

A Christian's Guide to



RELIGIOUS GIFTING

hope | peace | joy | love



St. Luke's
United Methodist Church

HOUSTON, TEXAS



Dear St. Luke's friend,

Early in my ministry, I shared with a mentor that I was losing my fire for ministry, and could already see a trajectory towards early burnout. He explained that I was trying to give something I didn't have. We can't give to others what we don't have ourselves. Similarly, once we receive a gift, we can choose to give it away. I think regifting needs a new brand. After all, it is the basic practice of the Christian life. In Matthew 10:8, Jesus tells the disciples, "freely you have received; now freely give." We give away that which we have received from God. And as we regift, God continues to give us more.

The word Advent means "a beginning or an arrival." It is marked by expectation and excitement. It is a time we prepare our homes and lives for the arrival of God as a human being into the world. We prepare to celebrate that arrival with the selection of just the right gifts for our friends and families.

The ultimate gift for us to give, of course, is Jesus himself. In Jesus is all the hope, peace, joy, and love one could ever expect or receive. But before we can give him away, we must receive him, lest we try to give something we do not have ourselves. But once we accept this marvelous gift of God, we absolutely must pass him along. At Christmas, we regift the same hope, peace, joy and love that we have received.

During this Advent season of preparation, I pray that you will open your heart to receive the gift of the Christ child. Invite him fully into your life and heart. And then pass him along. This is indeed a season of regifting.

In Christ,

Dr. Tom Pace, Senior Pastor

REGIFTING HOPE

Week of November 27

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Isaiah 55:10-13

Devotional by Reverend Bill Denham

My mother had one sister. The two could not have been more different. Mother was generous and, though a woman of means, my aunt's graciousness was all pretense.

One galling example of this came every December. Year-in and year-out a Christmas present, always in a beautifully wrapped Neiman-Marcus box, would arrive for Mother from her sister. Beneath the tissue my aunt would regift mother with one of her old, worn-out purses, a purse with a broken handle... torn leather... a snap that didn't snap. It was ridiculous, but Mother loved her sister. When the package arrived, Mother would sigh saying, "Well, this year I can always hope it's the real thing."

In this 2016 Advent season, how do we regift hope? We have an option. We can unwrap a worn-out-scuffed-up-hope or we can rejoice in the real thing.

Through the years we have all had our hopes dashed by a family member, a business partner, a friend, a neighbor, even someone at church. And that is exactly why we begin this season by regifting hope.

It is mind-boggling how the Israelites spent hundreds of years hoping and praying for a savior king. I cannot imagine how they persisted in this hope as generations came and went. And while the light of hope may have dimmed and flickered, it was never extinguished.

I think it is safe to say that we live in a darkening world with many voices offering different solutions. When are we going to learn that Jesus of Nazareth is our only hope? Our challenge is to regift this perfect gift that God gave to the world and share it with the world.

This week we aren't regifting a scuffed-up purse. We are regifting hope. Yes, as Paul wrote to the early church in Rome, "Be joyful in hope."
Romans 12:12a

Prayer

Hope of the world enter our hearts anew this week. Amen.

Lighting Advent Candle

As we light this first Advent candle, the candle of hope, may we be partners in hope and witnesses to the promise that hope is coming—it is being born into the world. Amen.



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 28

Be still and know that I am God.

Psalms 46:10

Prayer

Father God, it's a new week, and a new season—Advent. I am so overwhelmed at the whirlwind of activity and traffic all around me, yet you call me to sit at your feet. Thank you that you loved me even before I arrived on the planet. You entered as a babe on a busy night so long ago so that I would have the hope of eternity in you. Thank you that you keep your loving gaze upon me. This week I choose to breathe, slow down and smile. Amen

—Prayer by Suzi Pitts

Activity

Write the name you like to use for God in the middle of a piece of paper. Write down your hopes for the world, our country and your life. When you are finished, let your mind rest and listen. Enjoy the silence.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 29

O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.

Psalms 131:3

Prayer

Lord, thank you for your faithfulness. As the days fill with the noise and bustle of the season, may you stir my heart to hope in you. Regardless of the needs of the day, you are my hope, my strength, and my joy. Let that hope shine from me and light the lives of others. Amen.

