



Beverly Heights
Presbyterian
Church

scattered seeds.

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

December 2020



Christmas Stories*

*A collection
of Beverly
Heights
Advent
memories.

A Christmas miracle.

By
Nate
Devlin



“You’re never going to believe what they want us to do. They want us to dress up like Joseph and Mary for this Advent Family Celebration.”



It was December of 2005 and I was finishing up my year as the intern at Beverly Heights Church.

I wasn’t really sure what this event was all about. But I had attended a meeting for the Advent Family Celebration earlier that day where plans were developed. There I was informed that, at the end of the night, it was tradition for the family with the most recent baby to play the Holy Family.

We would need to dress up in costume, sit in a pen with live animals and smile majestically as the congregation sang carols. Our son Nathan was 5 months old then, so we were the lucky couple.

I was not at all interested in getting in costume, playing the part or sitting among animals, but I like to think I am a team player

and so I went along.

What’s more, I was eager to please, knowing that the Session was considering a more permanent position for me after my internship, so my default position was to say “yes” to whatever was asked of me. But that didn’t mean I needed to like it.

When I went home that evening, I was fully prepared to commiserate with Holly about the whole thing. But when I told her the news, to my great shock and horror, she responded by saying, “Oh, I’ve always wanted to do something like that! Won’t it be fun!” I was sunk.

I have two overwhelming memories of that night.

The first was hearing Alex Frye, our former

director of Children’s Ministry, laughing hysterically at me while I was in the pen.

I had confided to her that I was really uninterested in the role. That evening she couldn’t help but enjoy the sight of my discomfort as I kept snatching Hannah away just before she was about to pick up the goat droppings.

Also, I didn’t realize this was a casual affair and so I showed up that evening in my brand-new suitcoat and slacks. Now I was sitting on a bail of hay, feeling the moisture wick through my wool pants.

I confess, the more I heard Alex laugh, the more I began to smile. The whole thing seemed ridiculous and I was starting to enjoy it.

The second thing I remember from that night was the sight of my wife and son. Perhaps it was the way the light was shining above Holly’s head, but to my eyes they appeared holy.

You see, just a few weeks before the event, Nathan had surgery to repair the cleft lip with which he was born. Though considered a routine surgery, it was traumatic for us to see him bruised, swollen and bloody. We had never cried before as we did after Nathan’s surgery.

But now, Nathan was in Holly’s arms and he was smiling. No longer the broken smile he was born with but a beautiful, whole smile.

It was a Christmas miracle, and it happened right here at Beverly Heights. I’m not sure if I’ve ever shared this story with anyone at the church before, but it’s a story that brings me joy, and I hope it does for you as well.



Advent Album.



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When kindness spoke to my heart.

By
Karen
Lindenfelser

“Overwhelmingly blessed . . . visit christmasjars.com and pray with me for whomever secretly blessed my family with not only a very generous and kind financial gift but who also warmed my heart in a way that will take a lifetime to repay. Thanking God and thanking the wonderful person(s) who did this for us.”



The Lindenfelser children: Laura Losi, Andrew and Julie

I have been blessed with so many wonderful Christmases.

There’s the magic of my childhood, as I watched my mom and dad scale back our own celebration one year so that my dad’s brother’s family could have a Christmas after my uncle unexpectedly lost his job.

There’s another occasion when Julie and I delivered Angel Tree presents to the sweetest little boy named Elijah. He captured our hearts when we gave him a nativity set and shared with him the real meaning of the Christmas story.

Then there’s the blessing I mentioned above and the backstory surrounding it.

Kindness speaks to my heart and spoke loudly to me when I came home on Dec. 27, 2009. I was shocked to find a container that had a wad of money in it, stuck in between my kitchen doors.

I thought “wow.” I thought an even bigger “wow” when I saw the bounty of the blessing.

It came at a time when money was scarce for us. To this day we have no clue who blessed us in 2009 (and again in 2010). But it sparked joy and gratefulness. It also sparked a sense that miracles still exist.

To say I was overwhelmed with the thought of the sacrifice it caused the giver is an understatement.

I never would have been able to accept that sacrificial gift in person from the giver. It hits me now, all these years later, that receiving it was a life lesson to me on how important it is to accept, understand and appreciate blessings and sacrifices.

It is but one example of the beauty of giving and receiving.

