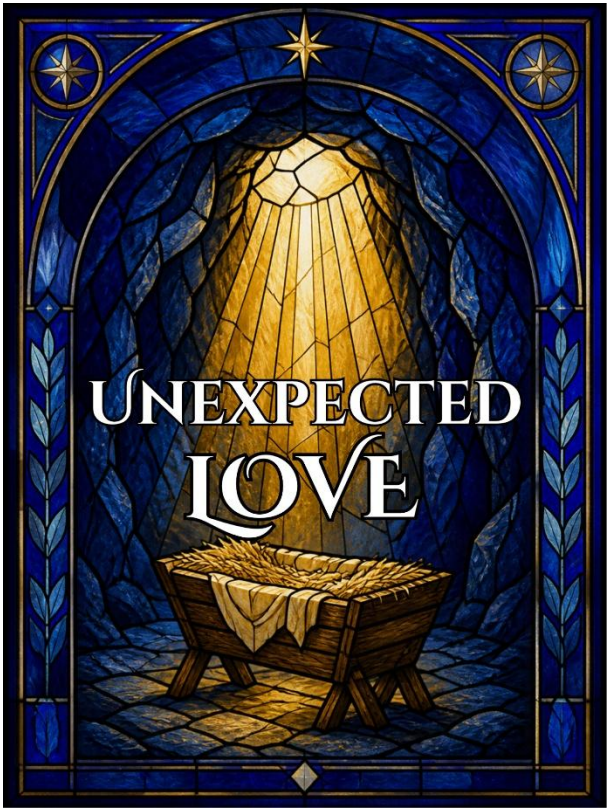


Personal Reflections

from the

St. Andrew's United Methodist Church Family

for

Advent 2026

The Advent season, while filled with expected traditions and customs, is also filled with surprises. The gifts, the visitors, the pop-in relatives, and the out-of-the-norm events require constant adjustments to our daily routines. But surprise is totally predictable. Because the season is unique, we both *expect* interruptions to our daily routines and at the same time are *surprised* when they happen.

God's love is like that. We are sure that God loves us, but we are surprised when we experience that love in unexpected ways at unexpected times. Usually when we need it the most.

A Messiah had been anticipated for many generations, but when Christ was finally born there was amazement … and surprise. The Messiah was expected "someday" but certainly not in the form of a baby boy on a lowly bed of straw!

Isn't it wonderful how God gifts us with what we expect but not when and how we expect it? Sometimes the surprise manifestation of his love is cause for a simple smile and a nod and sometimes it is cause for a life change. Which will it be for you this Advent season?

Advent Prayer

Gracious God,

Fill me this day with the power of your love. Remind me that your love is constant and pure and given by grace. Let your word guide my understanding of your greatest gift, Jesus Christ.

Help me this day to embrace the marvelous surprise of your steadfast love when I least expect it.

Amen

Contributors

Unexpected Hope (Prophecy)

Tony Iannitelli	Isaiah 64:4	5
Julie Miller	Isaiah 64:3	6
Trina McAlister	Mark 13:26,32	7
Georgia Ford	Isaiah 43:19	8
Jerry Parker	Micah 5:2	10
Marcy Brennan	Isaiah 7:14	11
Karen Agnew	Psalm 126:5	12

Unexpected Peace (Promise)

Jerry Narretta	Isaiah 40:3-5	14
Susie Hahn	Mark 1:7-8	15
Charleigh Hale	2 Peter 3:13	16
Debbie Calkins	Luke 1:30-33	17
Shane Morrison	Isaiah 61:11	18
Patricia Corkern	Psalm 37:7	19
Jonathan Preedom	Habakkuk 2:3	20
Rev. Drew Sutton	Isaiah 61:4	21

Unexpected Joy (Preparation)

Marty Ducote	Romans 8:25	23
Jacob Meyer	1 Thessalonians 5:23-24	24
Ainsley Hale	2 Peter 3:14-15	25
Mark Goldberger	1 Corinthians 1:5-7	26

Unexpected Love (Proclamation)

Denise Ray	1 John 4:9-10	28
Joyce Schoonmaker	Titus 3:4-6	29
Cat Pitre	Luke 1:46,51-55	30
Caitlin Narretta	John 3:16	32
Tiffany Hincks	John 1:14	33
Kelly Meyer	Luke 2:11	34
Laura Cobb	Isaiah 9:2	35
Karen Agnew	Isaiah 9:6	36


UNEXPECTED
HOPE

Day 1 – Sunday, November 29

From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.