—Adrienne McGee

Activity

Think of one thing that is contributing to your frenetic pace this season. Give it up this week and spend that time with someone who needs a listening ear.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30

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 people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Isaiah 40:4-5

Prayer

Lord, thank you for your faithfulness. As the days fill with the noise and bustle of the season, may you stir my heart to hope in you. Regardless of the needs of the day, you are my hope, my strength, and my joy. Let that hope shine from me and light the lives of others. Amen.

—Jennifer Gould

Activity

Write a prayer of hope for a special friend or loved one.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 1

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming,
it is near—*

Joel 2:1

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Hear our prayer: help us to be obedient to You and to follow in the ways that makes us closer to You. Prepare our hearts and minds to accept your grace and forgiveness for anything we may have done wrong. Make everyone aware of your desires to be close to us and have a personal relationship with us. Then guide us to walk in this life in a way that prepares us for eternity; for we know that day is coming; it is near. Amen.

—Prayer by Doug Christians

Activity

Call a friend or loved one who has been a source of hope in a difficult time and thank him or her.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 2

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 3:1

Prayer

Dear Lord, He's coming! He's coming! Something amazing is about to happen. It is during this Advent season that we are hopeful and excited about the birth of Jesus. We ask that you continue to share this hope with us during this season. In Your name we pray. Amen.

—Prayer by Addison (Age 8) and Jack (Age 10) Conner

Activity

Regift hope and send an uplifting card (not email) to someone who is homebound.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3

*Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.*

Psalms 25:5

Prayer

Our most heavenly Father, thank you for your continued guidance as you lead us down the path of righteousness. Thank you for teaching us that you are the truth and the way to salvation. Lord help us to be patient as we wait for you to show us the things that we don't understand. Give us the encouragement and reminder that you are our rock in times of need and you are always by our side as we accept the journey with you into your kingdom. We are so thankful for the blessings that you continue to put before us. Lord we trust you and thank you for loving us. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

—Prayer by Steve Lufburrow

Activity

Plant an Amaryllis or Narcissus bulb. Patiently waiting and watching as the roots and plant shoots serve as a visual reminder that growing and grounding are a joint effort.



REGIFTING PEACE

Week of December 4

*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall
lead them.*

*The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the
hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be
full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

*I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate,
the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you
everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with
you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not
let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

Isaiah 11:6-9 and John 14:25-27

Devotional by Dr. Linda Christians

In his book, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life*, Henri Nouwen writes, "Our occupations and preoccupations fill our external and internal lives to the brim. They prevent the Spirit of God from breathing freely in us and thus renewing our lives. While our minds and hearts are filled with many things, and we wonder how we can live up to the expectations imposed upon us by ourselves and others, we have a deep sense of unfulfillment. While busy with and worried about many things, we seldom feel truly satisfied, at peace, or at home."

The above quote from Nouwen applies to our everyday lives but seems especially true during the Advent season when we squeeze any number of extra obligations into days that are already full. Besides our usual daily chores and commitments, we now have presents to buy, decorating to complete, cards to send, and parties to attend. We can become so preoccupied and anxious with all there is to be done that we fail to take the time to consider what the season really means to us as Christians. Personally, I have found that no matter how busy I am, any time I take to intentionally focus on God enables me to receive the gift of God's abiding peace and presence. It is then that I am truly satisfied, at home and at peace with God and able to joyfully regift peace to others. Will you join me as I go through this season intentionally focusing on God and regifting peace?

Prayer

Jesus, we are so grateful for the gift of Your abiding presence and peace. This is especially true during this season filled with busy preparations, over-commitments and expectation-induced anxiety. Keep us mindful of Your gift and give us grace to share it as freely as we've received. Amen.

Lighting Advent Candle

We light the first Advent candle and remember that hope is coming. As we light the second Advent candle, the candle of peace, we remember that the Prince of Peace is coming, and we join in the work of preparing the way. We walk gently in the way of peace. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 5

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Isaiah 52:7

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we offer thanksgiving for the gift of salvation through your son, Jesus Christ. You have given us the ultimate gift in eternal life, so let us go forth and share the Good News with all whom we meet. Shape us to be a living example of your peace and love, and guide us to give testimony to your presence in our lives. Amen.

