



— A THRILL OF —
HOPE

SPECIAL ADVENT EVENTS

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas! Our campuses are ready for the most wonderful time of year with events for your family and friends to enjoy. For more details on these and additional Advent events go to stlukesokc.org/Christmas.

- Nov. 26 Family Advent Festival 4 p.m. Edmond
- Nov. 29 Michael W. Smith, Esther Women Concert 11:30 a.m. Downtown
- Dec. 3 Christmas Worship Concert 9 and 11 a.m. Edmond
- Dec. 3 Children's Joyful Jingle Merry Mingle 12:30 p.m. Downtown
- Dec. 3 Church Christmas Party - The Land of Oz 5 p.m. Edmond
- Dec. 6 A Symphony of Christmas Concert 7 p.m. Downtown
- Dec. 7 Night of Praise..... 7 p.m. Downtown
- Dec. 10 Children's Christmas Musical 3 p.m. Edmond
- Dec. 10 Church Christmas Party - The Land of Oz 5 p.m. Downtown
- Dec. 17 Christmas Worship Concert 9:30 a.m. Downtown
- Dec. 17 Angel of Hope Worship Service 5 p.m. Downtown
- Dec. 24 Christmas Eve Candlelight Services
- Downtown Campus: 11 a.m., 2, 4:30, and 6:30 p.m.
- Edmond Campus: 11 a.m., 4, 6:30 and 11 p.m.
- Online Campus: All services available at stlukesokc.org/live
- Dec. 24 Christmas Eve Worship - TV Special 10:35 p.m. KFOR-4



Christmas Offering

Each year, the St. Luke's family of faith joins together in a special, second-mile offering. 100% of the funds raised will be used to bless the lives of others through ministries and missions supported by St. Luke's. You can make a donation to this special offering during worship, by calling the church office, online at stlukesokc.org/give, or by texting "SLM Christmas" to 73256.



Angel of Hope Service

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17 AT 5 P.M.

ST. LUKE'S DOWNTOWN CAMPUS MANSION AND GARDEN



THE LAND of OZ

ST. LUKE'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

"THE LAND OF OZ" STARRING BOB LONG

December 3 at 5 p.m. | Edmond Campus

December 10 at 5 p.m. | Downtown Campus

Tickets available at Threefold.

Advent is the season leading up to Christmas Day. It is a time set aside for the preparation of our hearts and minds to fully celebrate the birth of the Christ Child. Advent is marked by anticipation of the coming of Christ as the physical manifestation of God. Jesus is “God in the flesh” and the best expression of God’s love for all creation. He is Emmanuel, which means “God with us,” and that is the greatest gift we can receive.

The candles are a way of counting down to Christmas by focusing on a different theme each week. Just as there are countless lessons to learn from the birth of Christ, there are also numerous themes that can be applied to the Advent candles.

Just as we clean and decorate our homes to get ready for the holiday, so too we make our hearts ready. There are five candles - each representing a certain week of the Advent season and one for Christmas Eve/Day.

There are three purple candles, one pink candle, and one white candle placed in the middle. Purple is a sign of royalty and represents that Jesus was born as the Prince of Peace and King of Kings. Pink or rose is the liturgical color for joy. The pink candle is traditionally lit on the third Sunday of Advent which is known as Gaudete Sunday. “Gaudete” (the first syllable rhymes with “cow” so that the word is pronounced Gow-Day-Tay) means “rejoice.” White is the color to represent holiness and is lit on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Let the lighting of the Advent Wreath become a family tradition that helps you celebrate the birth of Christ with anticipation, reverence, and joy!



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT - HOPE

Scripture

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. – Isaiah 9:6-7

Reflection

*A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!*

The Scripture is from Isaiah or one of his followers in the 8th century BCE. Likely, it was a birth pronouncement of a prince that was born at the time. The passage addresses God and is full of hope for the reign that the child would have when he began his rule. Of course, the scripture is very familiar to us because we



associate it with the birth of Christ and the eternal hope that is given through Him. This is a great example of our ability matched with God's. We are called to do our best, but we are limited. The people of the 8th century were limited as well. They were able to celebrate the birth of a royal prince and pray God's blessings over his life and especially how he would lead the people. In essence, they were consecrating the early kingdom to God and asking God's blessings through the child to bring about peace and justice. God would answer their prayers in the reign of that individual, but God also answered their prayers in a far greater way. God the Father knew the limitations and fallibilities of a human ruler and so because He loved the world, He would send His only Son that all the world might be saved through Him.

We are called to have hope in the moment for God's purpose to reign in our lives. But we also have eternal hope in Christ for He reigns far beyond our limitations, mistakes, and weariness. In the midst of our highs and lows, Christ still reigns over us. We have eternal hope because the One who reigns, is also the One who loves us as His own.

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Light the First Candle (Purple)

Prayer

God of the ages,

You have loved us before we knew You. In the darkest of moments, You bring Your light. We have everlasting hope in You. Thank You, for the promise of the Messiah.

- Amen.

Discussion Questions

Where do you find “a thrill of hope” in the Advent season or throughout the year?

Do you feel that Christ reigns in your life? Why or why not?



Scripture

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. - Luke 1:5-7

Reflection

*...in all our trials born to be our friend.
He knows our need, to our weakness no stranger!
Behold your King!*



In the Ancient Near East, having children was centrally tied to a person's identity. The culture of that day considered childless couples to be cursed by God. At that time, if someone went through hardship, it was seen as a punishment from God for some kind of offense. Throughout history, societies have often dealt with hardship and tragedy as punishment for sin. But we see in the message of the Bible that God continually loves people who make mistakes. The trials of life are not punishment from God, they are circumstances of life; either from our mistakes or the mistakes of others, or just the brokenness that sometimes exists in the world. While the world may seem to be against us or blame us for our hardships, God is always for us. As the carol proclaims, God "knows our need" and is not a stranger "to our weakness."

Our hope is found in God's love for us. Faith is trusting in God's undying love for us as God's children. Sometimes remembering God's love for all people helps to remind us of God's love for us; sometimes remembering God's love for us helps to remind us of God's love for all people. The birth of Jesus is a reminder of both, "for God so loved the world..."

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Light the First (Purple) and Second Candle (Purple)

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Your love that abides with us always. Strengthen our faith so that we are so confident in Your love for us, that we can help others see Your love for them.

- Amen.

Discussion Questions

Do you have any doubts as to God's love for you?

What helps to remind you of God's love for all?



THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT - JOY

Scripture

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." - Luke 1:26-33

Reflection

*Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.*



The third Sunday of Advent is known as "Gaudete* Sunday." Gaudete means "rejoice." The rose colored candle is lit because rose (pink) is the liturgical color for joy. It marks the halfway point of Advent and is associated with Mary because the joy she would find in God choosing her to be the mother of the Christ child.

It is important to find joy in life and especially in the Advent season. Joy is different than happiness which is often dependent upon the circumstances of life. Joy is like the sun and happiness is a sunny day.

We might not always feel "happy" when the storms of life come our way, but we know that behind all the clouds, the sun is ever present. Jesus was born as a reminder that the Son is always there. We can know everlasting joy because God the Son is ever-present in our lives.