Isaiah 64:4

Isaiah offers these words in the middle of a passage of communal lament, pleading with God to intervene after the defeat of Israel and the destruction of the temple. It looks like YHWH's promises to Moses, Abraham and David were completely undone. But Isaiah doesn't sit in fear or resignation. Isaiah, instead, reminds himself and the people that God works for those who wait – in contrast to any other idols or powers in the world.

Isaiah reminds us how much of the Jesus story was unexpected. The birth in Bethlehem to a young couple on the road, the lack of pomp and circumstance surrounding this heavenly king in the line of David … these are true every Christmas. You and I may be defeated and the things we thought utterly dependable may be utterly destroyed, but God still works and we are called to wait with faith and patience.

Tony Iannitelli

Day 2 – Monday, November 30

When you came down long ago, you did awesome deeds beyond our highest expectations. And oh, the mountains quaked!

Isaiah 64:3 (NLT)

To me God is a God of big love and it often comes in unexpected ways. I've known since I was a preteen that it would be very difficult or impossible for me to have children. I relate to Abraham's wife Sarah very much. It didn't really hit me until I was an adult how painful that can be sometimes.

When my oldest brother got married, they named me godmother to their oldest child Lindsey. I was 16 or 17 and so thrilled. When Mom and Dad would babysit, I would carry her everywhere like she was mine and we have always had a special bond. I also have a nephew who was born on my 20th birthday. He's always been my birthday bud. God blessed me with 15 nieces and nephews and now 20 and counting great nieces and nephews. More than I could have ever asked for or expected.

I was one of the first people Lindsey told when she found out she was having her baby. Beyond my own family I was blessed for a season to teach the 3-year-old Sunday school class and watch those babies grow in faith and strength into beautiful men and women.

My mountain was quaked and moved by the abundance with which God blessed me in an area of my life I thought was lost. I encourage you this season to be open to all the big and small unexpected ways God is going to show his love for you.

Julie Miller

Day 3 – Tuesday, December 1

"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.

Mark 13:26,32

I receive so much of my worship through song. I love listening to K-Love and hearing about the love of Jesus expressed through lyrics and singing in the praise band during the 9:00 service. This scripture reminds me of the lyrics to the song by Hillsong, "Hosanna":

> *"I see the King of glory, coming on the clouds with fire, the whole earth shakes, the whole earth shakes. I see his love and mercy washing over all our sin, the people sing, the people sing."*

It is a great reminder of his love for us and that he is one day sending his Son back for all believers to take us to our eternal home. I am grateful for that promise and that God loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us and is sending him back so that we can rest eternally with him.

Trina McAlister

Day 4 – Wednesday, December 2

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:19

I love the sights and sounds and smells of Christmas – the lights, decorations, and cheesy songs, as well as the beautiful sacred music, fresh cut greenery and mulberry scented candles.

And I have always loved Christmas trees. When I was growing up in the tiny town of War, WV, my brother and I were in charge of picking out, setting up and decorating our tree. Our Mom, a single mother and teacher, was working through the holidays at a dress shop one year, so my brother and I were on our own!

We selected a tree and took it home, but it was too big for the stand. My brother told me to hold it upright while he went to the hardware store to get wire to anchor it to the window casings (yes, we drilled holes in the window casings!). Unfortunately for me, while he was shopping, he was distracted by a neighborhood snowball fight and forgot about me holding the tree for about an hour. That story has endured in our family for 60 years!



Fast forward to November and December 2018. That was the year that my husband, David, had several back surgeries followed by weeks in a rehab hospital during Thanksgiving and early December. There would be no tree this year – or so I thought.