Activity

Breath or centering prayers are a way to move toward "praying without ceasing." Some people pray one line while inhaling and another while exhaling. Try praying this throughout the day: Come, Lord Jesus. Feel free to create your own, using any source that inspires you and helps you draw near to God.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 6

The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Romans 13:12

Prayer

Guide and help us to maintain our inner light so that it can shine through our armor and can reach out to and be shared with others. Let there be peace from sharing this light, especially in the secular world we live in, and help us to build relationships and overcome conflicts among a varied people. And, let us always remember that this light pleases the Prince of Peace, our savior and leader above all leaders here on earth. Amen.

—Prayer by Amanda Kirkham

Activity

Go for a moon and stars walk. Ask God to remind you that He is the creator of all of the stars and all of the souls.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 7

Strengthen the weak hand, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!"

Isaiah 35:3-4

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for the incredible joy that surrounds this season. We pray that we will be drawn to the power of Your endless grace. Although we become entangled by the struggles of our own vulnerability, we pray that You will fill us with the hopeful anticipation of your infinite strength. Lord, help us to know that Your reassuring arms are always around us to sustain us through any circumstances that we may encounter. We ask that You prepare our hearts and remove the fears that hinder our ability to feel the joy and amazing love that You offer to us as a promise. And, we pray that we can reveal Your love to others and show them the true meaning of this season. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

—Prayer by Mark Hawkins

Activity

Do a kind act anonymously today. If you're caught, do another one.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 8

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

Prayer

Dear God, Let us learn to set aside our differences. Let us embrace each other and not take up arms. Lord, help the world to know your love so that we may realize that in heaven we are all equal. And Lord, help us to live lives of peace. Amen.

—Prayer by William Pyper McKay, 9th Grade

Activity

Advent is a time of contemplation and waiting—challenge yourself (and your family) to take three minutes of silence today. If you are able, practice this daily for a more peaceful season.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

John 1:1-4

Prayer

Heavenly Father, at a time when the world is full of darkness and in desperate need of light, I take refuge in John 1:4: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." I pray for the light of all people to shine brightly and overcome individual and collective darkness. Lord, help me to live a life that will be a source of light to those who know neither His life nor light. Amen.

—Prayer by Neil Stovall

Activity

Take an unlit candle into a dark room. Light the wick, and notice that in a dark place, even a small light will pierce the darkness. Think about being a light in the world throughout your day.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Colossians 3:15

Prayer

Heavenly Father, You have blessed each of us with so much. Christ teaches us to be peaceful, kind, considerate and generous, and to share our blessings with others. We know that through You we can accomplish so much more than we could ever imagine. Help us to be bold to invite others to be a part of our St. Luke's family so that they might experience the love and forgiveness that comes with knowing You. In Christ, Amen.

—Prayer by Mark Kidd

Activity

Find one thing on your to-do list that can wait until tomorrow. With the extra time, regift Peace by sharing a cup of coffee with a friend who is experiencing anxiety or stress.

REGIFTING JOY

Week of December 11

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

Luke 1:39-48

Devotional by Rev. David Horton

My brother-in-law, Brian, is a lifelong Cubs fan. He's from a small, blue-collar town outside Chicago. He grew up going to Wrigley Field and watched the loveable losers drop game after game, season after season. I've known Brian for over half my life and I have seen firsthand how a Cubs fan can believe in a World Series championship despite all the evidence to the contrary. There was a certainty in his belief. One day, in his lifetime, the Cubs will be champions. It's wasn't a possibility; it was a fact despite the facts.

I think for Brian, there came a point in his life as a Cubs fan when being a Cubs fan became equated with believing. The very joy of being a Cubs fan came from that belief. I talked to him after the Cubs won in November and the 108-year curse was broken. He wore a halo of joy around his body. I don't think the joy came from the victory as much as it did the vindication of his belief.