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Light the First and Second Candles (Purple) and then the Third Candle (Pink)

Prayer

Loving God,

Thank You for the joy You give us in the birth of Christ. We know that whatever we face in life, we are not alone. You are always with us. We love You and praise Your holy name!

- Amen.

Discussion Questions

Do you find that you seek after joy or happiness more?

Can you remember a time when you didn't feel happy, but you knew joy?



Scripture

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus. - Matthew 1:18

Reflection

*Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,
and in His Name all oppression shall cease.*

In the scripture passage, Joseph discovered that his fiancée, Mary, was with child. One can easily imagine all the heartache, anger, and embarrassment that Joseph felt in that moment. In the Ancient Near East, to be engaged was almost as binding as being married. Joseph would have been within his cultural rights to publicly shame Mary and even to have her punished. But instead of giving in to the emotions and turmoil within his heart, he acted with grace. He was going to quietly let her out of



the marriage agreement, but then the angel told Joseph the meaning and the purpose of Mary's pregnancy. The scripture says, *Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.* Perhaps, it was Joseph's decision to choose grace over anger that enabled him to hear the angel's message.

Choosing a path of peace, instead of our emotions, allows us to better see and hear the opportunities that God places in our path. Jesus came to break the chains of all that would bind us and set us free that we, in turn, might work toward a world where "all oppression shall cease."



Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Light the First and Second Candles, (Purple), the Third Candle (Pink), and then the Fourth Candle (Purple)

Prayer

God of peace,

We come before You acknowledging all the times we have not sought Your peace. We have pursued busyness instead of purpose, we have judged others instead of offering grace, and we have not spent the time with You that our souls have needed. Forgive us, we pray. Remind us once more of Your peace that was made known in Your birth in Bethlehem and in Your presence in our lives. Free us to follow You in ending oppression and injustice.

- Amen.

Discussion Questions

What is your definition of peace?

How do you best find peace in life?

Scripture

And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."
- Luke 2:6-15

Singing of the Carol

O Holy Night!

*The stars are brightly shining,
it is the night of the dear Saviour's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
til He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!*

*Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,
with glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
Over the world a star is sweetly gleaming,
now come the Wise Men from out of Orient land.
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
in all our trials born to be our friend.
He knows our need, to our weakness no stranger!
Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!
Behold your King! Your King! Before Him bend!*

*Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.*



*Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,
and in His Name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
let all within us praise His holy name!*

*Christ is the Lord, then ever, ever praise we!
His power and glory, evermore proclaim!
His power and glory, ever more proclaim!*

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Light All Four Advent Candles and then Light the Fifth Candle (White)

Prayer

Lord Jesus,

Today we light the white candle, the Christ candle, of the Advent Wreath and celebrate Your birth. We love You and we pray that today - and all days, we would live lives that would reflect Your love to the world. Thank you for the gifts you bring - hope, faith, joy, peace, and Your everlasting love.

- Amen.



There are lots of special Christmases I remember, usually because they were a first Christmas of some sort. For instance, I remember the first Christmas Marsha and I spent as a newly married couple. And then there were the special Christmases that we had after our daughter, Kelly, was born and after Paul was born. I remember our first Christmas after we came to Oklahoma; it was so special to become part of the St. Luke's family of faith.

And this year will be another first Christmas. It will be the first Christmas as St. Luke's Methodist Church. Technically, our church has had the name of "St. Luke's Methodist Church" before, but in a different circumstance. This year our family of faith took a historic vote to leave a denominational structure in order to continue to be the church we feel God is calling us to be. The thing that makes "firsts" so memorable is that there typically is a small bit of fear inherent to each one. I had a tiny bit of fear that first Christmas with Marsha because I wanted to give her a gift that reflected my love and gratitude for her. The first Christmas with each of our children was full of love, but also the typical worries of any new parent.

Christmas itself is a season that reminds us that we are first in God's heart. Jesus came into the world not as a grown man, but as a newborn baby experiencing His first breath on earth as every one of us does. Mary and Joseph would have had their own fears as new parents giving birth in a strange place. But the birth of Jesus would set us free from our fears.

This Christmas, spend the first moments of each day with Christ. Begin your day reading this collection of devotions and having a time of prayer. At the close of the day, take time to remember that our lives are bookended by the presence of God.

My prayer for you is that this Christmas reminds you of the new beginning you have in the gift of Jesus' love.

Dr. Bob Long, Senior Pastor



Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name. - Psalm 86:11

I am one of those annoyingly cheerful morning people - just ask my sweet husband! So, it's not surprising I arrived as the coffee shop was opening that particular morning. I ordered my necessary caffeine and settled into a rhythm.

When I arrived, only two employees were behind the counter. As each of the subsequent employees trickled in, they were greeted with warmth and kindness. Their presence was valued just as God values each one of us. I was impressed by how much these people respected each other, laughed together, and encouraged each other during the busyness of a coffee shop during the morning rush. One order at a time, they made a positive difference in our world.

I don't know if I caught this group on a day when they all had gotten a good night's sleep or if they are always like this, but they made an undeniable difference for everyone that morning. Each customer went away feeling better. Certainly, my day was made better by watching their positive interactions.

Every person that came in or drove through was valued. The employees made an effort to connect with each and every person. It was obvious they had their regulars, but even the first-timers were brought into the fold and made to feel like a friend immediately.

"Where's our puppy friend today?" I didn't hear the exact response to that question but it was easy to see something tragic had happened. I watched as one of the employees ministered to a tearful dog owner while taking a coffee order. She leaned in, touched her hand and patiently listened to her story. One ordinary person ministering to another. We don't have to do huge things to make a huge difference. Simple moments are magically restorative if we simply show up for them.

I was there long enough to know these people truly appreciated and enjoyed each other. In turn, that love and kindness flowed automatically into the world! I wonder how many times I've missed seeing an ordinary moment become something truly extraordinary because I was too busy to notice.

That special morning, I heard the words, "let's find our rhythm" many times as they worked in concert to bless life while serving up a cup of coffee. These Advent weeks are available so that we may find our own rhythm in the light of God's most precious gift to us. Perhaps simply slowing down and noticing the extraordinary ordinary right in front of us is the best rhythm of all.

Tisha Tate Garcia, Hospitality Team

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” - Matthew 11:28-30

Several years ago, our grandson Park asked us if he could share a playlist of Christian songs that he loved. We said of course, so he took our phones and downloaded his list. For years now, Park has felt closest to God when he is listening to music, and it was heartwarming for him to share his joy with us. We were thrilled!

This past year has been filled with so many emotions as we all lived through extremely challenging days making significant decisions for the future of St. Luke’s.

One day I was especially discouraged and exhausted from the stress and emotion of this season in the life of our church, certainly a time in our ministry that I never anticipated. Frequently, I would have trouble falling asleep or wake up in the middle of the night with a troubled heart. As I continued to listen to some of the songs from Park’s playlist, I was deeply moved by the Scripture Lullabies album *Hidden in My Heart*, and the song, *The Peace of God*.

*Don't you worry about anything. Instead pray about everything.
Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done.
And the peace of God far beyond what we can understand will
guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.*

The writer and producer originally wrote these lullabies for children, but what they discovered was their songs, all based upon scripture, also instilled a calming presence in people across all generations. They have a full orchestra playing in the background that brings such richness to the scriptures. Now with many albums to choose from, I find that these lullabies are something that can immediately calm my soul, help me find rest, and bring me back to Christ and to what is really important.