One evening when I got home from the hospital, I found a box on the front doorstep. I brought it inside and opened it to find a 3½ foot pre-lit artificial tree, topped with a Santa hat.

Enclosed was a note from my brother saying, “couldn’t bear for you to be without a Christmas tree.” I smiled through the tears.

Those weeks when David was hospitalized and learning to walk again had, at times, felt to me as if I were in the “deserts of the wilderness” referenced in the Isaiah scripture. I was weary and scared yet always counting on God to see us through this. Unexpected love came to me when I needed it most – in the form of an artificial Christmas tree from my brother!

Georgia Ford

Day 5 – Thursday, December 3

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

Micah 5:2

God dreamed a dream. It was not a fantasy, nor was it wishful thinking. God's dream was about his overflowing love and his plan to permeate the universe with righteousness. As Micah the prophet explained, it was a dream of swords being made into plowshares, of everlasting peace, and the Lord's rule over the nations (Micah 4:3-4).

Bethlehem had been the birthplace of King David. God had promised David that he would build a house for him, that his descendent would sit on his throne. So, true to his word and committed to his dream, God chose this humble location as the birthplace of his Son who was David's descendant. God loved humanity so much that he became one of us in Bethlehem.

During this season, let us consider God's dream and the words from the Christmas hymn:

> *Oh, little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie … Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light … For Christ is born of Mary … Oh, morning stars together proclaim thy holy birth and praises sing to God the king and peace to men on earth.*

Jerry Parker

Day 6 – Friday, December 4

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.

Isaiah 7:14

I don't make a habit of asking God for signs, but I sure do receive them. Because I don't usually ask for one, when a sign shows up it is unexpected. One time I was visiting a beloved member of our congregation who was nearing the end of her days in a nursing home. She kept asking why God didn't just take her; why did he let her linger here when she would be so happy in heaven with him? I tried to tell her we all appreciated her daily prayers and her very presence, so we were glad she was still here. I don't think I convinced her.

Before I left, my friend's roommate was wheeled into the room, and my friend whispered to me, "They keep bringing me new roommates and every one of them asks me about the Bible I am always reading. Then they ask me about God. Can you believe so many people in here don't know God?"

There was her sign … mine, too. THAT'S why God still needed her exactly where she was. Who knows how many roommates (and others) were introduced to God before my friend was called home? God gave us the answer to her question, and it was totally unexpected, although right there in front of both of us. My friend and I parted that day filled with love and peace. She with a sense of purpose and me with an unexpected sign of God's presence.

The sign God gave Isaiah was that he would always be present with his people through a woman and her child. Of course, we understand the woman and child to be Mary and Jesus – Immanuel – God with us. What a wonderful gift. Unexpected? Only because we are pleasantly surprised every day by God's reminders – signs – of his everlasting presence with us.

Marcy Brennan

Day 7 – Saturday, December 5

May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

Psalm 126:5

Several years ago my brother's wife passed away. She was in her late 40s and had significant health issues. Even so, her death was unexpected and sent my brother into a tailspin. There were many, many tears shed, and questions of where God was during this time of sorrow. I tried to comfort my brother in his grief, offering what I could, but not sure I was really making a difference.

About a year and a half after my brother's wife passed away, he remarried and asked me to be his "Best Person." He said he did so in appreciation of the help I gave him through the most difficult period of his life. The tears shed that day were full of joy!

I had been uncertain whether I was helping, thinking others were much more equipped to handle his questions and worrying I was not giving him what he needed. But my brother's way of letting me know God had me right where I was needed was through asking me to stand beside him on a day of great happiness, just as I had stood beside him during his grief.

God took my feeble attempts to help my brother and turned them into exactly what was needed at the time. We can trust that God will also take other's offerings to us and make something beautiful. And the joyful shouts will follow!

Karen Agnew


Unexpected
Peace

Day 8 – Sunday, December 6

A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Isaiah 40:3-5

Having a house full of four kids can sometimes be pretty wild. At any given moment one kid can be screaming, one can be crying, one can be laughing, and the other can be off on their own not paying any attention to anything.