There is joy in believing. Advent is a time of joy, not because the hopes and fears of all the years have finally met their end, but because we believe in their end. No matter the looming heavy darkness around us, we will still go on believing. No matter the facts and figures we hear on the news, we will still go on believing. It is our believing, our holding onto hope, our tearful and dreamful confidence that all history is being repaired on Christmas morning, that makes Advent the joyful season it is. We do not believe because of the joy Christmas brings; we are joyful because we believe in Christmas.

Prayer

Eternal God, Father of Light: give us eyes to see the Christ Child pushing back the darkness in our world. Make us people of belief rather than people of certainty, for it is in believing that we find the true joy of Christmas. Amen.

Lighting Advent Candle

We light the first two Advent candles, the candle of Hope and the candle of Peace. As we light the third candle, the candle of Joy, we join the heavens and the earth in praising God's holy name. With joyous expectation, we watch for signs of God's coming. Amen.



MONDAY, DECEMBER 12

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Luke 2:10-11

Prayer

Lord, you have graciously given us the gift of your son, the Messiah, who gave his life to redeem us from our sin. In his life, he taught us how to live for you and for one another and how to love each other divinely. Through Jesus, we find great joy and peace regardless of our circumstances. Let us not be afraid to tell the Good News and help others find joy in you also. Amen.

Activity

Use only Christmas mugs for all of your drinks today.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13

Hear, you peoples, all of you; listen, O earth, and all that is in it; and let the Lord God be a witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple. For lo, the Lord is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth.

Micah 1:2-3

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father and Maker of our Joy, thank you for your word and promise to return to tread upon the high places of the earth. We anxiously await your return and look forward and pray to receive your holy blessings and undeniable and everlasting Joy and Love. Lord we pray for our remaining time here on this earth and ask you to watch over us and to protect us. We praise you for the gift and promise that we will ultimately leave our earthly bodies and earthly ways, and ultimately join and walk with you in eternity! Amen.

—Prayer by Jim Hogan

Activity

Make a date to go caroling with friend or family and spread Joy.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 14

For the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Nehemiah 8:10

Prayer

Dear God, this time of year is when we get crazy. There is so much to do and we beat ourselves up because we may or may want to do it all, but we know we should be saying no to things and leave more room for the things that are holy to us. Help us to not fight the crazy times but to see you at work in it. Help us to feel your joy as we go about our day. Help us to see your joy as we spend time with the people you have put us in community with. Help us to feel the love and joy you have for us that is so great, you gave us the gift of your son, the joy of your heart. Help us to see the joy in finding this quiet moment to stop and tell you thank you. Amen.

—Prayer by Faith Ayers, Encounter Worship Leader

Activity

Talk to a loved one about their favorite Christmas memory.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

John 15:11

Prayer

Loving God, you are all that we need, and in you, we are complete. Help us to focus on you and your unending Joy this Christmas season. Let us unwrap your gift of eternal salvation and experience your full Joy, and then, send us out to regift your perfect love and unending Joy. Amen.

Activity

Regift Joy and “pay it forward” in line somewhere today. Pay for the person behind you (works best in a drive-thru)

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 16

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Peter 1:8-9

Prayer

Heavenly Father, let us trust in what we do not see. During this Christmas season, I pray that true Joy would come into this world and help many find peace. Thank you for Jesus and the joy and peace that flood the hearts of all that know him. Help me share this joy of knowing Jesus to all who are in my path. Through you, let me rejoice in everything. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

—Nicole De Los Santos

Activity

Jump in the car and head out to see Christmas lights. Turn your radio to a station that plays Christmas music and sing along.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Philippians 4:4

Prayer

Gracious God, Even in anxious times, we have hope. And even when we struggle, we remain hopeful. For you are always healing, always creating, always restoring, and always loving us. What joy we have in knowing that! We love you and pray this is Christ’s holy name. Amen.

—Prayer by Katie Montgomery Mears

Activity

Invite another family, or friends, to come over in their pajamas or sweats to watch a favorite Christmas movie and share a Christmas treat.

REGIFTING LOVE

Week of December 18

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

1 John 4:16-19 and John 13:34-35

Devotional by Sid Davis

I always confuse “annual” and “perennial,” as applied to plants. (No gardener, here) They both sound like they always show up, right? But one lives only a season, yet you can count on the other to show up again and again. “Regifting” Love is more like the latter than the former, and the phrase, “paying it forward” comes to mind. I have for years started every day with this from the Service of Morning Prayer: “New every morning is your love, great God of light...” Perennial.