More importantly, I believe this story of giving and receiving offers us all a foretaste of the necessity to receive the John 3:16 ultimate sacrificial gift of eternal life that God gave to the world and that we joyously celebrate at Christmas.

It is a gift freely given to all who accept His plan of salvation through the birth of the Christ child.

Merry Christmas.

Advent at Beverly Heights.

By Hudson
Winkler

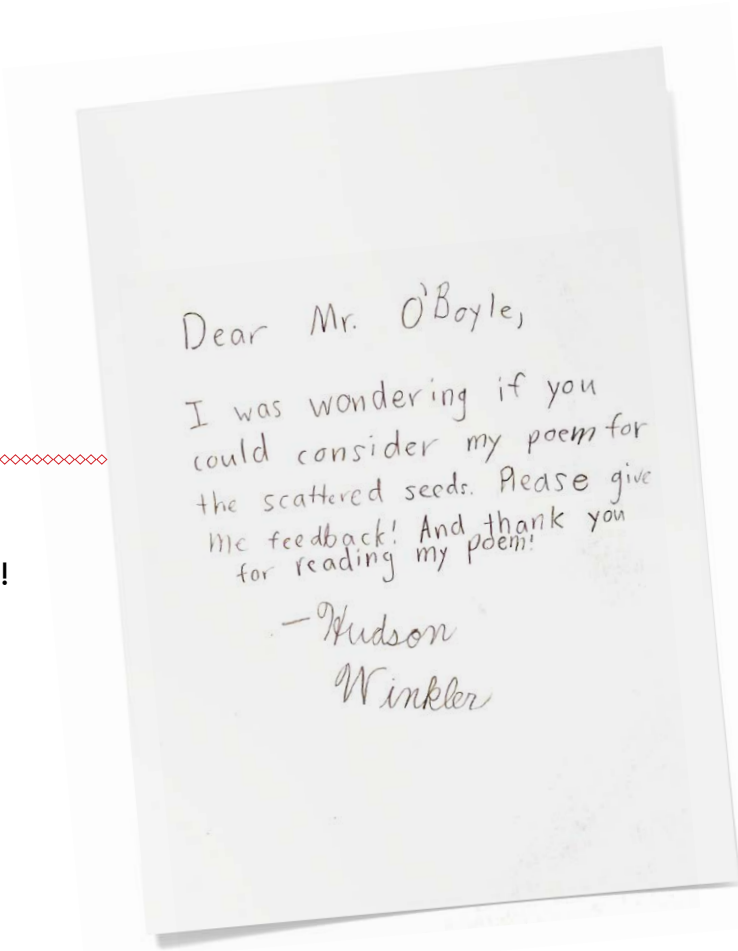
The days of Advent are very special times;
Singing songs, Jesus’ birth, and even tone chimes!

Outside we see the nativity and sheep,
And our love for God grows very deep.

Each Sunday morning the candles we light,
And Pastor Nate tells us to do sit tights.

Families all gather to worship and wait,
And together we sing and celebrate!

Our hearts are filled with joy and delight,
As we wait for Christmas at Beverly Heights.



One spinning Advent wreath...

By
Katie
Doyle

When Tom O’Boyle asked me to write a “Beverly Heights Christmas story,” I polled my family. My daughters Sarah and Meg and my husband Jack all responded immediately: “The spinning Advent wreath.”

For many years, the church’s Advent wreath was a large “doughnut” hanging over the floor of the chancel. Its diameter was about between 5 and 6 feet. Folks referred to it as an airplane tire or a wagon wheel.

It was a styrofoam circle about a foot high, covered with plastic sprigs of Christmas greenery. Five candles were placed evenly around the circle, one for each Sunday of Advent and one to be lit on Christmas Eve. For the rest of this story to make sense, you should understand how this wreath was suspended. Several wires were attached evenly around the wreath and were combined about 5 feet above the wreath to a single wire which was attached to a beam in the attic.

Before the recent renovations to the sanctuary, you could still see a 3-inch hole in the ceiling that was the wire’s path to

the beam. The base of the candles was about 9 feet above the floor.

To light a candle with its wick several inches above the wreath, you had to either stand on a ladder or stretch with a two-foot candle lighter. Though this wreath was large, being styrofoam it was not all that heavy. As it hung from only one wire, it was free to move.

