright and Jesse Lee Hoyle, my grandparents whom I knew as "Gannie" and "Ba-poo. And I knew their love and generosity first-hand. That "temporary" stay with my grandparents turned into something permanent. By the time my brother Charlie and I were born, there were eight people – my parents, the four of us children, and my grandparents -- living in that small house, with one bathroom. We lived there the rest of my grandparents' lives.

My memory of Ba-poo is of the smell of his pipe and the sight of him listening to baseball games on a huge radio that sat on the floor, and of sometimes having the delight of sitting in his lap while he listened. I still have his pocket-sized New Testament, which still smells faintly of his tobacco.

He died when I was six, and my grandmother lived for another seven years after his death. I remember Gannie as a very smart woman who laughed a lot, cooked wonderfully, wrote poetry, and gave much love to us grandchildren. She was a school teacher for a while, and later taught Sunday School at First Methodist in Charlotte. When we got our first television, the favorite show for my brother and me was championship wrestling, with wrestlers like George Becker (good guy) and The Great Bolo (baddest of the bad guys). My grandmother would sometimes walk through the room as we were watching wrestling, say that it was a ridiculous fake, and before long would be sitting down and booing and cheering with us. (continued on next page)

A few years ago, my sister Virginia said something that startled me in its truthfulness. Our grandparents sacrificed a lot for us. In their 60s, they could see a time when they no longer had to work so hard and could enjoy a quieter and easier life. They could envision enjoying their 19 grandchildren a couple of hours at a time, and then returning them to their parents. That truth hit me right between the eyes.

They were helping hands for us, to be sure. I cannot imagine what we would have done without them. They, and we, attended a church that meant much to us, and at least the adults listened to the sermons. We knew of the Christian vision of love, but it became real for us because we saw it from our grandparents and parents. Even though they gave up a lot for us, they never gave us a sense we were a burden: they gave us the sense of being loved. I am eternally grateful.

We were so very fortunate. “Go and do likewise.” We all need to help bring about a world where no one goes hungry, where all children experience love, where everyone has a place to call home.

December 19, 2020

## **A Fighter Pilot's Christmas The Longest Four Hours of My Life**

By Robert L. Benton, submitted by Ken Benton

It was Christmas Eve, December 24, 1944 during the Battle of the Bulge. The Germans had broken through our defensive lines and surrounded our troops in Bastogne. It was to be Germany's last desperate move of the war.

My fighter squadron flew a two hour mission to Bastogne early that afternoon to dive bomb and strafe the enemy.

Returning from this mission, word came down from headquarters that the Germans were within 20 miles of our airfield, and they were planning a parachute attack on our field this Christmas Eve.

The squadron was put on alert. I was "selected" along with one other pilot to be the interceptor planes in case the attack occurred. We taxied our P-47 Thunderbolts onto the runway at sixteen hundred hours.

I can't begin to tell you what it is like to sit alone in the cockpit of a plane for four hours on a snow covered runway, with complete radio silence and darkness drawing near. You scan the clouds and pray that the enemy could not mount the attack. For my fellow pilot and myself, it would be suicide to get our planes in the air in time to intercept the enemy.

A hundred thoughts ran through my mind during those long, lonesome hours. "Why me, God? But why not me? I am single, no wife or children back in the states. It's Christmas Eve. Wars shouldn't be fought on His birthday." Suddenly, a soothing peace came over me. I imagined I could see the star of Christmas shining through those snowy clouds, and I knew then that He was with me and I would never be alone again.

December 20, 2020

## **Finding Peace**

By Rev. Allison Benfield

You would think that seeing the Swiss Alps appear in the plane window as my plane approached Zurich would invite a sense of peace and calm for this mountain-loving girl. Yet, after an eight and a half hour flight on a plane with no seatback entertainment console to distract me from worrying about my first solo trip abroad, peace was notably absent from the list of things I was feeling.

All the worries about whether I would be able to navigate my way from the airport to the train station to Lucerne to the hotel became very real as we approached our landing. I had printed off and screenshotted all sorts of directions in preparation for this trip, but the fact that I was by myself made the task at hand seem very daunting. In about two hours, all of these worries would prove to be ridiculous and unfounded, but in that moment the anxiety felt very overwhelming. My soul felt like it was being tossed about on a little boat in the middle of a storm.

As my fellow passengers and I exited the plane, I ended up next to a lady that had been on the opposite end of my row. We wound our way through the airport and passport control and enjoyed a good conversation. I learned that she was there on business with a confection company, and she learned that I was there to attend the Baptist World Alliance's annual gathering.