Several years ago, a Thai foreign exchange student sang in Pure Sound whose nickname was “Egg.” He was talented in many ways, but among them was his ability to play his native instrument—the Thai flute. He was so good, I asked him to play on World Communion Sunday, and he did, dressed in his all-black native tunic and pants. It was memorable. Many months later, when he was returning home to Thailand, I gave him a little going away present, and he said he had something for me. When he handed me a gorgeous rosewood flute, I said, “Oh, Egg. It’s beautiful. Did you bring this from home to give as a gift?” He said, “Yes and no. I did bring it from home, but that’s my flute. My favorite flute.” It’s on my shelf right now, and I look at it every day.

“Regifting” Love is a given. As the ’70’s song says, “Love isn’t love till you give it away. Not annual. Perennial.

Prayer

“New every morning is your love, Great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world. Stir up in us desire to serve you, to live peacefully with our neighbors, and to devote each day to your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.”

Lighting Advent Candle

We light the first three Advent candles, the candles of Hope, Peace, and Joy. As we light the fourth candle, the candle of Love, we open our hearts to God’s love. It waits to fill our hearts that we may be signs of God’s extravagant love for the whole world. Amen.



MONDAY, DECEMBER 19

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

Prayer

Dear gracious God, Thank you for loving us so much, that you gave your only son to come and die for our salvation. Please help us believe and help others that struggle to find you. Let us be able to follow you through the hardships so that we may spread your word of eternal life. Bring to us the joy of knowing your loving embrace. In your son's holy name, Amen.

—Prayer by Eleanor Kershner, 7th Grade

Activity

Write a love letter to God, thanking God for the gifts you received throughout the year. Fold the letter and put in your Bible.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

1 John 4:7

Prayer

Dear God, For us to love one another, we need you. Thank you for sending your son Jesus to help us love. Since you loved us first, we can now treat others better. Knowing this helps me when there are challenges against my heart. Your love makes me stronger and happier. Hope you have a great birthday, Jesus! We love you back. Amen.

—Charlee McEvoy (Age 6)

Activity

Regift Love by doing something nice for one of your neighbors. Offer to pick up groceries, bring in their trash cans, or take over a plate of cookies.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 21

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

John 15:12

Prayer

Loving God, you have given us unconditional love, and you have never forsaken us. We are grateful for your unending love and patience, and we confess that although we freely receive your love, we sometimes judge others without love and forgiveness. Open our hearts this Christmas season, and let us overflow with your great love for one another. Help us to be patient and forgiving with a love like yours so that others may see your presence in our lives. Amen.

Activity

At some point today you will be in traffic or hunting for a parking spot in a busy parking lot. Graciously let a car in front of you with a friendly wave, or give the prime parking spot away with a smile.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 22

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

1 John 4:12

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,
At this busy time of year, give us quiet moments to know the blessing of your steadfast love. You loved us so much that you would send your only Son to bring your love into this world to save us from our sins. As we await the celebration of his coming, let us find your love growing in our hearts and let us share that love with one another. As we rejoice in the gift of your Son, in faith and gratitude we thank you for your constant, unfailing love. Amen.

—Prayer by Sandra Hendon

Activity

Have everyone in the household write a list of his or her hopes and dreams for 2017. When finished, pray for each other. Set the lists aside, and then tuck those hopes and dreams into their author's stocking on Christmas after presents have been opened. Look for them next year when decorating to see answered hopes and prayers! These can be “normal” things (school, work, finances, etc.), or more serious, faith-inspired or personal growth things—whatever is on your heart!

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 23

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39

Prayer

Dear Lord, Sometimes I am overwhelmed by the obstacles in life. At these times, I often fail to turn toward you and then tend to feel alone. When that happens, Lord, I pray that I can remember your promise to always be with me, no matter what. You demonstrate over and over that nothing can separate me from your love. Thank you, Lord, for loving me so deeply that I am never alone, regardless of how I feel in the moment. Thank you for writing this promise on my heart. Amen.