All through Rick Wolling’s tenure as senior pastor, his Christmas Eve tradition was to tell the Christmas story starting with Genesis. It continued as it does today with the story of Moses and the Israelites being freed from slavery in Egypt, then on to the messianic Psalms, the prophecies of the prophets (mostly Isaiah) and ending with Galatians.

On the Christmas Eve of this story, Associate Pastor Alvin Smith was to light

the four Advent candles as Rick mentioned the four Old Testament references and the Christ candle as he mentioned the Galatians text.

Regrettably for Alvin, the reality of physics showed up just as he moved to light the candles. Isaac Newton’s first law of physics is that an object will not change its motion unless a force acts on it. Some slight breeze (or was it a small bump from the candle lighter?) put the wreath into motion. Ever so slightly the wreath began to spin.

Alvin’s task of steering a candle lighter in a darkened sanctuary to a specific candle 3 feet above his head – attached to a spinning wreath just out of his reach – quickly became an exercise in futility.

Having missed a candle, he’d wait for the next candle to pass by, only to have a split second to direct the candle lighter to its wick, and – guess what – miss.

He’d wait a second or two for the wreath to spin so that the next candle was a candidate for lighting, and again miss.

It was like watching an arcade game play out.

Making it more difficult was that the wreath was too high for him to lift his arm to stop its spin. Here comes another candle, another pass with the candle lighter, and another unlit candle.

All the while Rick continued his telling of the Christmas story. Very quickly he knew he’d need a longer story.

Those of us listening that night heard of prophecies from every prophet in the Old Testament, and if Rick had included prophecies from unknown prophets, we would not have noticed. We were transfixed by Alvin’s unsuccessful but valiant attempt at candle lighting. Would this be a Christ-less Christmas if the Christ candle could not be lit?

Rick, with grace, at last moved to the Galatians passage and announced that yes, Christmas would be Christ-filled regardless of the candles.

It was not long before the arrival of the Advent Star that continues to grace our sanctuary throughout Advent and the Christmas season.

When it was first used, those of us who had witnessed the spinning Advent wreath exchanged winks and even a few giggles: this Advent wreath will not spin!

...and another.

By
Amy
Lucas

As a child at Beverly Heights in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, the first Sunday in Advent meant the arrival of the Advent wreath.



To a child’s eyes, this wreath was enormous and was the signal that the countdown to Christmas was going to begin! The large wreath hung from a chain above the chancel and required the use of a ladder to reach the candles perched on top.

Each Sunday the children of the congregation would crowd to the chancel and hold their breath as Pastor Wolling would choose a child to light the candle.

There was no advance warning; parents of the lucky chosen one would nervously watch the proceedings, praying their child would not be the one to burn down the church.

Pastor Wolling would climb the ladder behind the child, stabilizing them as they excitedly held the long candle lighter. With great caution Pastor Wolling would light the wick of the candle lighter and the child would lean over and light the candle.

The congregation would collectively hold their breath as the flame danced all around the candle, and the audible sigh would reverberate through the sanctuary when the wick was lit and child safely deposited to the floor. (And no, I was never so lucky to climb the ladder.)

On Christmas Eve, a child (usually in their choir robe) would be chosen to light the Christ candle. Then as we approached the time in the service of complete darkness, the candles would be extinguished, ready to be relit as Pastor Wolling spoke of the flickers of light, the signs of the coming Messiah, throughout the Old Testament.

One particular Christmas Eve, the wreath began to spin on its chain as Pastor Timm, our associate pastor, attempted to light the candles in succession while Pastor Wolling shared the traditional “From darkness to the passing of light.”

No ladder was used, but that meant Pastor Timm had no visibility to see the wick for which he was aiming. Once again, the congregation held their collective breath as they watched Pastor Timm chase the candle to keep up with Pastor Wolling’s place in the narrative.

Each time the long brass candle lighter accidentally bumped the wreath, the spinning increased and with it the nerves of the congregation. Eventually all candles were lit, but it certainly took longer than anticipated!

The candles on our Advent star are stationary (thankfully!), no ladders are involved and children are no longer randomly chosen without prior planning, but the joy of lighting each candle remains as we get closer and closer to our celebration of the birth of Christ. What a thrill it is for me to have celebrated so many glorious Advent seasons here at Beverly Heights Church!

Christmas memories.

By Bill Mehaffey

My memories of Beverly Heights Church are abundant. By my calculation, I have spent 70+ years worshiping at this church and celebrating Christmas here.

