

ABOUT THE COVER ARTWORK

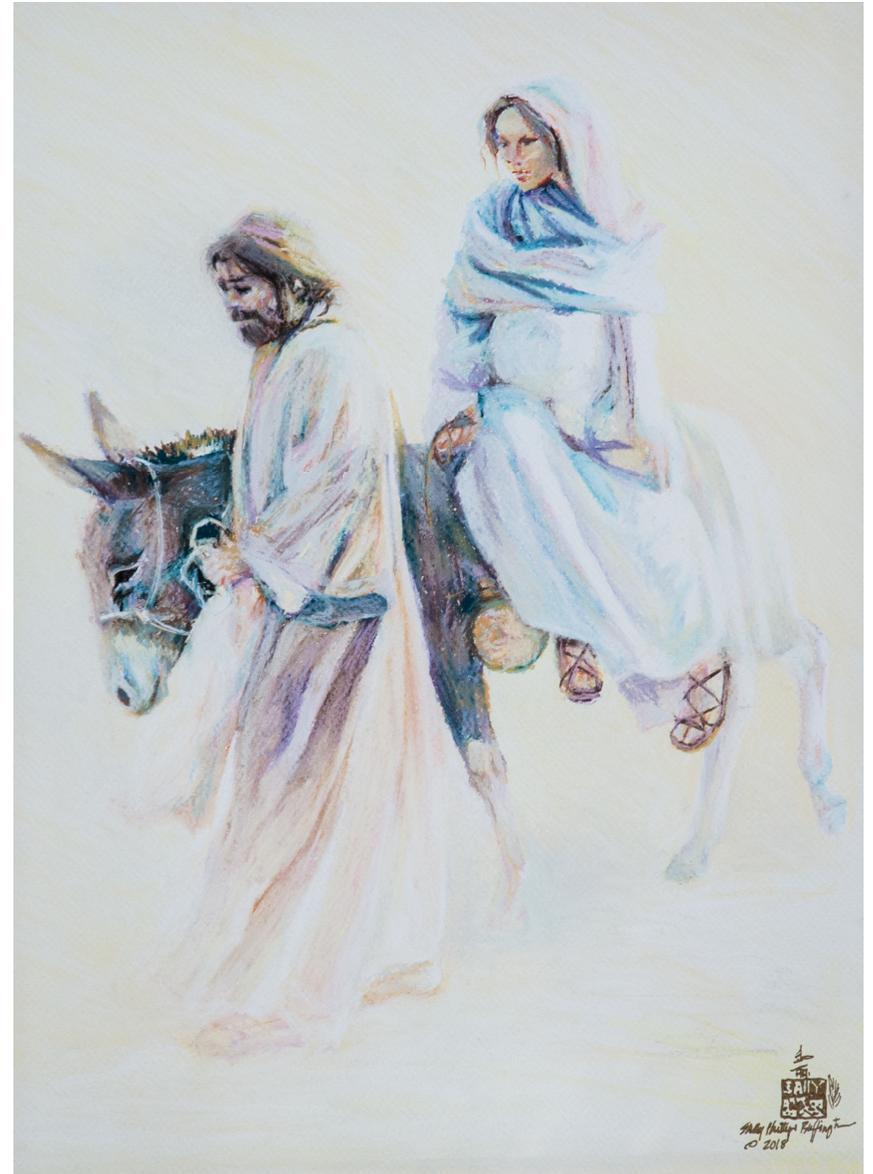


In 2018, Rev. Grady Mosley asked me to paint two paintings to use as banners to frame the Cross during Advent.

As I reflected on Advent and thought about how best to portray the anticipation of Christ's first coming, I thought of the faith of Mary and Joseph. The willingness of the little donkey that bore Mary with our Savior yet to be born. Four living beings who changed the course of history through their combined efforts guided by God above. Each had a vital role to play in what became the greatest story ever told.

The palm branch next to my signature symbolizes the gift the Lord has given me. The painting was done in European pastel using my little finger.

Sally Buffington



ADVENT 2020

ADVENT 2020

MADISON FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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MADISON FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH INTERCESSORY PRAYER MINISTRY

The mission of the Intercessory Prayer Ministry is to bring to God, through Jesus Christ, the concerns of our congregation, our city, our community and the world by the prayers of individuals and groups. Madison First UMC is a praying church. This ministry, which began with 37 volunteers in 1998, has grown considerably over the years. The prayer warriors are everyday men and women much like you. Most pray alone. Some pray as couples. Some pray as entire families. The volunteers range in age from preschool to ninety-two. Some are retired. Many are employed. Though not everyone writes notes, during a typical week, these volunteers write approximately 100 cards and letters to persons who need comfort, consolation and support.