—Prayer by Kymn Harrison

Activity

Read aloud the Christmas story from Luke 2:1–20

CHRISTMAS EVE REGIFTING PRESENCE

Week of December 18

All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us'.)

Isaiah 7:14

Devotional by Rev. Thomas Harper

When I was young, I remember staying up as late as I could on Christmas Eve in an effort to catch a glimpse of Santa Claus. My brother and I would talk about what it would be like to see Santa and what we would say to him if we did. As the naïve younger sibling, I would always fall for it when my brother would pretend to hear someone moving around on the roof. I never did meet Santa in person, but I can remember the sense of anticipation and excitement as I awaited his arrival.

Similarly, the Jews were anxiously awaiting the presence of the coming Messiah, the one who would save God's people and restore the nation of Israel. Mike Slaughter claimed in his book *Down to Earth* that it was the incarnation of Christ and not Christ's resurrection that has the biggest impact on our faith: "I believe the greatest miracle of all time was Jesus' birth: God Almighty willingly choosing to become God incarnate, God in the flesh. The Lord of the Universe, as a vulnerable babe, entered into the struggles of humankind at a tumultuous time and in a nondescript place."

Have you ever anxiously waited for something? The presence of God with us is arguably the most incredible event in human history and marks God's pursuit to know and be known by us. When we love like Christ loves, we are regifting God's presence to others and sharing a glimpse of eternity with the rest of the world.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the miracle of your incarnation. Help me to receive the gift of your presence this Christmas season. To whom might you be leading me to regift your love in the coming days? Amen.

Lighting Advent Candle

As we light the Christ candle, we welcome the tiny babe, born in a manger. Hope of the world, bringer of Peace, Joy of our hearts, and Love incarnate, we welcome you. Let Christ be born in us today. Amen.

Activity

Attend a Christmas Eve service, or join in on Livestream (Make sure you have a candle ready!)



CHRISTMAS DAY

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

Devotional by Dr. Tom Pace

It was the most common thing. It happens thousands of times every day. A child is born.

In a cave where the animals bed, Mary and Joseph make themselves a place to stay. The labor pains begin. The minutes between contractions grow fewer. No mother or sister is there with the young woman, and she is of course just a bit afraid. Joseph squeezes her hand when she cries out in pain. Wipes her forehead as the sweat rolls down. The hours go by. The intensity builds. Her screams and shouts get louder and closer together. The animals jostle uncomfortably. The young woman says little and Joseph says nothing, as nature prompts her to do what childbirth demands. Finally, her shouts are replaced by the momentary fearful silence before the tinny cry of a newborn. Mary is pregnant no more. A child is born. Yes, the most common thing. But there was something extraordinary in this ordinary birth. No doubt it was a sacred moment. They knew, or thought they knew, that this was no ordinary child. But I wonder if the parents could comprehend that it was the moment that divided history in two, that the world would be forever changed, that the kingdom of God had finally dawned.

Today is an ordinary Christmas, much like last year's Christmas day and the one before that. But I pray that for you, this might be a day where something common and ordinary becomes sacred. Maybe your own history is divided in two, that Jesus might be born into your life anew, that your world will never be the same.

Prayer

O God, words cannot express the joy and gratitude for you coming to be with me, to be with us. I pray that this ordinary day may be sacred, and that my own life will be forever changed. In the name of Christ, I pray, Amen.



All Advent Candle Prayers are from *The Uncluttered Heart* by Beth A. Richardson. Copyright © 2009 by Upper Room Books. Used by permission.

EVERYTHING ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS AT ST. LUKE'S

Westheimer Campus

Conspire Christmas | December 2 | 7:30 p.m. | Sanctuary

Austin's Grammy-winning choral ensemble Conspire returns to St. Luke's for their signature holiday concert. Tickets available at StLukesMethodist.org/conspire.

March to the Manger | Sunday, December 4 | 9:45-10:45 a.m.

Children in our 2s-5th grade Sunday School classes will bring un-wrapped toys to Sunday School for the Jingle Bell Express program at the Christian Community Service Center (CCSC).