We all have an image embedded in our hearts of the first Christmas that includes baby Jesus. Christ came to fulfill many promises, including His promise of rest. He set the perfect example for us by living a deeply restful way of life. During this season of Advent, I pray that we are all able to follow His example of peace by allowing our souls to rest in His presence. May you prepare your hearts to receive this gift that was so richly given to each one of us, remembering that He is the greatest gift of all.

Marsha Long, Director of Hospitality Ministry



Which person has spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to more people than anyone else in history? That's hard to calculate. John Wesley rode more than 250,000 miles on horseback. Billy Graham spoke to nearly 215 million people in 99 countries. What about... Elvis?

Oh c'mon. The guy who sang *Hound Dog*? Well, Joe Moscheo thinks Elvis belongs in this conversation. The former singer with The Imperials, who played with Presley in the early '70s, even wrote a book called *The Gospel Side of Elvis*. "He had personal problems and demons, but... he introduced gospel music to a secular world," Moscheo said. "In a way, he was an evangelist."

Talk about a potential congregation. It's estimated Elvis' music has been streamed over a billion times. How long has streaming music over the internet been popular? Since the mid-2010s. Elvis died in 1977. But the vast majority of that audience has only heard his secular songs, right? I can imagine someone saying, "Elvis sang gospel? Ohhh that's right... I hear it on the radio every December. *Blue Christmas*. Love that song."

It makes me "blue" that most people only hear that one song from him during Advent. That's because if you haven't heard his gospel music, you haven't really heard Elvis sing. Sounds crazy to say that, considering the "King of Rock 'n' Roll" recorded 104 hits in the Top 40, and 27 albums in the Top 10. Incredible secular success, but as Elvis said himself, "There's only one king, and that's Jesus Christ."

My mom and I have a tradition of listening to her favorite CD in the car. It's called *Elvis: Ultimate Gospel*. It's 25 powerful songs that showcase his vocal range and his passion for gospel music. We take turns singing background and lead, but always find ourselves saying, "Elvis can sing, can't he?" I wish everyone knew that this legendary performer was at his best when he was singing about Jesus. His three Grammy awards? Sure enough, all in the Gospel category.

How Great Thou Art and *Amazing Grace* are timeless hits, of course, but I love his version of *Milky White Way*, which captures the joy of going to heaven. The lighthearted song, *I Believe In the Man In the Sky*, acknowledges our mortality. Then there's our favorite, the slow and soulful, *Where Could I Go but To the Lord*. And I never thought I'd tap the steering wheel to a song about John's vision of Christ from Revelation, called *I, John*. So, if you need a Christmas gift idea, I guarantee you won't see *Return to Sender* on this CD.

On YouTube, one recent comment under an Elvis gospel song says, "As an atheist, all I can say is, he was the greatest gift God could give mankind!" I'm sure even John Wesley and Billy Graham would've clicked the Like button.

Ed Doney, Writer & Videographer

As we navigate the busyness of the month of December, our calendars are often filled to the brim with events, gatherings, and to-do lists. Amid the hustle and bustle, it's easy to lose sight of the true meaning of Christmas. In the midst of the whirlwind of activity, the timeless song *O Holy Night* offers us a moment of reflection.

This carol invites us to think about an ordinary night that became extraordinary because Jesus was born. It reminds us that, despite the chaos that often defines this season, the heart of Christmas lies in the simple yet wonderful message of Christ's birth.

In the middle of our jam-packed schedules and endless errands, we can find a glimmer of hope. *O Holy Night* teaches us that, just as the night sky over Bethlehem transformed into a holy sanctuary, our ordinary lives can become spaces where we encounter our amazing God.

December's frenetic pace can sometimes plunge us into darkness - the darkness of exhaustion, stress, or even spiritual emptiness. It's during these moments that Christ comes to us as a reminder that the darkness will never put out the true light of the world. Amidst the holidays, His presence remains constant and unwavering.

We can take comfort in the knowledge that we are the beloved children of God. Just as the shepherds were chosen witnesses to the miraculous birth of Jesus, we too are called to bear witness to His presence in our lives. Even when the whirlwind of December distracts us, His love and grace shine brightly, guiding us through the night like a beacon of hope.

This Christmas season, as you juggle your packed calendar and race against the clock, carry the message of *O Holy Night* with you. Remember that, in the midst of the craziness, we find the everlasting light. In the midst of doubt, we are reassured that we are children of God. In the midst of despair, we can still receive hope.

So, during the events and festivities that crowd your December calendar, take a moment to look up at the sky. Remember that the same God who filled that Bethlehem night with His glory is with you in your most chaotic moments. His presence can transform the ordinary busyness of December into a season of deep meaning and connection. May the hope that Christmas brings shine brightly in your heart and light your path throughout this season and beyond.

Schuyler Henderson, Edmond Campus Director of Youth Ministry



In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. - John 1:4-5

2020 was a challenging year for so many reasons. Covid closed schools, businesses, and churches. Around the world, people isolated themselves. We began to work from home. We taught our children at home. We worshiped at home. As the Advent season approached, we knew we needed to prepare for our family of faith to be at home and not in person for worship. We wanted to have something special for this occasion, something that would help unite us and keep the hope of Christ alive in our homes. We created an Advent Wreath to distribute to our family of faith that year. It would be the light of these candles that would represent what connected us, while we were still isolated at home.

The Advent wreath is an ancient practice of the church. Advent is the four weeks leading to the great celebration of Christmas. Each week we light one of the five candles on the wreath to remind us that, even in the cold darkness of winter, hope continues to grow in our world. Our hope is found in the arrival of the light of Christ. On that dark and lonely night in Bethlehem, the hope of the world was born. At the end of Advent, the family of faith gathers to light candles on Christmas Eve. It is the church's way to remember that one single light has now come to bring hope and light to all.

The light of the candle is one of the great symbols of hope. This is why my family decided to put our wreath in the middle of our dining room table. Our table is the center of all activity in our home. We needed, and still need the constant reminder that all the troubles in our world are not enough to overcome the power of the light of hope that entered our world in that manger in Bethlehem.

St. Francis of Assisi once said, "All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of one single candle." Covid did not bring complete darkness. All the terrible events of history have not extinguished the light of Christ in our world. This is the great gift of Christmas. We are not alone. God is with us. This light of hope shines in the darkness and illuminates our path forward. Today, I am thankful that nothing on earth or in all creation can extinguish the hope we have in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Rev. Keith King, Pastor of Worship



Sunday, December 3

Like so many of us, I love the Christmas carol, *O Holy Night*. The music is beautiful and the lyrics speak to me in a way that lifts my spirits and reminds me that at Christmas...hope appears when the Christ Child is born again in our hearts. One of my favorite lyrics from the song follows the line, *Long lay the world in sin and error pining*. The very next line is the answer to the world's problems: *Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth*.

Without the birth of Christ our souls are weighted down by the human condition. Paul sums up that condition when he says, "I can't seem to do what I know to be right and I keep on doing the evil I know to be wrong." But then Christ comes into the world reminding us that despite our sinful nature, we are still of great value to God. God loves us despite our shortcomings. He restores our souls according to the 23rd Psalm. God is our shepherd, and He reminds us we need nothing more than to be in His presence beside the still waters.