The ministry has realized some awesome answers to prayer – some miraculous healings of body and spirit. God doesn't always answer prayers in visible, altogether understandable ways. Intercessory prayer is, however, a powerful resource. In spite of prayers that appear to be unanswered, intercessory prayer does work! It is the greatest gift we can give to another person. As one volunteer said, "We're standing in the gap for others when they either cannot pray or desperately need our prayers."

If you would like to be a part of the Madison First UMC Intercessory Prayer Team, or if we could pray for you, contact our church office at 706-342-3325 or visit our website, www.madisonfumc.com.



CELEBRATING ADVENT

THE FOUR WEEKS OF THE ADVENT SEASON provide an opportunity to focus on the coming of Christ. As we prepare once again to celebrate His birth, we are reminded that He comes to us continually in Word and Spirit, and that He will come again in final victory. Perhaps this year – a year marked by isolation, uncertainty, fear, loss, and conflict – we have an even greater need to reflect on all that our Savior has given us.

When we are discouraged, even sinking into despair, may we find **HOPE** in knowing that Jesus has overcome the troubles of this world.

Where the world encourages conflict and hatred, may we seek instead the **LOVE** of Christ, allowing Him to love others through us.

When we are grieving because of significant changes in our lives, may Jesus restore the **JOY** of our salvation with the deepest assurance that we are forever His.

When our minds are filled with fear and worry, may we turn to the Prince of Peace, who promises to calm those worries with a **PEACE** that passes all understanding.

As you read the Scripture passages and reflect on the devotions written by members of our congregation, may you receive the gift of His presence this year. Allow Him to lift you out of the circumstances that threaten to steal your hope, love, joy, and peace. With Jesus as your guide, may you be inspired to live each day as a child of God "without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world" (Philippians 2:15, NRSV).



THE ADVENT WREATH

THE SEASON OF ADVENT is a time of waiting as we prepare our hearts and lives for the coming of the Christ child. Using the Advent wreath and its candles is a way that many Christians celebrate Advent at church and in their homes. Advent wreaths typically include three purple candles and one pink candle on a circular wreath of greenery to depict the four weeks of Advent. A white candle, located in the center of the wreath, is called the Christ candle.

November 29 – The First Sunday of Advent

We light the first purple candle, which signifies **HOPE**, because Advent is a time of waiting and hoping.

December 6 – The Second Sunday of Advent

We re-light the first candle, then light the second purple candle, because Advent is a time to celebrate God's **LOVE** given to us.

December 13 – The Third Sunday of Advent

We re-light the first two candles, then light the pink candle, in celebration of the **JOY** found in our Savior and in our salvation.

December 20 – The Fourth Sunday of Advent

We re-light the first three candles, then light the last purple candle, which signifies the **PEACE** we find when we lean into the presence of God.

December 25 – Christmas Day

We re-light the four candles around the wreath, then light the white candle in the center, the **CHRIST** candle, to celebrate the waiting is over and the Christ child is born.

Several students in our Youth group have pre-recorded candle-lighting devotions for each Sunday of Advent. You may access them on our website (www.madisonfumc.com/Advent2020) to lead your family when you light the candles of the Advent wreath in your home.



DECEMBER 25 JOHN 1:14-16

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

John 1:14-16

NO GIFT WILL EVER COMPARE

John promised One was coming to dwell among us. As always, God delivered on His promise. Jesus was born and set out to change the world.

This Scripture is especially poignant as we celebrate the Advent season. We often focus on the secular aspects of the Season – parties, decorations, family events, and gift giving – sometimes forgetting the true reason we have an Advent season. The greatest gift we could ever receive was given to us when God sent His Son to earth. We were not expected to give a gift in return; only to accept this gift and share with others. What an incredible love God must have for His children to give this gift. He knew the plans and knew that His "gift" would suffer and ultimately be sacrificed.

As a parent, I know a love like no other. From the moment my children were born, my heart and soul has beaten through them. As they have become adults, I have had to "let them go" into the world. I cannot imagine the magnitude of love God felt for us as He let His Son come to us. I want to focus on remembering the wonderful gift I have been given in Jesus and never take for granted the Father's unending, undeniable love. No gift will ever compare.

Shannon Collier is a 5th grade teacher in her 28th year of teaching. She lives in Madison with her husband, Steve, a contractor. They have 2 adult children, Will and Amelia.

Prayer: Dear Lord, may we cherish the incomparable gift of your Son, a gift greater than any other we may ever receive. Amen.