Friends at Home Poinsettia Delivery | December 4

Stop by the table in the Sanctuary Hallway Sunday morning to pick up an Advent Poinsettia and instructions on how to deliver it to a Friends at Home member at their residence. If you want to reserve a name in advance, contact Shelley Quillin at 713-402-5033 or squillin@stlukesmethodist.org.

It's a Wonderful Life | December 4 | 2:30 p.m.

Join the Tapestry Players for this perennial holiday treat—a “live radio” adaptation of the Frank Capra classic that is celebrating its 70th anniversary. One show only on Sunday, December 4 at 2:30 p.m. in the Rotunda Theater. Admission by donation.

UMW Advent Spiritual Growth Service | December 6 | 10:30 a.m. | Chapel

All St. Luke's women and guests are invited to an Advent service of music, scripture and Holy Communion followed by a potluck brunch.

Service of Prayer and Healing | December 7 | 6-7 p.m. | Westheimer Chapel

The Christmas holidays can be especially difficult for those suffering from illness and their families. Come for a service of prayer and find the peace amidst the bustle.

Christmas in the Chapel | December 9 | 7:30 p.m.

Join us for an intimate evening of Christmas music in the Chapel featuring Credo, a choral ensemble under the direction of Ryan Jones. Free admission.

Las Posadas | Sunday, December 11 | 9:45-10:45 a.m.

Mary and Joseph, accompanied by St. Luke's children, reenact their search for shelter by knocking at the doors of the inns (classrooms). At the end of the Sunday School hour, classes enjoy the breaking of a star-shaped piñata and seeing the nativity scene.

Encounter's Christmas Cantata | December 11 | 8:45 a.m.

If contemporary worship is your style, join us for Encounter's special Christmas music service. No organ. No choir. The Encounter band and special guest musicians fill the Fellowship Hall with heart soaring worship, which includes a message from Sr. Pastor Dr. Tom Pace.

The Rob Landes Christmas Concert and Family Sing-a-long | December 11 | 4 p.m. Sanctuary

Organist Rob Landes presents an afternoon concert of Christmas selections on organ and piano. The concert will also feature the Sunday Sing and Joyful Noise choirs, and a cocoa party hosted by the Children's Ministries following the concert. Free admission.

Christmas Music Festival | Sunday, December 18 | 8:30, 9:45, 11 a.m. | Sanctuary

St Luke's is known for its outstanding choirs and the highlight of the year is the Annual Christmas Festival. Come hear the Chancel Choir joined by a full orchestra and a hope-filled message from Sr. Pastor Dr. Tom Pace. Hint- Beat the crowds and come to the 8:30 a.m. service!

Gethsemane Campus

Christmas Around the World | December 14 | 5:30 p.m.

Celebrate Christmas at Gethsemane with a holiday potluck, fun and fellowship, followed by

Christmas Around the World Carol Sing | 6:30-7:30pm

What do Christmas carols sound like in east Africa? Or southeast Asia, or central America? Join us for an evening of global carol singing.

The Story Houston

Arrest These Merry Gentlemen | December 11 | 9:40 and 11:05 a.m. | The Story Houston building

The Story Houston's children present their first Christmas musical during both Sunday worship services.

Travelers Christmas Eve Candlelight | Thursday December 15 | 7 p.m. | The Story Houston building

Going to be away for the holidays, but want to celebrate Christmas Eve at a service that's approachable and unassuming, fun and engaging? Love is the story God is telling, and we're here to share it in a candlelight service with carols and a message from Rev. Eric Huffman about the significance of Christ's birth.