There will be times where we are at our lowest, and others where we feel like we're on top of the world.

This is a great representation of the verse when it states that every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low. While our feelings may change, one thing remains the same. Jesus loves us at all times. He is our rock that guides us through life. As long as we put our faith in him, both in times of sorrow and happiness, we will one day walk alongside him.

Jerry Narretta

Day 9 – Monday, December 7

He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Mark 1:7-8

In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit was only given to a few people to perform a specific calling and usually only given for short periods of time. John the Baptist announced that a powerful one is coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. I'm sure they didn't fully understand what he was saying at the time; however, when the Spirit did come at Pentecost they were surprised and amazed.

Think back to a time when you felt the Holy Spirit working within and through you. Maybe you felt peace in the middle of craziness, or you felt patient when you knew you would have lost it in the past. Maybe you felt a love for someone unlovable or received a direct answer to a question. What a mighty God we serve!

Susie Hahn

Day 10 – Tuesday, December 8

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

2 Peter 3:13

To me, this Bible verse represents the love God has for all of his children. Despite all of our sins and wrongdoings, we are still promised acceptance into Heaven, assuming we accept Jesus as our savior. This excerpt is a prime example of God's unconditional love. We don't have to earn our way into Heaven. Instead, we are promised it. This verse also provides hope that one day the pain and suffering of this earth might be exchanged for the peace and righteousness of Heaven. It personally gives me hope and excitement that one day I will be reunited with my loved ones who have gone before me. Sometimes when I am overwhelmed with grief for my grandparents – that I will become a person that they will never meet, make a family that they will never hug, and accomplish things they will never know about – knowing that I will someday see them again in Heaven gives me immense comfort.

Charleigh Hale

Day 11 – Wednesday, December 9

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Luke 1:30-33

This past summer, my 3-year-old granddaughter and 8 other kids had their first swimming lessons. The plan was for the kids to line up near the pool's edge, and one by one jump in the pool into the arms of a waiting instructor. A few kids were fearless and jumped right in, but most kids were afraid, unsure if this was a wise plan. My granddaughter was one of the fearful ones. But with lots of patience and encouragement from her instructors, she finally jumped in. The look on her face after she surfaced was one of pure joy.

The first words Mary heard from the angel were "Do not be afraid." But I wonder if Mary was fearful at first, just like all of us when we're faced with a new and uncertain situation. But God is like our swimming instructor, loving us and encouraging us with open arms. Waiting for us to trust him and jump in.

Debbie Calkins

Day 12 – Thursday, December 10

For as the earth brings forth its shoots
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Isaiah 61:11

Every year I'm asked to write an Advent Devotional and I become stressed that I may interpret the verse in some left-field or off-the-wall way. This year was less stressful; we have been studying Revelation in the Transitions Sunday School class. I've been forced to look deeper at verses since John uses so much symbolism in this book.

When I read Isaiah 61:11 I see God's creation of the world and of us as God sowing a garden. I see Jesus' humanity as something that was sown in the garden and then springs up! I see Jesus providing nourishment for us, as well as us providing nourishment for the world through Jesus. I see us praising Jesus for what he did for us, and I see the world praising Jesus due to the things we can do through his power and love.

The layers in this one verse are many and I feel God's love by seeing all the things he is willing to do for and through me and for others. I hope to be a worthy example of his love for all people and be a spring of praise to him.

Shane Morrison

Day 13 – Friday, December 11

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.

Psalm 37:7

Several months ago, I was taking a medication that made me extremely nauseated. I went to my pharmacy to pick up a prescription and perhaps find something that would help alleviate the nausea. As I was leaving, the nausea became increasingly worse, to the point where I was shaking uncontrollably. Hanging onto shelves, I made my way to the front of the store, quite sure all the shelves would come crashing down, and me with them.

