**The Perfect Gift**

By Sarah Buescher, SWA Spiritual Growth Chair

Christmas is gone and so is the stress that went with it: The frantic last minute shopping, the stressfulness of finalizing plans, and the chaos of packing and traveling. Guess what - there are only 330 or so days until Christmas (depending on when you read this)! How exciting! The joy of finding the best bargains, the giddy feeling of planning the trip and the thrill of seeing friends and family again isn’t too far away. I need to schedule the family portrait, start the Christmas cards, and begin the search for those perfect gifts. I want to find the gift that will evoke squeals of joy and make the recipient dance up and down. The gift that will make them gush over how wonderful and thoughtful I am and how perfect the gift is.

Sometimes we overlook that there is another holiday right after Christmas. It is an occasion where gifts are given; an occasion where men traveled from afar in search of the perfect gift. When they found that gift, they did not scoop it up and hide it under their coats in their shopping carts so that no one else would snatch it away. Instead they bowed down in reverence and presented their own gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh to the Christ child. The perfect gift is not an object that you find on a shelf during an after Christmas sale. The perfect gift is why we celebrate Christmas in the first place. God sent His only Son into the world to redeem the world. Jesus Christ came for us, and there is no greater gift than that.

Epiphany is a time when we remember the gifts the wise men gave to Jesus and the symbolism behind them. The gold for the King of Kings, frankincense to worship our Lord, and myrrh because he was going to die for our sins.

Even though Christmas has come and gone and Epiphany doesn’t last that long, it is still good to remember the reason we celebrate Christmas, Epiphany and every other holiday. We remember the baby born in a manager who later hung on a cross for us. Who died and then rose again, conquering death and the devil. Who one day will return for us and give us eternal life. That right there is the perfect gift.

**Christmas Leftovers?**

By Darci Miller

I pray that all of you had a blessed and joyous Christmas season. I’m sure your decorations are put away and the gifts you received are all in their proper places. While a part of me is always somewhat relieved to stow the “stuff” away once the new year arrives, I find myself wishing that we could all carry more of the Christmas spirit with us all year long.

This issue of “Lifelines” will be devoted to leaving some aspects of Christmas unpacked: the joy of Christ’s birth and resurrection, the spirit of celebration, and some chocolate cookies for good measure.

I would like to thank the Advent By Candlelight planning committee for allowing me to revisit the beautiful devotions that they shared at that event. You will find those printed on the following pages.
Cooking Corner: Brownie Macaroons

Have you heard that macaroons are one of the new year’s “trendy” foods? Whether you want to be on the cutting edge, find a new way to use some food bank items, or satisfy a chocolate craving, these can be on your table in 15 minutes:

1 box dry brownie mix
2 cups shredded coconut
2 T vegetable oil
2 T water
1 large egg
1 t. vanilla or coconut extract
1 cup chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 350° F. Spray cookie sheets with nonstick cooking spray or line with parchment paper. In a large mixing bowl combine all ingredients (dough will be stiff). Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Place on prepared cookie sheets. Bake 10-12 minutes.
Contributed by Sonja Weber

When things get a little unbearably hectic, do you ever long for a little peace in your life? Perhaps you imagine going away to a tranquil spot, like a sunny beach on a deserted island where all you can hear is the gentle lapping of the waves along the sand. Yes, that is one kind of peace. But it’s a temporary one. As much as we long to be at that beach we can not always whisk away to the sandy shores. The struggles and demands of this life pull us away and crowd out what little peace we may find.

However, there is a peace that is not temporary. There is a peace that does not go away despite the stressful times in life. This peace comes to us not in a tranquil spot on the beach, but in a manger. This peace comes to us not from our worldly leaders and strategic planning, but in a small baby. This peace that we receive is the peace of God. And this is no ordinary god. This is the God who created the heavens and the earth, this is the God who knit us together in our mother’s womb and this God gives us His peace. This peace from God comes to us in Christ Jesus and this peace is strong. It guards our hearts and our minds- it pushes out the temporary peace that the devil tempts us with and it allows us to address God as Abba Father. Ephesians 2:17-18 says, “And Jesus came with the good news of peace to you who were far away and to those who were near, since by one Spirit He enables both of us to come to the Father.” Because of this peace that Jesus won for us through being born in this world and dying on the cross, we can come before the Father and He gives us life that is full of peace. Just as Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever so is this peace because it comes from Him. This peace is the peace that God gave you last night when you fell asleep on your bed, and it is the peace that you will feel tomorrow when you get up to go to work and care for your family.