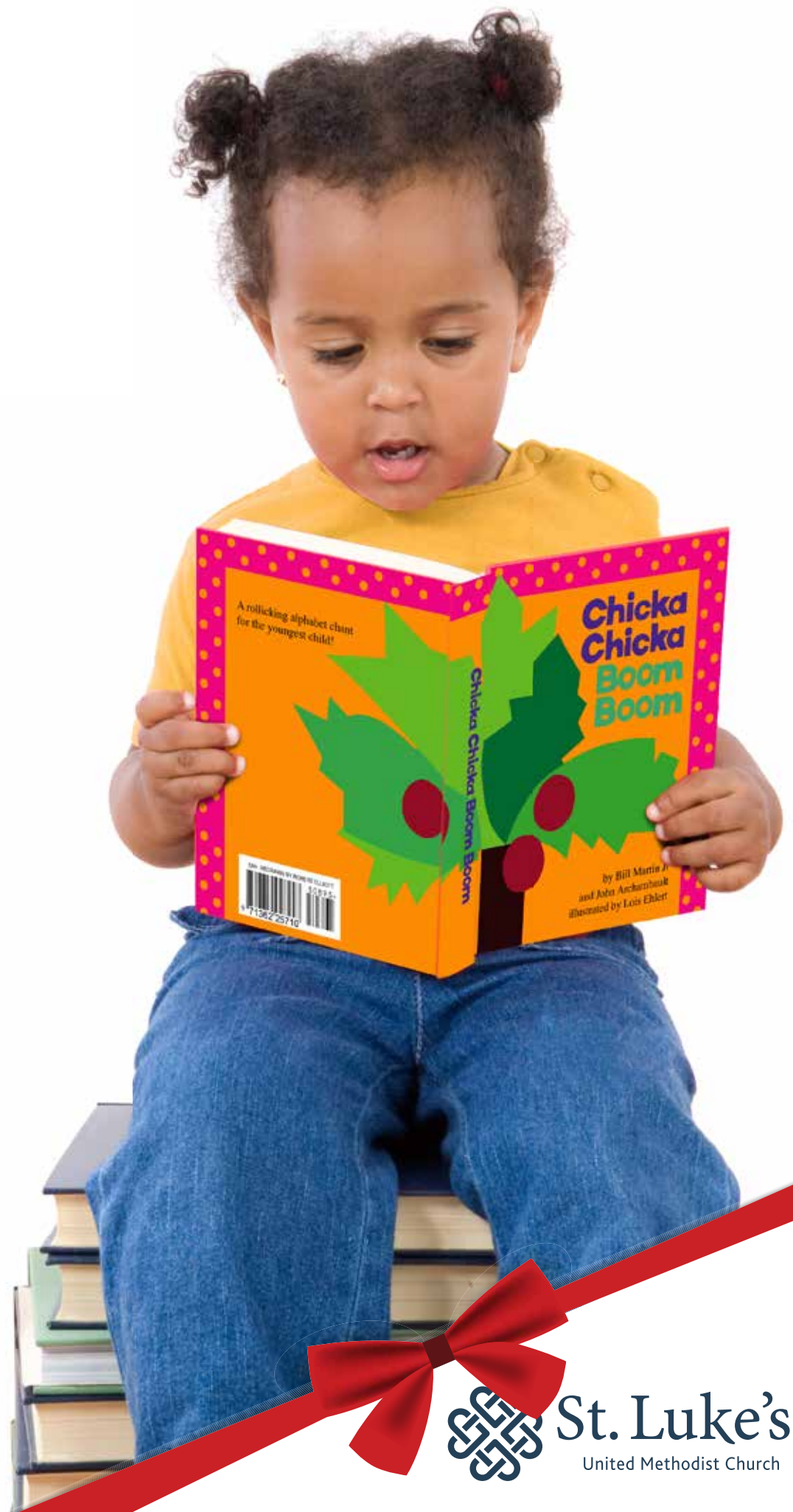
Christmas Offering 216

This Christmas we're supporting three organizations doing great things in the area of "Zero to Five Learning" for at-risk children in the Gethsemane Campus area.

Join us as we partner with Collaborative for Children, Legacy Community Health and UTHHealth to provide:

→ books
→ training
→ tools

so that every child has the opportunity to grow into the person God plans for them to be.



St. Luke's
United Methodist Church



Christmas Prayer

*By way of Bethlehem lead us, O Lord, to newness of life;
by the innocence of the Christ Child renew our simple trust;
by the tenderness of Mary deliver us from cruelty and hardness of heart;
by the patience of Joseph save us from all rash judgement and ill-tempered action;
by the shepherd's watch open our eyes to the signs of thy coming;
by the wise men's journey keep our searching hearts from giving up;
by the music of the heavenly choir put to shame the clamor of the earth;
by the shining of a star guide our feet into the way of peace.*

—Theodore Ferris