This leaves me with many memories.

Our daughter Erin married Jim Rimmel three days after Christmas in 1996. Shortly thereafter, I arranged to donate to Rick Wolling several different types of exotic wood from which our current Advent star was hewn.

My early Christmases at Beverly Heights are distinctly memorable.

When you are a child, the time between each Advent season seems to creep by. It was an eternity until the boxes of decorations came out again to decorate church and home for the season. Now it seems as if we just take all the decorations down and it is time to put them up again. I am told that this is an aspect of the aging process.

Christmas long ago is the same but



different. In the 1950's the candlelight service was the event of the season. Back then there was only a midnight service. As a result, not only was the church full, but the service was broadcast, audio only, to the smaller chapel and to the social room. A family member was often sent very early to claim seats for the extended family.

The ushers encouraged people to move over to make room for others. They then had to deliver the news to some that there was seating in the chapel and the social room.

Tom Brown and his son Duncan were in charge of the ushers at that time. They and other volunteers provided the welcoming message of the season to everyone entering the sanctuary. Perhaps their example is one of the reasons that today Beverly Heights remains a welcoming church.

Although I do not recall the exact date, the leadership of the church decided to conduct an earlier service to make Christmas Eve candlelight services more family friendly, especially for those with young children.

Yes, we do things differently today versus the 1950's. However, the one memory of Christmas for me is the unchanging message of this church that Christ is born to be a Savior to all who call Him by name.

Part of that memory was being old enough to hold my own candle and raise and lower it with the music as we sang "Silent Night." Afterward, we quietly left the church and wished everyone a "Merry Christmas" as we declared that Jesus Christ is born.

Beverly Heights Church has been a rock upon which my family and I have stood for many years. My fervent hope and prayer is that it will continue to be here for my children, grandchildren and others yet unknown, teaching the scriptures to them for decades to come.

My first Christmas Eve service.

By Jen Tan

Before coming to Beverly Heights, I had never attended a Christmas Eve service.



Not in the Congregational Church in Massachusetts that I grew up in, nor at any of the many churches I attended before this church became my home.

I can therefore recall with crystal clarity my very first Christmas Eve service at Beverly Heights Church.

I remember vividly the moment the sanctuary lights dropped. There was utter darkness and stillness.

A sense of hushed and holy expectancy, then the flare of the Christ candle. Rick's sonorous voice presented the glorious thread of grace and mercy that began with the Fall of man, and ran right through history to the moment our Lord entered this world as one of us.

That sense of wonder, of awe at the unfathomable love of a God who would send his only Son into a world full of brokenness to BE broken – that is what I always take away from each of the subsequent services we've since attended on Christmas Eve.

What a joy and a privilege it is to count my children among those who are steeped in this glorious tradition now continued through Nate. May they always remember the light that broke our darkness in the years to come!



Finding Christmas on my To-Do list.

By Louise O'Boyle



Louise's daughter Cara Webster with Ben, Charlie and Mae as baby Jesus, at the Advent Family Celebration last year.

Christmas.

My past Christmases at Beverly Heights Church. Not this year, 2020, that is likely to be a very different sort of Christmas. But a Christmas from when my children were young and we didn't wear facemasks.

Let me start by being brutally honest. Just the thought of Christmas in the past, when we were still in November, made my heart beat a bit faster.

The miracle of Christmas was first and foremost the Christ child and His coming to Bethlehem with the plan to save us from our sins.

A second miracle of the season was that somehow, by Dec. 24, I had been able to accomplish the items on my "to do" list.

You see, in November, there are birthdays – two of my children's and Tom's. As the children were growing up, these celebrations had my attention until mid-November.

Then, there was Thanksgiving. With it came the food drive at church and some kind of ministry opportunity for the congregation to help people who live nearby – in the past, Angel Tree with Prison Fellowship and now, the GROW Living Stones ministry in the South Hills.

I won't even mention the gifts, projects and preparation for Christmas that was happening in the preschool as we got closer to the holiday.

My purpose of reviewing my schedule is to help you see the chaos of my mind as I entered December. I know MOST of you know EXACTLY what I am talking about – it was the same for you and your household!

I always attempted to slow down my mind and direct my attention to the Christ Child all of December. Beverly Heights Church has been a wonderful facilitator of devotions and programs to focus back on the meaning of Christmas. I so depended on these times of worship and praise!