DECEMBER 24

MATTHEW 2:9-12

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 2:9-12

FOLLOWING THE STAR

The wise men could have studied the sky, but then continued about their business, ignoring the new star. They could have travelled part of the way and gotten tired and decided it wasn't so very important to see the new King. Traveling was difficult and tiring, but they wanted to see Jesus. Our journey on this earth is about using our gifts to honor the Savior. It is about seeking Him and following even when it is difficult and tiring. It is about making time to worship Him.

One day, when we see Him face to face in heaven, we will do as the wise men did and bow down in worship to our King. In my family, we read the Christmas story before presents are opened each year to make sure everyone hears about Jesus' birth. It is our way to worship Him. I have an ornament that says "Wise men still seek Him," and it reminds me to worship My King in all my days.

Laurie Lewis was born and raised in Morgan County. She is married to Charles Lewis from Macon, GA. They have two boys, Dillon (28) and Wade (24). Charles is a 30-year Army veteran and Laurie plans events and designs floral arrangements.

Prayer: Dear Lord, when we are tired and seeking You seems too hard, draw us near to You so we may find joy in worshipping You, our King. Amen.



DECEMBER 1

JOHN 1:1-4

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

John 1:1-4

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

At first glance, one might question how this passage relates to Advent devotions. Our culture focuses so intently on Christmas that we forget Advent is not just about celebrating the birth of Jesus; it is also about anticipating His promised return. John's words are a reminder to us that Jesus did not begin His existence that holy night of His earthly birth. Jesus has always been, just as God has always been. Jesus and God are one. In the beginning, God spoke the Word, and through Him (Jesus) all things were created.

The power in Jesus' birth is that He willingly set aside His place at God's right hand on the throne, humbled Himself in the form of the most vulnerable of humanity, and traded His glory to live our life and die our death to save us from our sins. He is the Light of the World come to illuminate our darkness and bring us true life. In Advent, we anticipate that future day when we will all see the return of our glorious Savior and King!

Deborah Mosley is wife to Pastor Grady, mother of three, and grandmother to four. She is a Media Specialist at Osborne Middle School in Gwinnett County and small group leader at Madison First UMC.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for bringing us true life, both here on earth and in heaven to come. Amen.



DECEMBER 2

GENESIS 2:4B-9, 18-23

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed . . . The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Genesis 2:8, 18

NEVER ALONE

Following the creation of heaven and earth, God made man. But God knew that man needed a helper because "it is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). We all may *feel* lonely sometimes. But from the very beginning, our wonderful, all-knowing God set everything up for us so that we would never *be* alone. And we never are.

It may seem difficult to reconcile the creation story and Adam and Eve with the birth of Jesus thousands of years later as written in the New Testament; however, celebrating the season of Advent reminds us of God's promise that we are never alone. We have Jesus! Our greatest helper is always with us!

He walks with us and talks with us. All the time.
He is in our hearts. Always.
He loves us. So much.
He is God's greatest gift to us. Forever and ever.
We are never alone. Not Ever!

Sarah Burbach is the daughter of a United Methodist minister. She is married to David and they have one daughter, Laura Margaret. She is Co-President of the UMW and teaches adult Sunday School classes.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the assurance that we will never have to walk alone because you are always with us. Amen.



DECEMBER 23

MATTHEW 2:3-8

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

Matthew 2:3

OUR KING HAS COME

The Jewish people expected the Messiah. They had learned from the prophet Micah (seven centuries earlier) that He would be born in Bethlehem. Micah spoke of the One "who will be a ruler over Israel . . . and stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord" (Micah 5:2, 4).

However, when the Magi appeared in Jerusalem with news of the One who had been born King of the Jews, the people were disturbed, and so was their King, Herod the Great. I can understand Herod's distress. But why were the Jewish people disturbed? The news of the birth of Jesus should have assured the people that the God they loved and trusted had come through for them. Their King had come. Maybe the turmoil of their times and the somber state of their nation made it difficult for them to believe that God had really sent them a Savior.

This devotion was written sixteen days before the 2020 presidential election. Many would describe our times as tumultuous and the state of our nation as somber. I do not know who the newly elected president will be, and I will pray for our nation and whomever is elected president. But I do know that the God I love and trust has already come through for us and sent a Savior, the Messiah, to shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord. We should not be weary because our King has come.

Laree Zant and her husband, Dan, have 2 children, Maclane and Carolina, at the University of Georgia. Laree is director of Madison First UMC Preschool. Dan is a Family Practice doctor in Madison.

Prayer: Dear Lord, show us how to place our complete trust in You even during uncertain times in our lives. Amen.