There is not a single person in this world who is not seeking peace. They search for it in clothes, money, jobs, relationships and fame, but they are looking in all the wrong places. Sisters of Christ, we know where that peace is. That peace is found in Jesus who is true man and true God. He desires us to have peace so much that he told the prophets to spread the word that peace is coming. When He was born He told his angels to sing peace is here on earth, He tells us through His Word that peace is in Him.

In the new year, take time to prepare your hearts. We have all sinned and we have all searched for peace in places that are not true. Open your heart to have true peace. The peace of hope, the peace of joy, the peace of a promise and the peace that Christ came and will come again. Jesus says in John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

Flashback to the 90s: Layers & Layers of Love

In Maria Von Trapp’s book, she tells of her family’s experience traveling the world as the Von Trapp Family Singers. Each day, Maria insisted that the children play outside, no matter how harsh the weather. On one occasion, when the temperature dipped below zero, she dressed her smallest child in a sweater, stockings, muffler, lined boots, an overcoat, cap, earmuffs, and two sets of mittens. When the child complained, Maria’s response was, “Think of all this clothing as my love. Every layer is added to protect you when you face the cold alone.”

This story was particularly meaningful as we recently prepared for our family’s Christmas trip, complete with our many layers of clothing. During the three weeks before Christmas we were “layered” with so much love here at the seminary. Our food bank was flooded with so much food that many of our families received double their monthly allotment. An area restaurant chain agreed to give the seminary students all of their day-old bakery goods. Many of the families did not have to buy French bread, rolls, donuts, or croissants for many weeks. The faculty and staff wives put on a huge Christmas sale that helped many of us with our Christmas shopping. The seminary children (all 198 of them!) received beautifully wrapped presents from several area churches. Some of us were surprised to find “love checks” amongst our Christmas cards this year. This “material” love is in addition to the endless prayerful support we all receive from people all over.

Yes, God and His people have layered our community with much love. Let us be so thankful for these many layers and layers of His love. Help us add layers of love to the lives of others around us and in this world as we spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

This article was written by Julie Klopke in January 1991 for “Lifelines.” Twenty years later, we are still being blessed in similar ways by friends and strangers alike. Praise God!
Lessons from the Birdfeeder: Grackles!
Contributed by Teri Vogeli, First Year Sem Wife

This morning I watched a large grackle at the feeder. They are so black and shiny that their heads glisten purpley beetle-green in the sunshine. They spread their broad tails wide for balance, and turn them sideways like a rudder or fish tail when they fly. They're larger than most of the birds at the feeder, and everybody else gets out of their way when they swoop down from the trees.

Which is what bothers me. The smaller birds are there for breakfast too, but when the grackle comes, they leave until he's done. He's loud, and his voice is harsh, not a polite “Excuse me little guy” but “Move it, stupid!” Not a “Mind if I share the feast?” only “Get lost, it's all mine now.”

I get annoyed because he doesn't even eat it all. He's picky too. He only wants one kind of grain from the mix. He lands heavily on the feeder edge, causing it to sway and spill seed on the ground. Then he rudely flings piles of seed this way and that with his big bill as he searches for his favorite piece, scattering all his wasted rejects onto the ground. He finds a tolerable piece or two and flies off, only to return in a moment, making another mess. Then he tries the other feeder with the same results. He struts back and forth on the ledge, broad tail sweeping off the exposed seed, and he doesn't even care. With a loud rattling croak, he finally leaves as if to say, “What a dump!” Unfortunately, he'll be back tomorrow, repeating the process, taking advantage of the free food, still complaining that it wasn't what he really wanted.