Phillip Keller was a shepherd who wrote a book entitled, *A Shepherd Looks at 23 Psalm*. In that book, he writes that sometimes when the sheep's fleece is long or heavy it can cause problems if the sheep lays down and ends up on its back. The weight of the fleece can keep the sheep from righting itself. The shepherd must come along and as Keller says, "restore the sheep," holding the animal erect and rubbing its legs until circulation is restored and it can walk on its own. Similarly, the Good Shepherd restores us, restores our souls when we falter.

Many years ago, my older brother was attending an Episcopal church in downtown Houston. He said it was their tradition for the congregation to gather in the education building before the Christmas Eve service. It was there that Mary and Joseph would ride a donkey and lead both children and adults of the church on a short walk to the sanctuary. Once everyone had entered the space, they would begin the Christmas Eve service. One year the parade was making its way to the entrance of the sanctuary when this poor old donkey collapsed and died in the doorway. What do you do when the donkey dies on Christmas Eve? My brother said, "nothing can stop Jesus from being born on this night," so the members of the church gingerly stepped over the donkey and made their way into the sanctuary where they sang the carols, heard the scriptures, and lit their candles.

O Holy Night reminds us that this is a night different from any other night. It is a night when hope is born and our souls once again feel their worth.

Rev. Dave Poteet, Pastor of Congregational Care



The song, *O Holy Night* is the epitome of the Advent season, leading up to Christmas and the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. The words, taken from a poem written by Placide Cappeau, paint an intricate picture of that extraordinary night. Personally, when I hear this beautiful song, I am instantly transported through time.

It is a dark, serene evening in the Holy Land. Imagine a barren landscape that isn't affected by the illumination of modern cities. If you have ever been able to escape large cities and have been given the gift to look up to the heavens and see the millions upon millions of stars in the sky, you can now picture the same imagery I see. The stars are shining brightly and Psalm 147:3 reminds us, *He determines the number of the stars and calls them by name.*

There is a *thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices* at the birth of Jesus Christ. A thrill of hope. I try to place myself in that moment many, many years ago and I immediately get goose bumps. Have you ever anticipated something so big and inconceivable that you were excited but didn't honestly understand the impact it would have on your life? That is how I interpret the short but powerful phrase, *thrill of hope.*

We fall on our knees in adoration and praise for the birth of Jesus. As a child, I always wondered why you would fall to your knees. Wouldn't it be painful? I never could comprehend the action to fall to my knees because a baby was born. By falling to our knees, we are showing humility to Jesus and affirmation of our hearts to our Lord. Worship takes on many forms and there is not a right or wrong way to worship. In this moment, the angels themselves lift their voices in joyous celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. The melody of their voices singing in unison is beyond compare and the purest music our ears could ever perceive.

*Fall on your knees
O hear the angel voices
O night divine
O night when Christ was born
O night divine
O night, O night divine.*

The song captures the essence of Advent, inviting us to reflect on the remarkable arrival of Jesus. It transports us to that miraculous night, encouraging us to kneel in devotion and praise, just as the angels did, as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I pray that you and your loved ones remember that on that holy, divine night our Savior was born unto us.

Jocelyn Morgan, Edmond Campus Director of Children's Ministry

Tuesday, December 5

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. - Luke 2:10

During the holidays, St. Luke's Children's Centers have many activities planned for both staff, parents, and children. Special events start in November with our All-Family Thanksgiving dinner. We invite all the parents and children from our Children's Centers to join us for a wonderful dinner prepared by our amazing kitchen staff. Our teachers serve our parents and children and then have the opportunity to sit together and share fellowship that they are not able to have on a daily basis.

As we move into December, we start the month with our Christmas Sing. This is where our classes pick songs for the children to perform and we have a special afternoon that includes parents, grandparents, and any other family or friends who can come and watch the children perform. They start learning these songs in September or October, so they are more than ready for this event. We have lots of parents recording and cheering for their children. This is such a special day and something that will be remembered for the rest of their lives.

December also brings a time for us to celebrate our teachers. Each year, we set aside an evening for our staff to come to the church, bring their significant other, and be celebrated with dinner and a Christmas Bonus as a token of our appreciation for all the hard work they have done to care for the children at the centers.

We want our staff to be able to spend time with their families and celebrate the true meaning of the Christmas season. We also want to teach our children the true meaning and story of Christmas, how Jesus was born in Bethlehem in a manger in a stable. This is done with the help of our Children's Ministry team during Chapel each week. They share with the children and our teachers the miracle of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ through stories and songs. The children enjoy this time of praise and learning and look forward to it on Wednesday mornings.

These special events and lessons are what lay the foundation for our children and encourage our staff to prepare for God's gift on Christmas.

Is there something you can do for someone in your life to lay the foundation for them to learn the true meaning of the Christmas season? I hope you, too, will take each and every opportunity to share this special season with the children around you in the same way St. Luke's shares this with our families.

Gabrielle Moon, Executive Director St. Luke's Children's Centers



*O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by thy justice here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

Many of our beloved and favored Christmas Carols center around the nighttime and darkness. Carols such as *Away in a Manger*, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, *The First Noel*, and *Silent Night* sing of the holy and sacred night when Christ was born. For me, it is poignant that Christ was not born in broad daylight when all kinds of human activity would create all kinds of distraction from this holy moment. Symbolically, Christ was born in the darkness, literally and figuratively, to shine Light on the world. It was the bright Star of Bethlehem that led the three Wise Men to the manger. In darkness, the heavenly host of angels beamed radiant light that led the shepherds to the Christ Child. The imagery of the nocturnal birth of our Savior just would not seem right in carols or on Christmas greeting cards if Christ came into a world of blazing sun and Ray Bans. Instead, God gave us His Son as the brightest Light in all of creation.

For the span of my more than forty-year music career, I have been blessed to accompany and conduct musicians performing the acclaimed composition *O Holy Night*. At St. Luke's, we have been blessed over the years to hear gifted vocalists sing this well-known piece, their beautifully trained voices adding depth and majesty to this artistic rendering of that holy night. *O Holy Night* has been arranged and recorded in numerous venues and styles, as have so many other much-loved Christmas songs. Vocal artists all over the world have contributed their varying musical genres to this one song. No matter how varying *O Holy Night* has been musically presented, the message is constant and profound: Christ was born at night as Light in a world of darkness.

Over two thousand years later, the world still lies in darkness, but the Light of Christ born on that Holy Night beams so brightly that you cannot help but feel a Thrill of Hope.

Robert Fasol, Organist and Choirmaster



One of my favorite Christmas memories was the year I wrapped “A Countdown to Christmas” with *The Twelve Books of Christmas* for my son. Every night before bed he would unwrap a book and we would read it together. Each book had a different theme and different storyline, but I found myself explaining in each book how Jesus teaches us to do these same things. One of his favorite series when he was young was “Little Blue Truck,” a series about how this little blue truck helps his friends in different situations.