DECEMBER 22

MATTHEW 2:1-2

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

Matthew 2:1-2

LESSONS FROM THE MAGI

I believe there is a lesson in these two verses for me and for all of us. First, pray for spiritual wisdom, and second, be willing to move on God's prompting. The Magi were listening for God, faithfully waiting and watching (spiritual wisdom) and ready to go on a journey when He called (willing to move). They said on arrival, "We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship him."

Kudos to the Magi for their faithfulness, their diligence in watching and waiting, and their willingness to put their lives on hold for this important event that so much of the rest of the world missed! May the Magi rest in peace knowing that they saw the Son of God in person!

Instead of placing the Magi of your nativity set near Mary and Joseph, consider moving them around your home each day to symbolize their travels from their homeland to Bethlehem. Think about the hardships they may have encountered in their journey. In what ways has your journey to faith in Jesus carried you through hardships as you drew near to Him?

Chris and Robyn Cook have two sons, Carter and Elijah. They have been members of Madison First UMC for more than 15 years. Chris is an artist and he owns Madison Studios, a website design and marketing firm located in downtown Madison.

Prayer: Dear Lord, our journey to faith may take us many places as we seek You. Thank You for the assurance that when we seek You we will find You. Amen.



DECEMBER 3

GENESIS 3:6-11

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

Genesis 3:8-9

WHERE ARE YOU?

When I read this Bible story as a child, I often felt so sorry for Adam and Eve. I felt like they were "in trouble" with God because they disobeyed His very specific command. As I have grown in my walk with Jesus, I see now that God may have been disappointed by their actions, but He was not surprised. Nothing we do shocks God. Why? Because He already knows.

The most beautiful part of this story to me, as an adult, is that God is right there with Adam and Eve all along. He never leaves them or withholds His love from them. Instead He gently asks them, "Where are you?" This may seem like a silly question since God knows where we are at all times. He also knows where we stand in relation to Him at all times. ***But sometimes we don't.*** Sometimes our walk with God requires us to pause and ask questions: Where am I in my relationship with God? What am I hiding? What do I fear? What do I want to avoid revealing to God? He is always by our side – with arms open wide – showing mercy, compassion, and forgiveness to those who choose to seek Him. What a gift of grace!

Julie and Steve Speyer have lived in Madison, GA since 1999. Julie owns Pure Bliss Spa & Shop. They have two grown children, Annie (26) and Jack (24), who both attended Morgan County Schools and enjoyed fellowship at Madison First UMC while growing up.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for seeking me out even when I have strayed far from you. Amen.



DECEMBER 4

GENESIS 17:3-8

No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

Genesis 17:5-7

THE PLAN

Abram lifted his face from the ground. He saw nothing more than when he bowed in fear. Regardless, his heart had seen and heard. Jehovah. The One True God.

Abram had given himself to Jehovah. Seldom had he felt comfortable or capable of the tasks Jehovah asked of him. Still, he followed. Obeyed. Now at the age of ninety-nine, he received a new name. Abraham. Father of many. The truth was he was the father of one.

But the new name came with a promise. Jehovah's plan.

Who would be among Abraham's descendants? Perhaps a great leader? One who would teach the people to love. The same way they wanted to be loved. To forgive. The same way they wanted to be forgiven. To accept. The same way they wanted to be accepted.

What was he thinking? Such a person would be . . . the Messiah. The Messiah would surely descend from a great king! A man after God's heart! Not a shepherd.

But, Jehovah had a plan. Always . . . a plan . . . for everyone.

Teresa Wallace is a life-time member of Madison First UMC. She is the aunt of two amazing nephews, three beautiful nieces, and great-aunt of three incredible nephews and two adorable nieces.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to embrace Your plan for us, even when we feel incapable of fulfilling them. Amen.



DECEMBER 21

LUKE 2:13-16

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Luke 2:13-14

WHY SHEPHERDS?

I can only imagine what the shepherds were thinking as they witnessed a multitude of heavenly host singing and praising God. As they stared in awestruck wonder, they were obviously so moved that they traveled to Bethlehem to find baby Jesus for themselves.

Ironically, they were the only people in the Bible who were directed to search for "a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" at the time of Jesus's birth. Even the wise men did not see Jesus until He was a couple of years old. I wonder if they ever considered, "Why me?"

I believe God chose those held in lower esteem to experience the awe of His Son before anyone else to show us our own worth. Regardless of who we are or how the world views us, we can all make a difference for Him by having faith and following Him just like the shepherds did that night long ago.

May we all fully comprehend our worth to God, and in obedience, follow His will throughout our lives in order to find Jesus, even today, over 2000 years later. In doing so, we are likely to experience moments of awe in our own lives.