Perhaps she sensed my anxiety or perhaps the Spirit nudged her to be kind and helpful to a stranger, but she stayed with me right up until we got our bags, and then made sure to point out which way to go to get to the train station before we parted ways. Her kindness helped to soothe my initial anxiety and helped to restore peace to my soul.

Later, as I sat by the lake in Lucerne and reflected on the events of the day, I realized that this kind woman, whose name I never learned, had been the presence of God to me in a moment of need. May we all be open to being the presence of God to the people around us--even the people whose names we do not know.

December 21, 2020

## Mary's Song

By Sally Young

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

*His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;*

*He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

*Luke 1:47-56*

The Magnificat is the first of four canticles, or hymns of praise, Luke inserts in the first two chapters of his gospel. It is an ancient hymn yet its prophecy speaks to our situation in the 21st century. Ostensibly, it is Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting when Mary arrives to stay with her pregnant cousin. In spite of what could be a scary state of affairs for an unwed, pregnant teenager, Mary rejoices! She could have been disgraced and expelled from all that is familiar and safe, but God welcomed her to God's family. She expresses her trust in God and what God will do for her through the birth of her son. She acknowledges and gives thanks for God's blessings.

For Luke, Mary is an individual – a girl with no rights or legal status – but she also represents the faith community; in other words, she represents us as the Church. What she says God will do for her, God will do for us. God will do battle on behalf of God's people and bring them to deliverance. God will also have mercy on the lowly and remember the needy. God's overruling human rulers is not punitive but places them in a position to experience God's graciousness. And all these actions are to fulfill God's promise to Abraham.

2020 has not been a peaceful year. In spite of the unrest we have experienced, we have God's promise to meet our needs and guide us to God's salvation. Like Mary, we should give thanks and rejoice in God's blessings and promises. Christmas is our reminder that we should always participate in Mary's joy.

December 22, 2020

## Celebrate

By Mallory Brown

In the past month, my daughter Annie Kate has gained awareness of her hands. These two strange appendages with 10 more appendages that can wiggle, scrunch up, wave, and feel. Due to teething, her fists and fingers are constantly in her mouth, which makes for quite a messy situation of drool around here. Her tiny, dimpled hands are objects of fascination and exploration, to be sure. I am sure many of you can relate to the fascination that is watching a baby figure out something on his or her own. The first time they smile, laugh, roll over, grasp a toy - everything they do seems so monumental and exciting both for them and for those watching.

All of this makes me think about the lives of us as adults and how little celebrating we do for ourselves and for one another. While it is often more natural to celebrate one another, it is harder to celebrate one's self. The inner critic is the toughest critic, at least for me. I do not often celebrate myself for the tasks I have accomplished or the good things I have done or for just being me. Instead, I look for ways to change the faults I see or to correct every perceived misstep. I also tend to avoid self-love, finding it too luxurious and silly for someone like myself. So, why can't I celebrate myself? Just as Annie Kate lights up with a smile when she sees herself in the mirror, I too can smile when I see myself. Just as she laughs at the silliest of charades put on by her parents, I too can find more reasons to laugh. Just as she surprises herself when she rolls over, I too can surprise myself by what I can do. Just as she grasps a new toy or marvels at her hands, I too can marvel at myself for having made it through another day without pulling my hair out.

Additionally, I need to take the time to celebrate others for being their marvelous selves! It is easy to forget to say thank you or to take the time to cheer on someone for the wonderful work they are doing. I am guilty of taking folks for granted and forgetting that everyone, no matter their personality type, needs a little encouragement once in a while. Can't we all celebrate one another a little more? Not only for tasks and skills but just for being the human God created each one to be.

So, as I watch my daughter marvel at her hands, touching her fingers together, using them to tug on her ears or soothe her sore gums, I am reminded of my own hands and the hands of those around me. Celebrate the small things and the big things you do with your hands every day. Be like Annie Kate and marvel at them! And always, celebrate yourself, your True Self, and those around you, their True Selves, for just being who they are in this world.

December 23, 2020

## God's Hands

Derek Henson

As we journey through Advent we are in the season of expectation, particularly the coming of new life in the birth of Jesus. The themes of love, peace, joy, and hope easily surround the image of the infant savior lying in a bed of hay smiling and cooing as he sleeps. This year it is so hard to focus on new life when our daily news is filled with tallies around the world from a pandemic that continues to cover people near and far.

Death is no respecter of class, of status, race, or other ways we segregate and divide ourselves. It lays us equally at its door. In Charles Dicken's classic, "A Christmas Carol", Mr. Scrooge finally relents and changes when he finds himself standing at that very door. In my own family, we have walked through that door in 2020 along with many more around the world.