Reminds me of me sometimes. Dissatisfied with what I'm given, unappreciative of the wealth I have, looking for something I don't have, insensitive to others as I seek my own way. I am so grateful for these gentle lessons. I don't want to be a griping grackle.

"The heavens are full of the glory of God! Day after day they pour forth speech."

God teaches me continually, “Create in me a new heart, and put a right spirit in me!” Thank you for finding a use for the wasted seed on the ground. The mourning doves are enjoying it immensely! You are a God who restores. And thank you for cleaning up my messes. Help me not to make so many...

Preparing Our Hearts for Christmas: An Advent Devotion by Adrienne Kern

Christmastime can be one of the most stressful times of the year. There are decorations to dig out of storage and then you have to find creative ways of putting the decorations up in our ever-changing living situations.

We rush to write letters and address Christmas cards hoping they don't become New Years Cards and then there is the extensive process of Christmas shopping, and trying to find the perfect gifts that fit into our less than perfect budgets.

All while taking classes, holding down jobs, supporting our husbands with their own burdensome class loads and trying to teach our children the important lessons of the Christmas season.

Yes, Christmas can be stressful and exhausting and it requires a lot of preparation. As we run around preparing everything for Christmas, we often forget to prepare our own hearts.

Thankfully our Father in Heaven knows how we are and he knows just how to prepare us for what is lasting and important.

At the first Christmas, Mary was given a task that no one could fully understand. She would be the one to carry the baby Jesus as he grew and developed, until he was ready to be born. To accomplish this, God prepared Mary by sending the angel Gabriel.

Please see Luke 1:26-38.

I don't know about you but I don't always handle it well when my plans are changed on me. That is why I find Mary's response to Gabriel's news so humbling, “I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.” How would our lives change if every time the unexpected happened we said, “I am the Lord's servant”? How would our hearts change if every time our Christmas preparations were hindered, we responded with “I am the Lord's servant”?

This advent season, let’s concentrate on the preparations of our hearts for the birth of Christ. Let’s concentrate on serving the one who became a man to save us from what we deserved.

Of course, let’s decorate our homes, send out Christmas cards and shop for gifts but let’s make sure that through the stress of the season we always say, “I am the Lord’s servant” to the One whom Mary bore and who came to Earth to serve us.
Advent Devotion on Micah 5  
By Sarah Buescher

Micah 5:2 - “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

When Micah is writing this the Israelites are in captivity. They were forced to leave everything behind. They left their land, their homes and their place of worship, the temple. God had always promised to be found in the temple. Now that they were taken away from it where would they find God? They were alone and the situation seemed hopeless.

Micah is telling them that a Messiah will come from their own town, from their line. Just like David, Jesus was to be born from the Line of Judah and in the town of Bethlehem. Other prophets had foretold that a Messiah was going to come but they were vague prophecies. Micah said where He would be born and from whose line it would be. He had the answers and this gave them hope.

This Messiah is not going to come because all of a sudden Israel was taken into captivity. He is not a plan B from God; His coming was planned from the beginning. John 1:1 states that “In the beginning was the Word” and Moses says in Psalm 90:2 “From everlasting to everlasting; Thou art God”. God knew what He was doing then and He knows what He is doing now.

Israel was desperate, but so are we. Some of us left our families and our homes to follow our husbands. Some of us are dreading the Christmas season; it is just another excuse for people to ask for money we can’t give and gifts we can’t afford. For others it is hard to celebrate. How can we? Our loved ones have been called home, we are far from family or our family is far from us fighting overseas. Where is the joy in this? Like the Israelites we feel like we are in a hopeless situation.

Unlike the Israelites we don’t just know the line and the birthplace of the Messiah, we know His name and His purpose. His name is Lamb of God, King of Kings, Lion of Judah, Emmanuel. His name is Jesus. His purpose was to come and save us from our sins by dying on a cross, and He did just that. God’s plan was made clear, in even more detail than Micah’s prophecy.

Our situation is not hopeless, it is full of hope and love. Jesus came to earth to give us hope, and this Advent season we can anticipate not only the birth of the Messiah but the hope that we have in the resurrection to come.