I stood there looking at my car, knowing I would never make it that far without falling. All of a sudden, an arm was offered to me and a voice said, "M'lady, let me help you to your car." How did a stranger know I needed to get to my car? ***Who knew indeed?*** I gratefully accepted the offer of help and said thank you. And this same voice said to me, "***We are put on this earth to help people, and if we don't, what good are we?***" Words I will never forget.

As we neared my car, I asked his name and he told me it was Mel. Mel saw to it that I got safely in my car, and as I turned once again to thank him, he had vanished.

God knew I was in trouble that day, and he had sent his angel to help me. God gave me his ***unexpected love*** when I needed it the most, and I will forever believe that I have a very special guardian angel named Mel.

Patricia Corkern

Day 14 – Saturday, December 12

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come; it will not delay.

Habakkuk 2:3

I am closest to God when I am still and all around me is quiet. Be that in the hunting blind, on a boat in the Atchafalaya, on the dock behind my house fishing, or pausing at a mountain overlook on an epic hike.



Paradoxically, the world tells us we must remain in motion, else we be left behind. Left behind from what? The noise, distraction, and anxiety of life? The doubt-filled emptiness we seek to fill?

Habakkuk 2:3 reassures us that his vision will be fulfilled (not ours), but it will occur slower than expected. God's timing will be perfect through it all.

During this season of Advent, ask yourself, "where can I pause to hear God's plan and welcome his unexpected love? Where can I shut out the distractions to listen for ways to be a 'stranger' for God, sharing the bountiful, unexpected love of God with another?"

Jonathan Preedom

Day 15 – Sunday, December 13

They shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

Isaiah 61:4

Advent, a time of waiting, anticipating God's wondrous and mysterious work bringing healing and restoration to all things.

Isaiah anticipated a hope filled future in which life is restored, ruins repaired, trauma overcome. A future once lost now reclaimed.

Preparing for the Christ child in a manger is preparing for the one who brings this hope to fruition. A God who comes in the midst of ruin and devastation walking alongside us as a hope filled future becomes a reality.

Often, we'll only see the broken glass, the ruins and the destruction. However, Advent is a time of preparation, shifting our focus now to God's unexpected work of restoring our lives and the world through the one who is the child in the manger.

Rev. Drew Sutton


Unexpected Joy

Day 16 – Monday, December 14

But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Romans 8:25

There's a small clip from the Disney movie Aladdin where Jafar (the bad guy) tells his parrot friend, Iago (voiced memorably by Gilbert Gottfried), "Patience, Iago! Patience." When my daughter was little, and I'll admit, sometimes now, we'd pull up that phrase when something was not happening as fast as we wished it would. Jafar knew that what he was talking about would happen, just not as quickly as he wished. Or at least that's what he thought.



Of course, it didn't turn out the way Jafar expected. Because he's the bad guy.

Patience. The Greek word means endurance, steadfastness, or perseverance. And the Greek word for "hope" means something different from how we use it today, too. It doesn't mean "Oh, please, oh, please, oh, please, I hope he calls me!" Just as Jafar imagined, it means, "We know it's going to happen. We just have to wait." We aren't begging for it to happen, we're waiting, because we know that the birth of Jesus is coming.

Marty Ducote

Day 17 – Tuesday, December 15

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Often, I find that Jesus' love is something we Christians take for granted. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." I remember hearing pastors preach about the unfailing love of God, how God can make us new and white as snow, and thinking … duh. That's just what God does, right?

However, there have been moments throughout life when verses like this one have hit home in a profound and often unexpected way. Times when the full measure of God's love just reverberates the soul and takes your breath away. I invite everyone to join me this Advent season in truly letting God's love in and reflecting upon what it means to be blameless in his sight and sanctified by him in full, without exception or caveat. God's love is always with us, but recognizing the sheer immensity of it is an unexpected gift just waiting for us to receive it.

Jacob Meyer

Day 18 – Wednesday, December 16

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

2 Peter 3:14-15

Patience

I've had the opportunity to put patience into practice. Most of the time I trust that God will ensure everything works out in the end.