In these moments of loss, we as Christians find ourselves most ready and equipped to be the hands of God to one another. When my older sister died in 1987, even as a 4-year-old I remember the people of the church coming to our home and being present in our families' time of deep grief and loss. At another time a family in our church experienced the death of a child and the women of the church showed up to clean their home, to prepare meals, and to be the presence of Christ. This was the church being the hand of God that the early church modeled for us.

In this time of being apart physically, we continually ask how we can be connected and one body to serve and support one another when we cannot be together. This brings to mind another act of the people of God that I have experienced in difficult times, cards, and notes. Even though it has been over 30 years since the passing of my sister, I still have cards that so many people sent to her and our family both during her illness and following her death. Many friends and family who sent those words of comfort, care, and support have since gone to join the Church Triumphant, but yet, their words they penned so long ago still ring true and bring comfort today. In this 2020 advent season, perhaps we can use the power of the pen to show the attributes of love, joy, and peace in ways we've forgotten in our digital age. And in this small action, we can give hope; hope that is to come is worth waiting for; and that our beloved community will be there to celebrate with us.

O Come Emmanuel, come and teach us the way in which to be your presence to each other and to our world.

December 24, 2020

## **Is There Something Waiting to Be Born in Us Today?**

By Kathy Bragg

On the morning of October 29, after hurricane Zeta blew through the Charlotte region, throwing wind gusts and heavy rain on all of us, I was on my way to the barn to feed the horses. This morning was nothing like the one before. It was clean, washed, sunny and crisp. Once at the barn, I began to attend to my chores, feeding the horses and cleaning things up. As I worked, I was listening to a new musical composition by Kevin Gray on my phone. One little pony was munching away on her feed. The other one, Buttercup, was on the other side of the barn gate, standing beside the fence, dozing in the warm sunshine. Once Kevin's piece was over, the phone began to play the next thing to come up, which was the "Messiah." I was surprised by the coincidence, since I had Mallory's request that I write a piece for the Advent booklet on my mind. As the first familiar and lovely notes of the overture rang through the barn, I saw Buttercup's ears prick up, her head turned quickly toward the barn, she moved closer to the gate of the barn hallway, and she appeared to be on high alert.

Now I can't say for sure, of course, that she was responding to the music, but perhaps she was. What I do know is that her attention to something new in her morning made me think of the wonder of the Advent season, the coming of God into our world in human form, and being born there every day in us.

What makes us stop to wonder, to notice or to pay attention to all that God has given us? In what ways do we respond to this greatest gift of all? Are we making ready to discover something new, to find God becoming real in our lives today? What will we see? What will we hear? Who will we see? Who will we hear? Is there something waiting to be born in us today?

"And the Glory, the Glory of the Lord shall be revealed, shall be revealed..."

December 25, 2020

## Christmas Day

By Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister

On this Christmas Day, my prayer is that you will unwrap God's gift of encouragement. This year has included many challenges. You do not need me to recount them all.

But, be encouraged! The story of Jesus' birth emerges in a world full of anxiety and discomfort.

We tend to focus on singing angels and awestruck shepherds. However, on the night of Jesus' birth cry, the world was a dark and scary place.

Jesus was born in a land where strife and suffering were commonplace. People were plotting to overthrow the government.

Racial prejudice, oppression, social blindness and the absence of compassion were normative.

Disparity between rich and the poor was expansive.

Political leaders were legalistic, manipulative and punished anyone who questioned them.

Religious life focused on bending God's truth more than expressing God's love.

Jesus' relatives and his nation's citizens were under control of a foreign power.

Every footprint of Joseph and Mary between Nazareth and Bethlehem was in dust ruled by Rome. Their ultimate arrival in Bethlehem to be registered as descendants of David was tumultuous. The cause of their journey, during a late term pregnancy, was due to an unfair tax system. Rome made these citizens pay taxes, although the people had few freedoms. When Joseph and Mary finally arrived in Bethlehem, they found no comfortable lodging. A kind innkeeper opened his stable to them which was most likely a dank cave.

Into this darkness, the Light of the world arrived.  
(continued on next page)

But, be encouraged, beloved, God's Light always arrives in the darkness. John's Gospel begins with these familiar words: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

You have been so very faithful this year.

You have cared for one another and expressed compassion to our neighbors.

You have prayed for and encouraged one another.

You have been responsible for your commitments and honored our St. John's church covenant.

You have reflected the light of God in places where darkness needed to be transformed.

So, unwrap God's gift of encouragement.

If God can bring light into the world in which Joseph and Mary lived, God has light for you.

The message of Christmas is this: God's light shows up in dark times. When people are afraid, confused and abused, God's light brings hope, peace, joy and love.

Even if all you can hear is a baby's cry, take heart, for there is a new world being born.

"God's light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not,  
has not,  
will not,  
cannot overcome it."

Shalom!  
Dennis