The Christmas version is about the Little Blue Truck delivering Christmas trees to all his friends and then finally there is one left for him in the end. Explaining to a child the importance of sharing is hard enough, but this book not only taught the lesson of sharing with others; it also taught the importance of friendship, community, and how the simplest of acts can spread joy. The Little Blue Truck made sure his neighbors had their perfect tree before he took one for himself. This is an amazing example of what it is to be Christlike. He didn't need big extravagant gifts or a crazy busy plot, it was as simple as sharing his trees with his neighbors.

This Christmas season I hope we can all share joy in the form of a simple smile to a stranger or even a kind word to the person behind you in line at the store. Although God works through us in many extravagant ways, He can also use us in the simplest ways to make a big difference.

Taylor Easttom, Downtown Campus Director of Children's Ministry



Around five years ago, sickness had taught us a lot. We sought a new way of living and moved to a farm to share all we had learned. Now healthy, I felt God calling us to open our farm to the community, not just for events, but for Christmas. However, I admit I was also afraid because we lived in an area where most people did not seek God. It was only a few weeks before Christmas when we finally decided to trust and began the preparations for a Christmas Eve service at our home.

After hours setting up the event barn with decorations, holding the tensions of eagerness and a little bit of fear, my favorite Christmas song, *O Holy Night* began to play on my phone as I walked outside.

*Long lay the world, in sin and error pining, till he appeared,
and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices.
Fall on your knees, oh hear the angel voices.*

Already teary, I looked up and saw the most magnificent moon I have ever seen; God literally overwhelmed me by His spirit, as I fell to my knees and wept. Completely overcome with His presence, I felt God was telling me to trust in Him and this mission in our hearts. His presence offered me the most tremendous peace.

And so it was that St. Luke's on the Farm began, and after a phenomenal Christmas and Easter, we had big dreams of the next year! Yet only 9 months later, we found ourselves surrendering that dream back into God's hands, as we unexpectedly packed up to move again. I really wrestled and grieved this decision because I kept going back to that holy moment when He filled me with such peace. I didn't want to misunderstand or get it wrong. And yet ultimately, because of a life filled with reminders of His presence, including that holy night, I was also able to fully trust Him. Because I knew His spirit, I was comforted by His divine sovereignty. That moment gave me a thrill of hope that shone brighter than any confusion.

Everyone can relate to the words, *the weary world rejoices*, from *O Holy Night*. Our Father knew we would need hope, and how beautiful that He sent His son so we could experience His love in our own human way. It was His presence then, and the gift of His Holy Spirit now, that allows us to know Him, and trust Him. All throughout our everyday moments, He wants to remind you, and me, that He is with us, even when we do not understand. And it is that gift of His presence that fills us with a thrill of hope, and allows us to sing in chorus, *sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we, let all within us praise His holy name*.

Kelly Judd, Director of The Grove, Family and Couple Ministry

In the midst of the twinkling lights and festive melodies that fill the air during the Advent season, it's easy to be swept away by the hustle and bustle of the upcoming holiday. However, as followers of faith, it's crucial to intentionally carve out moments for the sacred amidst the celebrations. Let this Advent season be more than a season of presents; let it be a season of presence - the presence of the divine in our lives.

I like to think of the stillness of that holy night when the Savior was born. The shepherds, diligent in their duties, were granted a divine interruption. They were about to witness something extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. - Luke 2:8-20

When we are in the flurry of Christmas preparations, let us be like those shepherds, watchful for the moments when the divine breaks through the noise of the world into the quiet corners of our hearts. Consider the simplicity of that holy scene. God chose a humble setting to unveil His greatest gift. This Advent season let us simplify our lives to make room for the profound.

Make a conscious effort to engage in your faith. Attend a Christmas Eve service, set aside time for personal prayer and reflection, and gather with loved ones to share stories of gratitude and blessings. Let these intentional acts become sacred moments that define the true essence of this Advent season.

Dear Heavenly Father,

In the midst of the tinsel and carols, grant us the grace to pause and make space for You. May the busyness of the season not drown out the whisper of Your presence. Help us to be intentional about setting aside time for prayer, reflection, and gratitude. May our hearts be like humble mangers, ready to receive the gift of Your Son.

- Amen.

Madison Eckerson, Edmond Campus Director of Welcoming Ministries



Advent is a season of waiting, preparation, and expectation for the incarnation of the Savior, Jesus Christ. Advent means “coming.” The mysterious beauty of the incarnation, God made flesh, captivates us. Not only does this season symbolize the expectation of Jesus’s first coming but it is also a reflection of the longing of our hearts for the day when all things will be made new. The incarnation of Christ reveals this to us and is wonderfully portrayed through the age-old carol, *O Holy Night*.

I have wonderful memories of singing this beautiful song on Christmas Eve, and while there are many Advent and Christmas hymns that touch me; *O Holy Night* is the one that captures my heart. Truly, Christmas Eve would not be complete without singing *O Holy Night*. The music composition has huge swells that seem to lift you up to *where the stars are brightly shining* and carries you to the place that you want to *fall on your knees* in adoration.

One of my favorite memories took place at McFarlin Church in Norman, where we had a tradition that during the singing of this carol, as the lights dimmed, I would walk to the altar where the Christ candle held a place of honor and light the Christ candle as the music swelled to the words: *A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn*. I don’t think there was ever a year when my eyes didn’t fill with tears during that moment.

What is this *thrill of hope* that the carol speaks of? Imagine the shepherds on that holy night, tending to their flocks in the stillness of the dark night. Suddenly, the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. In that moment, the shepherds experience a thrill of hope, a sudden and overwhelming sense of expectation and anticipation.

Sometimes, hope can feel distant, like a flickering candle in the midst of darkness. But just as the shepherds experienced a thrill of hope in the presence of the divine, we too can experience hope when we draw near to God. It’s a hope that transcends our circumstances, a hope that assures us that even in our darkest moments, God is with us.

I pray that we carry with us *the thrill of hope*, sharing it with others who may be lost in the darkness. As we celebrate the birth of the One who is the source of all hope, the One who brings light into the darkness, may we be touched by the wonder of that Holy Night.

Rev. Linda Harker, Online Campus Pastor



My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors. - Luke 1:46-55

This proclamation comes after Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her she will conceive Jesus. She asks “How will this be?” and Gabriel tells her that her cousin Elizabeth, who was aging and barren, was also bearing a child. This was done so she could glimpse God’s power, and believe. Mary rushed to see her cousin, and the child in Elizabeth’s womb leapt for joy. This child was John the Baptist. Mary knew then that the Lord would fulfill His promise to her and proclaimed “My soul glorifies the lord.” How impossible does all this sound? A virgin and a woman of 88 years would conceive? An unborn child (John) would know the presence of Christ in Mary, and spend his life preparing the way for Him? God would take on our lowly state in order to heal us and die for us? Yet we know it to be true.

This verse is often called “Mary’s Song.” I like to think of it as the first Christmas carol. All those after it echo the same themes of joy and great promise beyond our understanding. It reminds me of the line in *O Holy Night: A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.* No matter how uncertain the night may be, we can hold on to the promise of a glorious morning. Christ’s birth brings us renewal. A time when the mighty are brought low and the humble are lifted up. When wrongs are made right and that which is impossible becomes reality. His mercy is yours, now and forever, and He has done great things for you.

Do you keep faith in God’s promises, even when they seem impossible? Do you rejoice, even when you’re weary? I pray that you have eyes like Mary. That no matter how dark and uncertain the night, you see the True Light of the world and glorify His holy name.

