

Open the Door

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."
~ JOHN 8:12 (NIV)

Isometimes imagine my life as a long, dark room lined with doors on either side. Each leads to a different area of my life — friends, family, work — they go on and on. At the end of the room, there is an old door. Light sometimes shines through the crack near the bottom, illuminating the room just enough so that I can see the outlines of the other doors. But most of the time, the room is dark, and I remain in solitude.

Behind that old door is the light and glory of the Lord. With the door locked shut, darkness prevails. However, if I open the door and invite God into my heart, light fills every inch of the room. Choosing to follow Jesus means that I will never walk in darkness again. As the room glows with His brilliant love, the light seeps under the cracks of the doors to the other areas of my life. If I open these doors too and let His light reach even farther, then the Lord will shine and speak through me no matter where I go.

It's easy to keep the door locked and hide in the darkness. You can survive that way, but it's lonely in a room filled with nothing but closed doors. However, if we have the courage to open our hearts to God, we will always walk in His light. The more we allow Him to shine through our lives, the more we will inspire the people we encounter to pursue a relationship with the Lord.

He has the power to transform a dark room with His beautiful light, and all it takes is an act of courage. When we open that lonely door at the end of the hall, we open our hearts to the infinite light of life.

Lord, give us the courage to open the door and invite you into our lives. Only you can guide us, and I pray that you consume me with your glorious light.

RACHAEL KELLEY

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Celebrate the third Sunday in Advent!

See page 34.

Gift Wrapping

...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 2:7 (NIV)

“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” ~ LUKE 2:12 (NIV)

Newborn babies are swaddled tightly in their little blankets for warmth, security, and comfort. Babies are often swaddled for the first five months or so. Sometimes as they grow, it is a chore to wrap them, but it is a labor of love. What a joy it is to “unwrap” them to count their fingers and toes. These little ones look at you with trust, and when they are picked up and cuddled, they snuggle.

I’ve often thought of Mary as she swaddled her baby boy in strips of cloth. It may have been 2,000 years ago, but the feeling of protection, warmth, and love that goes into the act of swaddling was probably the same.

As we wrap our gifts this Christmas season, no matter how many or how few, may each of us remember the greatest gift that was wrapped and given to us all those many years ago in a stable in Bethlehem.

As we unwrap the pages of the Bible to learn more about Jesus and all that He brings to us each and every day, may our hearts be full of His love and light. Also, let’s share Him by our words and actions with all whom we meet and help them to unwrap the greatest gift ever given — Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Happy wrapping and unwrapping.

Lord, as we go through this Advent season, we want to unwrap all that you give us. May we recognize your gifts and share them with others.

CHAR GAYLORD

BETHLEHEM LUTHERAN CHURCH, DELMAR, NY



The greatest gift wasn’t wrapped in shiny silver paper
but in swaddling clothes.

Author unknown

Secretly Giving

Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which He has given you. ~ DEUTERONOMY 16:17 (NKJV)

Imagine giving 150 families you didn't know an anonymous Christmas gift during one of the worst economic times in their lives and in our nation's history. That is exactly what Mr. B. Virdot (alias) did during the 1933 Christmas season of our nation's Great Depression. In one of the best-selling books of 2010-2011, *The Secret Gift*, Mr. Virdot's grandson tells of a suitcase he found with 150 thank-you letters in it. The letters described how 150 destitute families spent their \$5.00 gift, at a time when a loaf of bread was seven cents. It tells of how appreciative they were of such a generous gift. None of these families ever knew the identity of B. Virdot, and it wasn't until 2008 that his identity became known and shared with the relatives of the original 150 families.

In Matthew 6:3-4, Jesus states, "When you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret." If you have ever received an anonymous gift, especially during the Christmas season, I know you will agree with me that it was a very uplifting experience. It shows that someone out there truly cares about you and doesn't feel their identity is important in expressing the love of Christ toward you. As you may already know, it is also a remarkable feeling when you give an anonymous gift to someone. Mr. Virdot must have had an incredible feeling of satisfaction knowing he was able to help all those families during such a low point in their lives.

The bottom line is that Jesus told us we should always look to help others when we can and be servants to others like He was throughout His life. In Acts 20:35, He said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." During this holy season and at any time of the year, we don't have to look long and hard to find a family member, friend, neighbor, or someone sitting in a pew near us who may be in need of a "pick-me-up" like an anonymous gift. If you haven't already given one, try it; you may like it, and it may become habit forming and may cause a chain reaction of giving.

Lord, may we have grateful and generous hearts to honor you.

TED FRETT

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Nature – A Gift from God

They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty and I will meditate on your wonderful works. ~ PSALM 145:5 (NIV)

Messages we receive from God come to us in numerous ways. Sometimes we recognize these messages, and sometimes we don't. This year has been a challenging one and at times disappointing. I felt the nudge God gives us when we need to change our path. I stopped teaching Bible study and returned to being a Bible study student. I had a strong need to go back and learn so I could grow in my relationships with others and God. The decision was hard, and I had inner conflict following what I believed God was directing me to do. I knew it was right, but I felt torn.

God sent me a miracle. It didn't look like a miracle, but God works that way. He used my friend to send an email with photos attached that displayed nature's splendor. My friend's sister-in-law takes photographs of nature near her home. Through those photos, I experienced the miracle of God's creatures, and they gave me peace. "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform."* I've heard that many times. This time it was illustrated right in front of me and brought me awe, peace, wonder, and the closeness I needed to our Heavenly Father.