Jessica Crawford and her husband, Michael, have two daughters, Brooke (10) and Blake (8). They moved to Madison in 2016, along with her parents, Eddy and Cathy Crumbley, and her sisters, Alicia and Jennifer, and their families.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we are so thankful that You came to earth to offer salvation to people from all walks of life. Amen.



DECEMBER 20

LUKE 2:15-20

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Luke 2:16-18

ORDINARY PEOPLE—EXTRAORDINARY MESSAGE

Throughout the Bible, God chose simple, common people to do great things for Him. Just as very ordinary fishermen were later chosen to follow Jesus and preach the Resurrection, very ordinary shepherds were chosen to witness the Incarnation and proclaim the Good News of His birth.

We don't know much about the shepherds, but we do know they were obedient in their response. They left the darkness of that night to follow the light and find Jesus. Upon seeing Him, they were filled with joy, awe, praise, and a new purpose. They had a zeal to tell others about the Messiah, and they amazed all types of people as they shared the message.

The Lord can take us from the humblest of circumstances, and through His Spirit and power, He can make us capable of extraordinary things. This Advent season may we also follow the light of our Savior, be filled with joy and amazement, and respond, as the shepherds did, with a desire to share the Good News with others.

Alicia Braswell and her husband, Kim, have a son, Cad (13), and daughter, Cate (11). Her sisters, Jessica Crawford and Jennifer Braswell, and her parents, Eddy and Cathy Crumbley, are also members of Madison First UMC.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for using ordinary people like us to share the extraordinary news of Your love. Amen.



DECEMBER 5

PSALM 137:1-6

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

Psalm 137:1-4

WE ARE WAITING

God's people were exiled in Babylon, and they were sad and yearned to be back in Jerusalem. They looked to God to restore them as He had done for their ancestors. They waited and hoped in prayerful expectation for the coming of the Messiah.

We observe Advent as the coming of the Christ Child into the world as a newborn baby, while also knowing that we, as the church, wait in expectation for Christ's second coming to rescue the world once again from sadness and separation. We are waiting in joyful anticipation of that day, knowing that we are all God's children. As He has promised, we are assured of eternal life with Him, and oh, what Joy that is! As we begin this Advent season, let's remember the wonderful words of the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" which we sing to commemorate that first coming and in expectation of Christ's second coming in the future.

"O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here.
Until the Son of God appears,
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."

Ray and Cindy Spence are parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of a wonderful family, and stay busy with the IPM, SPRC, as well as growing berries and peaches on the farm.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to wait in joyful expectation of your return even as we celebrate during this Advent season. Amen.



DECEMBER 6
PSALM 22:1-2

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.

Psalm 22:1-2

GOD, ARE YOU THERE?

We have all cried out these same words when we have experienced a great fear or a deep sorrow. We know that God is the Ruler of all and that His love for us is unlimited, but at times we still feel alone. King David must have felt very sad and alone when he wrote this psalm and cried out to God. Jesus also cried these words while He was nailed to the cross.

This may be a question we all ask from time to time, but we know that our God always listens and He will never forsake us. When we cry out to God asking where He is in a certain situation, it does not mean that our faith is unsteady. Instead it means that we still trust and believe in God. When we pour our hearts out to God, it makes us feel closer to Him. God wants us to ask Him anything and tell Him everything! He will answer our prayers . . . we just have to be patient!

Theresa and Hank Johns have been married for thirty-nine years. They have two married sons and five grandchildren. She enjoys gardening, cooking, and spending time with the family.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we are thankful that we can cry out to You whenever we need You, confident that You will always be there with us. Amen.



DECEMBER 19
LUKE 2:8-12

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Luke 2:8-12

JOY FOR ALL PEOPLE

What is Joy? As defined in the dictionary, it is a state of happiness or source of delight. The JOYOUS event of the birth of Christ was announced to shepherds watching their flock at night. Why shepherds? Shepherds because a Savior is born not just for the kings in palaces, or the wealthy dignitaries, but for ALL people. Christ is our Shepherd and watches over us, guides us, and lays down His life for us. Talk about JOY for those shepherds, and JOY for us today, knowing that Christ is born, and Christ restores our life in His death.

Imagine the fear the shepherds must have felt! "The glory of the Lord shone around them" (v. 9). Light is used to calm their fear and open their eyes. All of this as Jesus is born as the Light of the World. How joyous and glorious! May your Christmas season be full of the LIGHT and JOY that the shepherds felt one night many years ago.

Amy Miller is a Staff Accountant with Stoltz Business Services, Inc. in Watkinsville. She is married to Matt, a CPA and Partner with Treadwell, Tamplin & Co. They met in college, married in 2002 and moved to Madison in 2012.

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we celebrate this Christmas season, may we be filled with the light and joy of Your presence in our lives. Amen.