Advent Devotion by Coli Escher

When my husband and I got married, one of the first issues we had to compromise on involved Christmas dinner. I grew up eating turkey and mashed potatoes. He grew up eating Norwegian potato pancakes called lefse and Swedish meatballs, neither of which I particularly enjoy. How many times have you changed a Christmas tradition, whether it be for a family member, moving to a new place, or because of time constraints?

Unifying Christmas celebrations, just like our lives in Christ, must be focused on the good news of Jesus...in his birth, death, and resurrection. When we as Christians are united, we have a unique opportunity to allow the light of Christ to shine through us. This Christmas season, remember that although the fun family traditions of carols, decorations, and food are fun and special, the reason for this time of year is to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Our only chance for this unity is not in simply compromising with others in the church body, I cannot simply conform to the ideas of my husband. Eating mashed potatoes or lefse is not the way we celebrate the birth of our Savior. We celebrate through having an attitude like our Savior.

Such a beautiful account of Jesus’ attitude is found in Philippians 2:5-11. The contrast of Jesus’ humility with his exaltation is quite moving. As we ponder these words, let’s think on them in light of the manner. There doesn’t seem to be a more humiliating place to be born than in a stable. Picture the baby’s warm hands in his mother’s—the same hands that will soon be pierced with nails. Picture his soft, bald head—the same head that will be crowned with thorns. His birth and death were both stages in the grand plan for our salvation. Because, as the last verses of the passage reminds us, Jesus Christ is Lord to the Glory of God the Father. So in this season of Advent, let’s remember to remain humble and focused on the good news of the season. When we experience humility as He demonstrated it, benefiting from the grace of His exaltation, we know that we can experience unity of purpose in the Body of Christ, both in Advent and all year long.
Advent Devotion on Romans 15:12-13
By Emma Meyer

And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.” May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

In two verses, Paul used the word 3 times, so it has to mean something: Hope. This word gets tossed around a lot this time of year. “I hope that I find an adorable dress that will make me look awesome for the Christmas party.” “I hope I score some sweet deals at the mall this weekend. I have a lot of presents to buy.” “I hope the Colts win.” “I hope that we can make it through the holidays without upsetting family members.” “I hope that I take time to remember what Christmas is really about.”

Hope. Advent is about hope, but not the kind of hope that leaves room for uncertainty and doubt. It’s clear that Paul’s hope is not equivalent to our desire to find that perfect outfit. It goes deeper than that. It’s not just hope for a better day or the lessening of pain. I’m sure our husbands would have something to say about the Greek translation and how the English does not justify the true meaning. And they would probably be right.

Regardless, we can see that Advent exemplifies the kind of hope that Paul prays for us. It is more about hope that human existence has meaning and possibility beyond our present experiences. A hope that the limits of our lives are not nearly as narrow as we experience them to be. It is not that we have possibility in ourselves, but with God all things are possible.

God’s people in the first century wanted Him to come and change their oppressive circumstances, and were angry when those immediate circumstances did not change. But that is a short-sighted view of the nature of hope. Our hope cannot be in circumstances, no matter how badly we want them or how important they are to us. The reality of human existence is that God’s people experience that physical existence in the same way that others do. Christians get sick and die, Christians are victims of violent crimes, and Christians are hurt and killed in traffic accidents, bombings, and war.

If our hope is only in our circumstances, we will always be disappointed. That is why we hope, not in circumstances, but in God. He has continually, over the span of thousands of years, revealed himself to be a God of newness, of possibility, of redemption; the recovery or transformation that goes beyond what we can think or even imagine. This time of year we contemplate that hope embodied in a newborn baby, the perfect example of newness, potential, and possibility.

It is easy to get caught up in all the trappings and trimmings of this “most wonderful time of the year.” But we need to reflect on the true meaning of hope and preparing our hearts for the coming of Christ. You can still shop on Black Friday, bake hundreds of cookies and root for your favorite football team. But those special on-sale items won’t last. Gifts may be forgotten, teams may win or lose, but in the end, none of that matters. Our real hope is in this small child, God made flesh, the Word among us. Who died for us, rose again, and in whom we now put our certain hope that he will come again. And that hope will not disappoint us.

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