The first two weeks of college, I was extremely lonely. I was entirely on my own. I constantly tried to make friends to no avail. I asked God if I was meant to do this journey alone. Then my high school acquaintance told me she was at Southeastern, and, having nothing to lose, I asked if she wanted to eat lunch together. She told me to come to her dorm and spend time with her and her roommate. It was awkward and not instant friendship. But we all continued spending time together. One day I asked my acquaintance to drive me to pick up my textbooks. I was having a severe chronic-pain day and was using my cane. I didn't think about how I would carry my textbooks with only one hand. I am very stubborn, so I tried to carry my textbooks independently, until my hand started to shake and my textbooks crashed. Her roommate looked at me and said, "Do you want me to carry them?"

People say you don't see God, but I felt him in that moment. She didn't make me beg for help, assume I was incapable, or grab the textbooks without asking. She gave me the gift of unconditional acceptance. I felt God's love. She carried my textbooks to the car and all the way back to my dorm. *This is what all that patience is for*, I thought. *You helped me find my people and feel your love*. I learned that some things may take longer than we want, but the outcome may be better than we ever thought it could be, so don't be bitter. Be patient.

Ainsley Hale

Day 19 – Thursday, December 17

for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:5-7

In the early 2000s, I traveled to Shanghai many times on business. Early one trip, I felt ill and suspected an infection. I traveled to a nearby hospital and quickly realized they were not going to help me. However, one nurse caught my eye and walked over. She only spoke Mandarin but through our flawed communication attempts she was able to understand my predicament. On the front of her business card, she wrote "TAXI" and on the back in Chinese she wrote an address. Before departing, I noticed a tiny, almost hidden, cross around her neck. I took a taxi to the address which turned out to be a pharmacy where I was able to buy antibiotics. She had already called ahead and told the pharmacist what I needed.

Reflecting later I thought about how God's love comes in unexpected ways. This nurse was working in an environment where she was likely harassed and discriminated against due to her faith, yet she helped me when the others wouldn't. Perhaps she assumed I was Christian; I'll never know. But that experience stuck with me and came to mind when I meditated on this scripture. This woman had a gift of healing and through the strength of Christ had the courage to use that gift when others around her would not. Paul's words encourage us to identify the gifts God gives us and then muster the confidence to use these gifts to help others – perhaps in ways others won't.

Mark Goldberger


Unexpected Love

Day 20 – Friday, December 18

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John 4:9-10

Among the sweetest of expressions of love are the ones we never see coming. My dad had a way of whispering an unprompted "Love you" into an otherwise quiet moment. Other times, a smile, accompanied by a double blink of his blue eyes, expressed what words could not. Those moments reminded me that I was loved, not because I had done anything to deserve it, but because I was his.

That's what makes God's love so extraordinary. He didn't wait for us to seek him or earn his favor. He loved us first, and he demonstrates that love in the most unexpected of ways. The Father sent the Son, who left the throne of heaven, put on flesh, and entered our broken world as a tiny baby. God didn't just send a message of love. He sent Love himself. Through Jesus, he offers the greatest gift imaginable – eternity in his presence.

This Advent, may we pause to recognize the unexpected ways God whispers, "I love you."

Denise Ray

Day 21 – Saturday, December 19

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior …

Titus 3:4-6

When I was very young, my older siblings would taunt me with tales that if I weren't a good little girl they would hang me back on the tree of life. I don't really think I was such a bad kid, but regardless it was a sure-fire way to make me behave. I'd try to be good, obviously quite often, because after all these years, I still remember that teasing. But as I got older, I learned God had better and kinder plans for me. I've known a few people who truly reflected the love of Jesus Christ. Sadly, there are more of us who have need of a whole lot more forgiving than those precious few. Even so, nobody – not one in all of mankind since the beginning of time – has been without sin.

In this scripture, Paul reminds Titus that Jesus was the incarnation of God's love sent to earth as human to save mankind from sin and all that separates us from God. That's God love, agape love, the highest and purest form of love. *The Living Bible* says it was "not because we were good enough to be saved." We can't do it on our own. *The Message* flatly says "we had nothing to do with it."