DECEMBER 18

LUKE 2:6-7

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Luke 2:6-7

THERE'S NO PLACE GLORY CAN'T GO

The world had waited for the Messiah, the long-anticipated King, for thousands of years. But instead of being born in a palace, Jesus was born in a stable, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a lowly manger — an animal's food trough. Not very elegant, was it? It was not at all what the world expected. What are we to make of it?

Perhaps Jesus came with such humility so that *we would know* that *He knows* what this human life is all about. That He came not for the things of this world, but for the things of eternity.

Or maybe it tells us that Jesus will go anywhere with us and for us — so that when we find ourselves in that dark and lonely corner, we will remember that He was there first, and He is there with us still. As Frederick Buechner wrote, “There is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too.”

Ruth Bearden is married to Rob and they raised their four children, James, Emily, Clayton and John David here in Madison with Rob's mom, dear MamaB. The Inn is not as full as it used to be, but the joy continues.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I am so thankful to know that You will go anywhere with me and for me. Amen.



DECEMBER 7

ISAIAH 9:2-7

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 2:6-7

COMPASSIONATE VICTORS

We have seen more contests lately than many of us care to see, ranging from politics to football. There comes a time in every season that the victor is declared, and the competition ends. Advent tells the story of what is next.

We all experience time on the winning side, and unfortunately on the losing side, but there is always hope for a better tomorrow. The Messiah is the promise of ultimate hope and victory for all mankind. The victory that He brings is eternal and everlasting.

All too often we want to relive our victories at the expense of those who were defeated. The Prince of Peace taught us that the new covenant calls for us to love our neighbor, love those that we have defeated, and in so doing love ourselves. Victory without compassion and caring is not victory at all.

Jimmy Stokes is a retired college chemistry professor, high school principal, and association executive. He and his wife, Patricia, have been residents of Madison and members of Madison First UMC since 1996.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we place our trust in You as our Prince of Peace. May we share Your love and peace with others. Amen.



DECEMBER 8

ISAIAH 43:1-4

But now, this is what the LORD says — he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.”

Isaiah 43:1-2

FEAR NOT, YOU ARE LOVED BY GOD

“I have called you by name. You are mine.” God knows every star by name. He not only knows us by name, but calls us by name. He knows the number of hairs on our heads.

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.” The words “fear not” appear in the Bible 366 times, one for each day of the year and one for leap year. God tells us we are not to fear because He has redeemed us with the blood of Jesus.

As parents, we are able to relate to this by raising our own children. Even before the day they are born we already love them, we name them and consider them our own. We know every little detail about them from subtle differences in physical features that nobody else would notice, to even the slightest quirks in personality traits. We would make almost any sacrifice to protect them. We teach our kids to not fear things in life, and to know we will always be here for them even in hard times.

Jason and Ashley Brown have lived in Madison for fourteen years. They have four kids between the ages of 4 and 18. Ashley is the Director at the Presbyterian Preschool. Jason is an owner of Georgia Civil and is a member of Madison First UMC Praise Band.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we are thankful that You know us by name and because we are Yours, we do not have to walk in fear. Amen.



DECEMBER 17

LUKE 2:6-7

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Luke 2:6-7

AREN'T WE ALL THE INNKEEPER

The Innkeeper gets a bad rap. It was his busy season, and the inn was full. There was probably much to do to keep everyone happy. Haven't we all felt like the innkeeper? A million things to handle, just trying to keep it all together?

He could have turned Mary and Joseph away, but after a quick glance at them, he knew they were in great need. So, he let them stay in a dark, quiet stable nearby — it was just a cave, really. But it was all Heaven's Glory needed.

The innkeeper's heart **was** open that night — just enough to make a humble space for the coming of a King. What if he had stopped and taken the time to realize what was about to happen? What if he had heeded the urge to go and fall on his knees at the sound of the baby's first cry?

The Innkeeper's heart was open, but he missed the miracle. Lord, open our hearts wide. Don't let us miss the miracle of this Advent season.

Ruth Bearden is married to Rob and they raised their four children, James, Emily, Clayton and John David here in Madison with Rob's mom, dear MamaB. The Inn is not as full as it used to be, but the joy continues.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please open my heart wide so that I fully comprehend the miracle of Christmas. Amen.



DECEMBER 16

LUKE 2:1-5

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. . . . So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Luke 2:1, 4-5

BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL

Luke set the scene for something big. Caesar Augustus called for a census and payment of taxes. Joseph traveled to Bethlehem to be counted, and brought Mary, whom he had pledged to marry, with him. You can imagine their burdens. Mary was unwed, very pregnant, and forced to travel on foot and donkey to pay money they did not have. But there was something so bright and beautiful ahead. The weight of their burdens would soon be lifted in an unimaginable way.