George Soter, Director of The Table

There is joy and excitement in the sights and sounds of Christmas all around us. Beautiful decorations and lights on homes, businesses, parks, and streets. The calendar fills up with special events in our community and churches or with family and friends. If we look around, we see that for many there is a great anticipation and a hopeful expectancy of something good to celebrate and treasures to unpack during this season.

But our world is also weary and troubled, and there are times that the season doesn't feel as joyful, exciting, or merry as we would want to feel. Conflict in our world as well as personal struggles, financial strain, loss and change, relationship challenges, health circumstances, and even the busyness of the holiday season bring a weariness to our bodies, our minds, and our souls. A person of faith may know that there is a reason to celebrate, but sometimes these circumstances can drain the joy from any of us.

The promises of Advent remind us that hope, joy, peace, and love are all around us. We are reminded that God is always present and hope is always something that we can grab hold of, but when we are weary, it is sometimes hard to find. I want to encourage you to take a posture or position to seek and discover more fully these promises in your life. God is with us but we must have eyes to see and a heart that is open.

The lyrics in the beloved song of worship *O Holy Night* tell us to *fall on your knees and before Him lowly bend*. There are other words of posture like *by His cradle we stand*. These physical and spiritual positions are a true response of encountering the glory and majesty of God's work in the world through Jesus. But they are also an invitation to experience God's presence more fully.

Take the time to be near to God. Bow in humility and declare His goodness and majesty. Look up in reverence to the Creator of the universe while lifting your hands and your hearts to yield to God's way. A humble prayer, a breath of peace, reaching up in praise, reaching out in hope. Put your body and your spirit in a position and a posture to encounter the living God this season. As the song continues *Let all within us praise His holy name. Christ is the Lord! O praise His name forever! His power and glory evermore proclaim!*

Amy Givens, Director of Youth Ministry and Discipleship



Traditions are my favorite part of the Christmas season. Every year, I watch the same holiday movies, eat the same Christmas Eve meal, and visit the same family members on Christmas Day.

A particular tradition that has always struck me for its beauty and simplicity is the Norwegian tradition of Santa Lucia Day, held every year on December 13th. It is told that Saint Lucy, a Sicilian woman, wore a laurel wreath crown adorned with candles to light the way for persecuted Christians hiding in the darkened tunnels of Italy. The Scandinavian version says that she was a young woman who delivered baked goods to surrounding farms on the longest night of the year, what was then believed to be December 13, wearing a white robe, red sash, and a crown of lights, with a torch lighting her path. Santa Lucia Day is now a Norwegian tradition often celebrated in churches, family gatherings, and town squares, where a procession of girls is led by a young woman dressed as Saint Lucy with a white robe, red sash, and crown of lights. The girls carry baskets of baked goods and hot coffee to deliver to the devoted onlookers.

Saint Lucy represents light and hope in a dark and weary world. Even her name shares the same origin as the Latin *lux*, meaning *light* - her very name sends a message of hope in the darkest of seasons.

I can't help but compare Saint Lucy to other figures in the Bible. Her white robe and red sash, white for purity and red for royalty, harkens to a beautiful heavenly angel delivering messages of hope, such as the angel Gabriel in giving the news of Jesus' birth to Mary of Nazareth. I also think of the bright Star of Bethlehem that led the wise men to visit the young Jesus, the Savior of all men. But perhaps the greatest comparison would be that of the baby Jesus, fully God and fully man, who was born of a virgin in a manger to be the Lamb of God and the Savior of all people. Indeed, the most marvelous light of all!

As we reflect on this Christmas season, prepare your heart for the luminous message of hope that Jesus' birth brings: He is the Light of the World that brings peace, joy, love, and everlasting life to all. Perhaps on this December 13, we can reflect on the meaning of Saint Lucy and her symbol of light in a world that yearns for peace, forgiveness, and hope.

Abigail Pappas, El Sistema Oklahoma, Director of Development

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. - Luke 2:7

When I was growing up, the Christmas story always bothered me that the innkeeper couldn't find a place for Mary and Joseph to stay. Standing in front of him was a pregnant woman about to give birth to her first son and a better place couldn't be found than a barn for her to stay in? It seemed to me that he could have found more mercy in his heart and better accommodations for her.

Truthfully, the Christmas story never tells us that the innkeeper put them in a barn. Probably it was more of a cave than a barn, which would provide more privacy for Mary and Joseph than the inn would have where men and women were often separated and sleeping in large rooms with lots of other people. The scripture never tells us that there was an innkeeper. We are told there was no room in the inn so we assume there must have been an innkeeper. Now when I read the story, I have come to believe that the innkeeper was a person of compassion and mercy who provided them with the best accommodations they could offer.

Sometimes we can look at our lives and wonder what kind of difference we have really made. Will anyone remember us? If so, what will they say about us? One night, 2,000 years ago, an innkeeper saw two traveling strangers in need and offered to help in the best way they could. Today, 2,000 years later, we don't know the name of this innkeeper or anything about them, but we know the compassion that was shown. That small act of compassion paved the way for the Light to enter the darkness of the world that has been shining ever since.

Will people remember your name 2,000 years from now? Maybe. Maybe not. But, I can promise if you do something generous and compassionate for a stranger today your life will hold meaning for that person. The mercy you show will have a ripple effect that will last for years to come, and you can help bring light to the darkness.

Rev. Josh Attaway, Edmond Campus Pastor



Christmas is one of my favorite times of year due, in large part, to the music! I've played and sung Christmas music every year since I was a child and so many of the songs never get old. As an adult, the music of Advent is especially meaningful. Advent is such a beautiful season of the church calendar as we reflect on the coming of Emmanuel - God with us.

A Christmas carol that has remained one of my favorites since childhood is *O Holy Night*, a beloved 'standard' in the Christmas music repertoire. As a musician, I am moved by the impressive vocal range and beautiful harmonies, demanding respectable vocal skill to perform. As a Christian, however, I am more deeply moved by the message of the song. Unlike many of our favorite Christmas hymns that proclaim the joys of our newborn Savior, *O Holy Night* tells a story of a broken and weary world whose hope is restored by a humble child in a manger.

The third verse is particularly moving: *Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love, and His gospel is peace. Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother, and in His name all oppression shall cease.* Though we may live in a world full of suffering and inequality, we are reminded that Christ has taught us how to love, sharing with us the good news that is His enduring peace. We can rejoice as God's family, celebrating *the thrill of hope* that Christ brings to us in Advent, knowing *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* - Galatians 3:28 With the many people we encounter during the holiday season, I hope we can all enjoy sharing love and peace with everyone, just as Christ has shown us!

Dr. Hayden Coie, Worship and Music Associate

My mom was one of 10 children, so I have many aunts, uncles, and cousins. Some of my favorite Christmas memories are when we gathered at my grandparent's modest home to celebrate. We'd have a turkey dinner, prepared by my grandmother and the other women in the family. I always sat at the "kid's table" and loved sharing a meal with my cousins. This time spent with family was priceless!

Our family had these annual gatherings at the request of my grandmother, the true matriarch of the family. She was a kind, loving woman and lived her life by the Bible. My grandfather was the fun one, always looking for ways to entertain others. He liked playing games and enjoyed practical jokes. They both loved spending time with family!