Thank you, God, for your salvation that brought me life, for we're all spiritually dead without Christ. Paul said that we're washed clean from sin by the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ and regenerated to a new birth to become new creations in Christ. When I accepted Jesus as my Savior, I was born again, forever saved, forever loved, my sins forever forgotten through the goodness of God.

So, what about the Tree of Life? I found out from the book of Revelation that it's in heaven.

Rev 2:7(b) … "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (NIV)

Joyce Schoonmaker

Day 22 – Sunday, December 20

And Mary said,

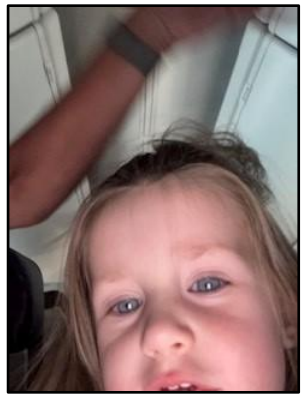
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Luke 1:46, 51-55

Love. What comes to mind when we think of that word? As I pondered all the different aspects of love, many examples came to mind. They were all familiar and expected sources of love. Love for and from my parents, my husband, my children, extended family members and dear friends. Familiar. Expected. What about love defined as a benevolent concern for another's welfare? How about a shift from preoccupation with one's own welfare to prioritizing another person's needs? I believe that is unexpected love.

I was reminded of that kind of love on a recent trip. We were flying from Morocco to Egypt. There was a young family sitting behind and across from us on the plane. Their youngest child Josephine (Jo-Jo) was only 2½ years old and quite a handful. Only the father spoke any English. Jo-Jo was go-go and her exhausted mother was trying to sleep. My husband and I quickly noticed the disgruntled looks and mutterings of nearby passengers and the harried and worried looks of Jo-Jo's parents as they tried to make her sit still. This darling child caught me smiling at her and she instantly came to me and stroked

my arm. I assured her apologetic parents she was fine and as the flight progressed she got bolder with me. She would point at charms on my bracelet and tell me the word in French and eventually signaled for me to let her have it to play with which I readily did. Eventually she took my phone and snapped about 50 selfies.



When the plane started to descend, her parents coaxed her back to her seat but before she reached her seat she turned back, grabbed my neck and gave me the sweetest, purest and softest kiss on the cheek. Wow! That struck me as the love of Christ. So unexpected, so beautiful, so pure with no strings attached. This was a love that did not need words for indeed we did not speak the same language. This was a love that was demonstrated by action just as Jesus demonstrated by his actions while living on earth and taking our sins to the cross.



Cat Pitre

Day 23 – Monday, December 21

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

John 3:16

At the beginning, as the Bible also goes, God was in perfect union with the Son and in need of nothing, yet he created the universe. Unfortunately, the humans he populated the earth with essentially said, "we got this," and thus began the story of God rescuing and redeeming humanity over and over. It's hard for me to understand why our perfect Creator would keep seeking humanity. At the end of the day when my kids have gotten into their millionth disagreement, I'm ready to throw my hands up and let the chaos ensue. Lucky for us, God is good, loving and patient! His love endured as he sent prophets, performed miracles, made new covenants, and ultimately sent his Son. In another plot twist, Jesus came as a suffering servant, who's anointing death restored our relationship with our Father. Jesus' death was the gamechanger. We are invited into a personal relationship with God right here, right now, AND into eternity! What an unexpected and undeserved gift of love.

Caitlin Narretta

Day 24 – Tuesday, December 22

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

The love of our Jesus … what is it about? John 1:14 refers back to Christ revealed in the 1st verse in John ("in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God …"). This scripture also references how Jesus is fully divine and human all at once and how he dwells among his people demonstrating miracles of grace, trust and love that so many in Scripture experienced but could not initially understand. Remember that Jesus often spoke of being about his Father's business. They did not understand the business of grace and truth and love that they so desperately needed to hear.