I would venture to say 2020 has been heavy for many of us. At times, I have struggled to carry its weight. Covid is heavy, racial injustice is heavy, politics are heavy, separation is heavy. Are you ready for a little air? I sure am. Luke 2:1-5 gives me hope for things to come. The scene is set, the weight will soon be lifted.

Mary and Joseph's hard journey ultimately revealed what mattered. This year has reminded me of what really matters — faith, hope and love — God, family, and joy in everyday life. This Christmas season, let's remember what matters and not let the weight of 2020 slow us down in spreading the bright light of Christ.

Ashley Johns is a lifelong member of Madison First UMC. She lives in Madison with her husband, Clint, and their two young children, Charlie (5) and Harris (4).

Prayer: Dear Lord, when the cares of this life weigh heavily on us, may our faith in You shine even brighter. Amen.



DECEMBER 9

ISAIAH 11:1-9

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

Isaiah 2:6-7

GOOD NEWS

What are you currently looking forward to? Depending on your generation, you might be anticipating retirement, a vacation, a new home, raising a family, getting a driver's license, graduation, playing sports, or spending time with friends at school.

The Bible promises we can look forward to God's new kingdom, where:

- We will live in unity with eternal friendships.
- We will be judged by what is in our hearts, not what we have done.
- We will have great peace with others in safety and security.
- We will be delivered not only from evil, but also from the fear of it.

This is great news! We are often told to live in the moment, focus on what is before us, and seize the day. However, during particularly stressful moments in time it can be helpful to have something to look forward to, like the coming Messiah.

When we walk with Jesus, our Perfect Shepherd, we have hope. Rejoice in His coming and tell others the good news!

Macy Johnson is our pianist, wife of Jeff, mother of Alex Johnson (Birmingham, AL) and Libby Nelson (Fletcher, NC), and "Nana" to Dahlia, Carver, Noah, Carson and Kynlee.

Prayer: Dear Lord, may we walk with You today while looking forward to Your new kingdom. Amen.



DECEMBER 10
LUKE 1:26-38

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. . . . For nothing will be impossible with God."

Luke 1:35, 37 (NRSV)

NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

My dad has read this passage to us on Christmas Eve since I was a little girl. Mary was a young teenage girl, single, without any real social status. Can you imagine how she must have felt when Gabriel declared that she would soon become pregnant with the Son of God? Mary was given one of the greatest honors and privileges one can receive. She could have easily turned it down, but she knew God would not give her anything she could not handle.

When I think about how Mary felt, my own role as a mother comes to mind. Mary relied on God's grace and His plan for her. There have been many times in my life that I have been faced with challenges and given tasks that I felt I could not handle. As a mother of twins, I face something new each day. I think it takes a lot of grace, patience, and reliance on God to be a parent. I pray daily that I am doing the right things for my girls. I rely on my faith in God to get through the not-so-fun days. I know God would not have blessed AJ and me with twins if He knew we could not handle it.

This passage shows us Mary's faith in God. Just like her, we know that nothing is impossible when we put our trust in Him.

Christian Williams is married to AJ Williams. They have 3-year-old twin girls, Charlotte and Chandler. Christian is a Morgan county native and is happy to be back in Madison raising her family. She is a long-time member of the church and also serves on the Madison First UMC Preschool Board.

Prayer: Dear Lord, when we face things that are impossible for us, may we trust in You to accomplish the impossible. Amen.



DECEMBER 15
LUKE 2:4-6

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

Luke 2:4-6

JESUS WILL BE HERE SOON

Anticipation! There have been many moments in my life filled with anticipation: graduations, new jobs, new cities, and changing schools, just to name a few. Looking back, the biggest anticipation I've ever felt would be waiting for the birth of our children. Each pregnancy being a nine month long test of patience. There were many days spent dreaming of who our babies would be when they joined us here on earth.

Can you imagine the anticipation Mary and Joseph must have felt in the moments before Jesus was born? They likely did not understand the gravity and true importance of His birth and how His coming would affect the world and all generations to come. Luke reminds us Jesus would soon be born into this world. He would soon take the shape of man and walk alongside us. The world would soon know His promise. What a time of anticipation for Mary and Joseph!

Brighton and Jesse Patrick have lived in Madison for eight years. Brighton is a Nurse Practitioner at St. Mary's Hospital and Jesse is a row crop & beef cattle farmer. They are kept busy by their 2.5-year-old and 5-month-old daughters.

Prayer: Dear Lord, even as we celebrate Your birth so many years ago, we look forward with great anticipation to Your future return. Amen.