My grandparents were married over 50 years and endured struggles with finances, health, and other challenges. They were biological parents to six children and adopted my grandfather's four nieces and nephews, all under the age of four, when their parents both passed away. Other family members were going to separate the four of them, and my grandfather wouldn't hear of it. He drove out to California and his family of eight, soon became a family of twelve. The church people in the town where they lived built two extra bedrooms and another bathroom for them. My grandparents were always so grateful for this labor of time and love!

I can see how very blessed I was by these two people. We lived about a football field away from them, so they played an important role in my upbringing, as well as my five siblings. They didn't have much money, but they invested a lot of time in their family. They attended ballgames and concerts, and always supported us in every good thing we did.

During this Advent season, is there anyone who would benefit from your gift of time? It's a simple thing, but one that can make a lasting impact.

Susan Meharg, Executive Assistant to Executive Team



I have a confession to make: I have not once in all of my Advent Seasons with St. Luke's, lit a single candle on the Advent wreath. It is not because I don't love the practice or celebration of Advent, or even that I am forgetful. The truth is that I am currently in the season of my life where I have a wild 2-year-old and a brand new baby who have blessed our family immensely. With that comes my full attention to the point where I am not even sure how we will resurrect our tree this year, much less take a moment to reflect on the birth of our Savior with the intimate lighting of our precious candles.

And yet, in this season of uncertainties, messes, and foggy-headedness, I am reminded that Jesus meets us where we are. The joy of celebrating His birth is something I experience in the music we sing on Sundays and during the Christmas Eve service. It is in the communal meals we share with family members, and the reading of the Christmas story in the book of Matthew and Luke. I also experience the joy through my daughter's eyes as she discovers Christmas as only a toddler can. Keller loves St. Luke's and she especially loves to dance to the music.

This has been the most surprising way that my heart is renewed during Advent. Seeing how children discover the wonderment of the season allows my inner child to experience it right along with them. Sometimes God has a way of giving us new eyes and new perspectives to see His glory anew. I am truly looking forward to the ways He will ignite my soul this Advent season and I pray He ignites you and graces you with new perspective.

Kelsey Paul, Downtown LifeLight Worship Leader, Director of Arts Education

My husband and I have recently set a goal to visit as many state and national parks as we can. We have had all sorts of amazing adventures that have included day trips to parks nearby and longer road adventures to national parks on our bucket list.

Our recent trips have taken us to the Hoodoos of Bryce Canyon National Park and the desolate fields of pinon, cliffrose, and mesquite throughout the Mojave Desert leading into Zion National Park. One thing that was extra special was recently viewing the Harvest Moon from the absolute darkness of an isolated national park. I think my city living had made me forget what it is like to see a night sky in a really dark place. Absolutely amazing! It took my breath away to see so much when there was not one artificial light around, only the reflective light from the moon and stars!

When my sister and brother and I were growing up, we would sometimes lay outside on a quilt on a dark night, and we would just look at the sky. No television, no phone, no activity, no plan - we would just look up and see what we could see. My dad would point out the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, the North Star and so many other things - I wasn't always certain that I could really see the specific configuration he saw. (I always wondered, what's a dipper anyway?) However, I just loved that he knew everything and could point them out and it was so dark that we could see the millions of bright objects in the sky.

Those nights, just staring into the sky and then again recently looking at the moon and stars in a dark space without a light visible on the entire horizon might have been what it was like when a beautiful star shone in the sky to tell of Jesus' birth. Can you imagine the totally dark sky and the amazingly bright star above. How exciting, how frightening, how peaceful and how daunting it would have been to be told "follow that star to the Savior!"

The next adventure on our travel list is to Death Valley National Park - they say nights there are so dark that the park is classified as a Gold Tier - the highest darkness level given by the International Dark-Sky Association. Many celestial objects viewed from there are not visible anywhere else in the world! I can't wait - the light in pure darkness is truly sacred. If you can, drive away from the lights of the city some clear evening and spend a moment just sitting in the darkness looking into the sky. Think on these words, they can remind us that any night can be a holy night:

*O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
O holy night, O holy night, O night divine!*

Lori Hall, Executive Director of Missions



I have been blessed to lead two St. Luke's trips to the Holy Land. My favorite places to visit are the Sea of Galilee and surrounding areas. They are not only more rural settings, but they are less crowded and quieter. When you visit holy sites in Jerusalem, there are more people and I find it a bit more difficult to have a reflective moment amidst the noise and busyness. But, the noise, people, and busyness were all part of life during the time of Christ.

Whenever we imagine the "perfect Christmas," we sometimes think of a quiet scene where everything in the house is perfectly in place, perfectly decorated, and perfectly serene. But is that really the goal of Christmas, let alone realistic?

We look at a Nativity scene and think it is the perfect example of a tranquil Christmas setting. The reality is that the first Christmas was every bit as noisy and chaotic as the ones we experience today. Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem to register for the governmental census. People from all over were gathering in the small town to take part. Crying babies, dogs barking, and families who hadn't seen each other in some time celebrating during reunions. Mary and Joseph found that the inn was full and they were given a stable space. It wouldn't be perfectly clean or serene. The animals would have shared their displeasure having to share their stable with strangers. And certainly, the newborn Jesus would have voiced His own displeasure from time to time. But Mary and Joseph had never been looking to have a perfect getaway, they were focused on the birth of their child.

As we get closer to Christmas, it is helpful to remember the point of the holiday. Our goal is to celebrate the birth of Jesus and be with loved ones. Don't let a false image of perfection and serenity get in the way of a memorable Christmas. Focus on what matters - loving God and loving all!

Rev. Wendy Lambert, Senior Executive Pastor



In a recent episode of one of my favorite podcasts, *Everything Happens with Kate Bowler*: Kate, author and professor at Duke University's School of Divinity, interviews Angela Williams, current President and CEO of United Way Worldwide. When asked about the values that guide her work, Angela mentioned joy. She maintains the idea that when we live a life that is defined by the service and love of others, it opens up our capacity for joy.

This made me think of the line in *O Holy Night, A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices*. I want to focus specifically on the latter part of this line, *the weary world rejoices*. I have to think that when faced with seemingly all of the world's problems, Angela Williams can at times feel weary. Yet she continues to choose joy. Not only that, but this heavy work that she does, day in and day out, not only sustains her capacity for joy, it expands it.

If you've been around St. Luke's long, you've likely heard about our commitment to coordinate and expand Meals on Wheels in Oklahoma City. You've probably seen the videos in worship that highlight some of our clients and tell the beautiful stories of how their lives have been changed by the program. The part we don't always think about is that for every one of these "afters," there is also a "before." Listening to people's heartbreaking stories is a big part of my job. So many of our clients are in unthinkable hard situations and have little or no family around to support them. There have been many times that I've hung up the phone with someone and felt truly weary. However, due to the generosity of the St. Luke's family of faith, another component of my job is getting to share with people that we can provide them with help. The meals we bring and the visits we share with our clients bring such joy to them in times when they feel despair.

As I enter my fifth year of working with our Meals on Wheels program, I am reminded of the importance of choosing and sharing joy. I have realized that there will always be times we feel weary, but when we rejoice in the midst of that weariness, that is when we truly experience and share the light of Christ.