When we need to see the Lord in all His splendor, He will appear to us. God showed me birds in many beautiful colors, awesome eagles, adorable beavers, fuzzy babies, and many other critters He has created. They flew up from the water, droplets streaming down from their wings. They looked at me through innocent fawn eyes expressing trust and love. They were not afraid of where they were or where they were going; they were safe with God.

When these photos come via email, I stop whatever I am doing to see, feel, and know the peace they bring to me from our Father in Heaven. They, along with Judy and Eileen, bless my life, make me feel comfortable with my decisions, and most of all show me the love of God.

*Thank you God for all that grows, Thank you for the sky's rainbows, Thank you for the stars that shine, Thank you for these friends of mine, Thank you for the moon and sun, Thank you God for all you've done!****

ELIZABETH CHIPMAN
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*God Moves in a Mysterious Way, written by William Cowper in 1773.

**Child's Thanksgiving prayer

Come as a Child – Laughing, Dancing, and Singing in the Rain

Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.
~ PSALM 37:4-5 (KJV)

Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope.” ~ ACTS 2:26 (KJV)

I have often felt the desire in my heart to play in the rain as I once did as a child. One day I was feeling discouraged. For me, getting outside on my knees weeding is great therapy. As I worked, I meditated and prayed. Then it began to rain! God’s faithfulness from past prayers brought renewed encouragement to my prayers of the present. The experience was marked by my laughter, joyful singing, and dancing in the rain!

It dawned on me that God was giving me the blessing of the desire of my heart to dance and sing in the rain like a carefree child again. Often on rainy days I had looked out my window with yearning in my heart to laugh and play out there. God answered that desire. I laughed and danced and sang. I kicked and splashed, did some soft shoe steps and lifted both arms with outstretched hands to the God I worship. I looked up at the sky and felt the raindrops pour over me like renewed baptism. I belted out *The Doxology*, singing my heart out.

I was told by my spouse to stop because people would think I was drunk! Have you ever had so much joy of Jesus that people thought you were drunk? That happened when the Holy Spirit arrived and washed over the disciples in Acts 2. Satan may try to steal our joy, but on this day I sang and danced for the light-hearted joy of Jesus. A sacrifice of praise and worship. I was giddy with joyful laughter. (See Hebrews 13:15).

Father God, help us surrender our burdens and feel the freedom of your grace and Holy Spirit upon us. You inspire great joy, great prayer, and great hope. May we laugh and sing and dance with the heart of a child of God. To your glory and praise. Amen.

DIANA McMILLION
NORTH RALEIGH UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, NC

How Could It Be?

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, 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.” When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. ~ MATTHEW 1:18-21, 24-25 (NIV)

As we celebrate Advent and Christmas draws near, and we anticipate our spiritual preparation for the birth of our Savior Immanuel, many thoughts and feelings pass through the cerebral and spiritual parts of one’s being. We reflect on the scriptures that describe what transpired during this time. The scriptures speak of the many personalities that are brought to the forefront of the truth of the birth of Jesus: Mary, Elizabeth, the innkeeper, three wise men who were also astrologers, shepherds, angels, and a precious infant as guest of honor. However, there is also one more name that touches my heart — Joseph.

Scriptures don’t seem to transcribe much of Joseph’s speech. He was a man of few words, but of great strength and love. In my mind, his actions spoke louder than any words ever could. In his compassion and integrity, he protected Mary from any disgrace or physical harm that might have come to her. He provided food, water, and all that would keep the body sustained. Moreover, he was most certainly with Mary as she delivered her Son beneath the heavens.

I can only imagine the courage and commitment of love when Joseph said “yes” in his heart to being the earthly stepfather of the King of the Universe. What an honor to be told that God was entrusting His Son into Joseph’s hands!

How could it be this baby in my arms, Sleeping now, so peacefully
The Son of God, the angel said; How could it be?
Lord, I know He’s not my own, not of my flesh, not of my bone
Still, Father, let this baby be the son of my love
(Joseph’s Song by Michael Card)

MICHAEL PATRICK MURPHY
ZION COMMUNITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Our Protection

Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. ~ MARK 5:9-13 (NIV)

During the summer I have always enjoyed walking the boardwalk in Ocean City. Since I was a child I have noticed people feeding the seagulls. The city has posted signs trying to keep people from feeding the birds because over the years, they have become very aggressive in their search for food.

One day I watched as a seagull sat on the roof of Kohr Brothers Frozen Custard store and waited until a person walked into the open. Then it swooped down from behind and took their ice cream. I actually saw a seagull hit the person it attacked.

To help control the birds and protect the residents and the visitors, this year the city hired a professional bird training company to deploy hawks, falcons, and owls over the boardwalk every day from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Their job is to frighten off the large population of gulls that have laid claim to the popular tourist attraction of the boardwalk. We saw this in action one night when a man was walking with a hawk on his arm. You could see the gulls flee. I was surprised when he released the hawk, which circled a couple of times and landed on the roof of the music pier. During the time I was there, I saw only one seagull fly by.

Like the man named Legion in the scripture, Satan is always trying to take a place in our hearts. The demons in Legion recognized Jesus and wanted no part of Him; they wanted to get away. When we have Jesus, we carry the protection that only God can provide. Jesus drove the demons from Legion into the swine, and they were destroyed. Jesus will drive away our demons and restore us to love and safety in Himself.

Lord, may we always be looking to you, believing in you, and trusting you to do what is best for us. Amen.

JIM KIER

PITMAN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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