Often when other people come into our lives they come in for a reason. But they often come in for a season, too! The lives we encounter can often deposit true love via acts of kindness or service or even through speaking truth into our lives. It's like depositing money into an empty bank account! When we are emotionally or physically exhausted or empty we don't have the energy to look for the answers. But when someone like a good friend or pastor or even your own family deposits love into your heart by speaking truth to your circumstances or speaking grace to your heart? It takes you aback at first but it changes you if you allow it to do so. It's unbelievable and ultimately unexpected!

In my life, many people have come in seasons for reasons I didn't initially comprehend, but looking back I do know now. My parents were two people who loved me despite my failures and my own disappointments. They loved me unconditionally like Jesus loved and continues to love his people unconditionally. That's love that sweeps us off our feet. Love so deeply unexpected! My heart's prayer is for all of us to experience that overwhelming presence of love that sweeps us off our feet and praise the One who requires us to love each other just like that!

Tiffany Hincks

Day 25 – Wednesday, December 23

… to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Luke 2:11

Really, the entire birth story of Jesus is unexpected. Mary, a pregnant virgin; the journey to Bethlehem while in the final stages of pregnancy; only lodging accommodations were in a barn. To top it off, going into labor and delivering the most holy gift from God in a stable on dirt and hay surrounded by animals. Can it get any more unexpected?

Oddly, those unexpected bumps, twists and turns can lead to beautiful opportunities and spontaneous appreciation. Our God is no ordinary God and his love finds us always. We may not be accepting of the unexpected and, though surprises are usually thought of in a good connotation, surprises can be … well … unfortunate. Funny enough, those moments are often followed in reflection as exposing God's love for us.

Wouldn't you say baby Jesus made quite a surprisingly unexpected entrance? All by God's design. All done for God's love for us.

Kelly Meyer

Day 26 – Thursday, December 24

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

Isaiah 9:2

My 5-year-old son, William, has recently been waking up in the middle of the night. He's too afraid of the dark to leave his bed, so he yells out for his daddy at the top of his lungs. My poor husband races to the other side of the house as fast as he can before our other two boys get awakened. As soon as he makes it to William's room, he climbs into bed, and William drifts back to sleep.

As we grow up, the literal darkness we dread as a child morphs into new, more complex fears and worries (though I am still afraid of the dark sometimes!). I like to think of God like a father comforting his son. William doesn't need his daddy to turn on the light. He just needs to know that his daddy is there with him, and as Christians we know that God is always with us. He didn't remove the darkness from this life but instead walks alongside us as we navigate it. And for that I am so grateful.

Emannuel means "God with us."

Laura Cobb

Day 27 – Friday, December 25

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

We all go by different names depending on what our role is at a given point in time. For example, I am a daughter, sister, wife, mother, mimi, friend and employee. Different parts of the same person.

The same is true for Jesus. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace depict the divine nature and different roles attributed to the Messiah. Different parts of the same person.

This verse foretells his coming, giving those who heard it hope that better days were at hand and that the Messiah would fulfill their every need. We look forward to celebrating his birth each year, knowing that our every need is still met to perfection through him. We need only to call on his name.

Karen Agnew

Christmas at St. Andrew's

Light the Night / Mission Project / Chili Cookoff

Sunday, November 29 – 5:00 p.m.

Children's Play – "How the Grinch Stole Christmas"

Friday, December 11 – 6:00 p.m.
Followed by a Spaghetti Dinner (eat in or take out)

Saturday, December 12 – 11 a.m.

Christmas Cantata

Sunday, December 20 – 9:00 a.m. & 11:00 a.m.
(Chancel Choir)

Travelers "Christmas Eve" Communion Service

Tuesday, December 22 – 6:00 p.m.
(Praise Band)

Christmas Eve Communion Worship Services

3:00 p.m. Family Service with Live Nativity

5:00 p.m. Candlelight Service
(Chancel Choir)

God's Unexpected Love Has Arrived!

Thank you to everyone who submitted a devotional for this Advent season. This compilation is proof of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of our St. Andrew's family. **God is so good!**





St. Andrew's United Methodist Church
17510 Monitor Avenue
Baton Rouge, LA 70817
225-752-2903
www.saumcbr.com