Morgan Jones, Associate Director of Meals on Wheels Oklahoma City



About two years ago, I came across a children's book entitled *Be Kind* that I purchased on a whim. It has made its way into a regular rotation of nightly reading with our girls.

In the book, the child narrator is describing ways that you can be kind to others: "You can listen to Aunt Franny's stories (even though you have heard them 1,000 times before)" and last night this spurred a thought for me.

Oftentimes my husband, grandparents, etc. will tell me stories over and over again. Typically, I zone out and don't focus on what they are telling me after the second or third time I've heard the story. I tend to get frustrated or agitated-though I know this is not the correct attitude to have, but I had never heard it referred to as an act of kindness.

Each Christmas we hear the story of Christ's birth and how amazing it is, but how many times do we zone out and not focus on the story because we hear it each year? How often do we make lists in our head of things we need to be doing when we finish at church?

I encourage you this Christmas, to posture yourself in an act of kindness toward God by giving Him your time and attention His story deserves.

Mandi Coleman, Director St. Luke's Children Center



As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. - Psalm 42:1

When listening to my favorite Christmas carol, *O Holy Night*, I tend to hear the beauty in the lyrics worshiping God: *Fall on your knees* and *Let all within us praise His Holy Name* are two of my favorite lines. In fact, that's what I initially planned to write about.

But then something new stuck out to me. Something that has always been there, but chose to reveal itself to me as I was writing.

*Long lay the world, in sin and error, pining
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.*

The soul felt its worth. How often do we question our worth in this world? Our worth in our relationships, our abilities, our identity?

Through Jesus' birth, the soul has found its worth. The soul felt, knew, acknowledged, accepted its worth, its value. Yet so many have never heard this message of their worth and value as children of God.

God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but so the world might be saved through him. - John 3:17 God sent the Son because we're worth the journey, we're worth the effort. In the eyes of God, you and I matter.

It's remarkable to me to find this message hidden in *O Holy Night*, given that the text was written by poet Placide Cappeau, a professed atheist. Cappeau was commissioned to write a Christmas poem, "Cantique de Noël," for his native town Roquemaure, France in 1843. How good is our God, that He would use someone like Cappeau to inspire all the generations to come. And yet, that's what Christ's birth does in the world, that's what happens when someone hears this message and feels it in the depths of one's soul. Something new comes into being: we discover who we are in God's eyes, that we are people of extraordinary worth, whose lives, by grace, can be beautiful expressions of God's glory.

So, when doubts assail, when life's challenges overwhelm, and when the world tries to diminish your worth, hold fast to the unshakable truth that your soul is of immeasurable value in the eyes of the Almighty. You are not forgotten; you are not insignificant. You are known, cherished, and deeply loved.

Heavenly Father, I am so grateful for Your love. Thank you for Your blessed assurance, that my soul's worth is eternally established in You. Help me to always walk in the knowledge that I am a beloved child of God, and may this truth empower me to live a life filled with purpose, joy, and unwavering faith. - Amen.

Ashley Carr Soter, Director of Young Adult Ministries



One of my favorite childhood memories of Christmas is the church candy bags given out at the small church where I grew up. Every year on the Sunday closest to Christmas, children and adults alike were handed a brown paper bag they left church. I loved the crinkle of the bag as I opened it, eager to see what treats were inside. There would always be an apple and an orange, raw walnuts, pecans, almonds, and always a few funny-looking Brazil nuts. I usually gave the fruit and nuts to my grandma. I was interested in the real prizes: hard Christmas candies and a candy bar, seemingly either a Mounds or an Almond Joy.

The origin of this tradition is not clear, but some historians trace it back to the 18th century, when German immigrants brought the custom of giving fruits and nuts to their children on Christmas Eve. They would wrap them in paper or cloth and hang them on the tree or place them under the pillow.

Others suggest that the candy bags were inspired by the legend of Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children, who was known for his generosity and kindness. According to one story, Saint Nicholas secretly threw three bags of gold coins into the house of a poor man who had three daughters. The bags landed in the stockings that the girls had hung by the fireplace to dry. The next morning, the girls found the gold and were overjoyed. This story gave rise to the tradition of hanging stockings and filling them with gifts on Christmas Eve.

The candy bags make me think of the song *O Holy Night*. The lyrics say, *A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn*. That's how I felt when I opened my candy bag: a thrill of hope and joy. I knew that Christmas was not just about candy and presents, but about the birth of Jesus, who came to save us from our sins and give us eternal life. He was the greatest gift of all, and the reason we celebrated.

We see a similar thrill when we deliver more than 750 blizzard boxes to seniors receiving Meals on Wheels. Instead of candy and nuts, they are full of non-perishable food items seniors can use in case of a winter storm or emergency that prevents the regular delivery of hot meals. They are meant to provide nutrition and comfort to seniors who might otherwise go hungry or feel isolated. It's just one of the many ways the St. Luke's family of faith shares God's love and brings hope to the world.

Chris Lambert, Director Meals on Wheels Oklahoma City

My favorite moments of Christmas Eve are listening to *O Holy Night* and then getting to stand next to my mom as we all sing, *Silent Night*. Both carols help me to experience the true meaning of Christmas. *O Holy Night* shares the message that the birth of Jesus delivers the world from oppression and sin. *Silent Night* speaks to the peace, quiet, and holiness of the night that Christ was born. It might seem that the two contradict each other *Silent Night* being about the quiet and stillness, and *O Holy Night* is talking about the angel voices and our voices singing hymns of joy. But both songs show how Christmas was then and is now.

That first Christmas was likely a stressful day for Mary and Joseph. First, their long travel to get to Bethlehem, then their attempts to find lodging, finally, having to face giving birth in a stable. With all the noise of the world around them, they found that none of that mattered when Jesus was born.

O Holy Night is the song we sing as we set aside the pains and struggles we've carried and approach the manger. *Silent Night* is the message for when we are with Jesus and we recognize that nothing else matters. As we worship and come together to sing Christmas carols, and share the message of Love born on Christmas, I encourage you to experience the Christmas story in your heart. Let the noise and busyness of life be set aside as you approach the manger and embrace the peace and holiness that Jesus came to bring to all.

Brooks Lambert, Ministry Intern



Christmas Eve

CANDLELIGHT SERVICES

Downtown Campus

222 N.W. 15th Street, Oklahoma City, 73103

- 11 a.m. Traditional Candlelight Service
- 2 p.m. Traditional Candlelight Service
- 4:30 p.m. Family Candlelight Service
- 6:30 p.m. Traditional Candlelight Service

Edmond Campus

900 N. Sooner Road, Edmond, OK 73134

- 11 a.m. Family Candlelight Service
- 4 p.m. Family Candlelight Service
- 6:30 p.m. Traditional Candlelight Service
- 11 p.m. Midnight Candlelight Service

Local Television Services

- 10:35 p.m. News Channel 4

Online Campus

All services available at
stlukesokc.org/live

STLUKESOKC.ORG/CHRISTMASEVE



Downtown Campus

222 NW 15th St.
Oklahoma City, OK 73103
(405) 232-1371

Edmond Campus

900 N. Sooner Rd.
Edmond, OK 73034
(405) 285-2002

Online Campus

stlukesokc.org/live

stlukesokc.org