DECEMBER 14

LUKE 1:46-56

*And Mary said, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name."
Luke 1:46-49*

MARY'S SONG

How blessed we are as Christians to have the Lord guide us in the very smallest of everyday decisions to those that are overwhelming. We can trust in the Lord's word to fill us, keep our faith strong, and hold us steadfast. In those unsure moments, we can sing out our needs. By asking God for help, we are confirming our belief that His promises are true. He is there and ready to embrace us. In my times of need, I often sing my song:

*Jesus, I am calling, come take my hand,
Jesus, come be near me, help me to stand.
Fill me with Your caring, turn my way to your love,
Show the path of your righteousness,
Shine your light from above.*

*Jesus, I am ready, tho' hard it may be
Touch me with your healing, help me to see.
We'll walk close together, as my life starts anew,
Show the path of your Holiness,
Now my trust is in you.©*

Carol MacAllister is wife to John, mother of two sons, and grandmother of four grandchildren. She is a teacher, and loves sharing her songs, artwork, and writing.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for responding to the songs of my heart — songs of joy as well as songs asking for strength and comfort. Amen.



DECEMBER 11

MATTHEW 1:18-23

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Matthew 1:20-21

LIVING FAITH

This passage describes the mystery around which our entire faith is built. The Virgin Mary becomes pregnant and her faithful husband does not understand as they have not yet "come together." One can only assume his first reaction to this news! I don't think anyone would fault him for wanting to abandon her and leave her to her shame — after all, she has broken their marriage covenant and brought humiliation to her husband.

Joseph is a man of compassion, however, and does not wish to disgrace Mary. After all, he loves her! What a maelstrom of emotion he must have felt! Through his faith and willingness to obey the Lord, Joseph rears Jesus as his own and does not question his legitimacy. Joseph's ultimate decision to surrender to the Holy Spirit impacts us eternally.

God sends us opportunities to "love like Joseph" regularly. When was the last time you embraced the chance to love someone whom society has cast out? Who has the Lord placed in your path? Stay open to each chance God gives you to show grace and love to those who may not otherwise experience His tenderness and mercy.

Travis and Courtney Thomas live in Madison with their three daughters, Caroline, Emily, and Mary Georgia. Travis is a system level administrator with Henry County Schools. Courtney is a Special Educator at Morgan County Middle School. They are active church members and can be found at or near a football field or cheer gym most nights of the week.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please let me be a person who embraces the chance to love others with Your love. Amen.



DECEMBER 12

LUKE 1:39-45

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Luke 1:39-45

LEAPING FOR JOY

As Mary set off to reach her relative, Elizabeth, we cannot help but wonder what went through her mind. Is this really real? Upon entering the home of Zechariah, Mary greeted Elizabeth. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy, for she was filled with the Holy Spirit, and knew this child was the Son of God. Surely this brought great encouragement to the virgin Mary.

Elizabeth was at least sixty years old and six months pregnant with a son she had long waited for. Putting ourselves in Elizabeth's shoes, would we have had the same response? Elation over young Mary's news? Or would we have been envious of a child greater than our own? The example Elizabeth sets of rejoicing has made a big impression on our hearts and reminds us to always delight in the ways God blesses our sisters and brothers.

Sam and Sarah Ball have lived in Morgan County for eight years and have been members of our church since 2016. They have two children, Evie (4) and James (2). Sam has served as a Lay Leader and Sarah on the SPRC. Together they lead a Sunday School class for young adults.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to rejoice in the many ways that you bless my brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.



DECEMBER 13

LUKE 3:1-6

The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.'"

Luke 3:2b-6

PREPARATION

We got the news the first time in early 1996. Stephanie and I were going to be parents. With no time to waste, we painted the guest room baby blue. The next months were filled with furniture and clothes shopping, baby showers, doctors' appointments, birthing classing, and practically memorizing every word in the book, *What to Expect When You Are Expecting*. In 1999, the news came again, starting the drill all over again. And once more in 2001, when we learned our family would become five. Though each time was different, they all had one thing in common. We got news of something wonderful coming, and we had to get prepared.

In this experience I can identify with John the Baptist. He got word of the coming of Jesus and made it a priority to prepare the hearts and minds of those around him. In the same way, we can all share in the preparation of the coming of our Lord in this Advent season.

Bob Dickson is the husband of Stephanie, and they are the recently empty-nested parents of Alex (23), Emily (21), and Rachel (18). Bob is a member of the Men's Bible Study group and has taught Sunday School and Confirmation classes.

Prayer: Dear Lord, fill me with the desire to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others during the Advent season and throughout the year. Amen.