But, still. There was decorating. (I have won a battle in recent years – we now reuse an artificial tree that simply comes down from the attic. Alas, it still needs to be put together and decorated!!) There were parties to plan and attend. Shopping to be done. Baking. Wrapping. Packages to be mailed. Christmas cards to be written. And a house to be cleaned and prepared for the arrival of guests.

And, in all this flurry, I attempted to remember the "Reason for the Season." Most days I succeeded but some days I did not. Some days, I was not kind or sane by the end of the day!!

So, what's my point? I Imagine these past seasons as a mountain. In November, I would be at the bottom in the valley below, let's say, a Mt. Denali. As I toiled upwards toward the precipice, I listened to music, attended all church programs, and lost a lot of sleep.

But I always got there – and when it was all done, and we had finished our traditional beef stew dinner on Dec. 24, we headed to Beverly Heights Church. Some years it meant the early service with our children in the choir. More recently, it involved adult choir and

organizing cars to get everyone to the pews.

But, FINALLY, we got there. I would sink into the pew. I listened to the nativity story read from the pulpit. And, then, what I had been climbing up to all of December began. I was at the top – the view would be amazing!! The lights went out in the church as I clutched my candle waiting expectantly for Rick or Nate's voice to start, "In the beginning ..."

When my daughter Cara was in college, and she was preparing for Christmas, she said what many of us feel about this special service at Beverly Heights. When we were relating our favorite Christmas traditions, she said, "It would not be Christmas without our pastor's Christmas message on Christmas Eve."

I agree.

This year will be quite different as Covid has changed some of the gatherings and preparation for Christmas. There will be no choir. There will be fewer parties and visitors. Much of the shopping will be done online.

But the meaning of the holiday remains. Jesus is at the center. And perhaps this year, when it is time to sit down in the pew on Christmas Eve – this time surrounded by my family (not the choir) – my mind will be a bit more settled and ready to hear the story once again of how God came into this world due to his amazing love for us!

BETWEEN SUNDAYS

BY RICK WOLLING

What were Mary's Christmas memories?

Betty was a simple woman. Born and raised in Vermont, she moved with her family to upstate New York during her high school years. She held various jobs during her life but none more precious than her employment as a wife and mother.

Betty Gates birthed five children – two boys and three girls – one of whom was my wife, Mary. Betty loved her family with passion, especially her son-in-law. She thought I was the greatest preacher to have ever entered a pulpit. Consequently, I adored her.

Betty loved babies. She couldn't get enough of them – her own and everyone else's. She particularly loved stories of pregnancy, labor and childbirth. On each of our children's birthdays, Betty would invariably ask her daughter the same question: "What were you doing X years ago today?" She loved the memories of the birth of her children and grandchildren.

My thoughts go to Betty when I read that Mary, the mother of our Lord, "pondered" the particulars of her son's birth, hiding them in her heart (Luke 2:19).

During the 30 years of her son's life, what were her favorite Christmas memories? The trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem? The "No Vacancy" sign at the Bethlehem inn? The report of angel visitants? The worship of wise men? The escape into Egypt?

And when did those memories get unpacked from her heart? Like Betty, each year on the anniversary of Jesus' birth?

I wonder if Mary pondered favorite Christmas memories during those three long days that followed her son's horrific death for the sins of the world.

Did she remember the joy of the shepherds or was it overshadowed by the despair of the disciples? Was the sight of astrologers bowing in



Cooper Wolling with his grandmother Mary. Cooper will be a confirmand in 2021. His sponsor? Grampie Rick.

worship in a local home blurred by the scene of those who knelt in sorrow at the foot of the cross?

Could she imagine, again, the angelic sound of "Glory to God in the Highest" or was that heavenly anthem drowned out by shouts of "Crucify him, crucify him," still ringing in her ears?

Favorite Christ memories of joy and gladness were no doubt mixed with reflections of sorrow and grief. As ours are when we celebrate Christ's birth each year.

I have clear memories of my dad, sitting in his chair in the living room after one of mom's classic Christmas dinners. All was joy and happiness with much

activity buzzing around and kids in the midst of Christmas excitement.

But dad was quiet, reflective. He too, I now assume, was pondering things that he had hidden in his heart. Was it memories of his childhood Christmases celebrated during the Great Depression? Was it Christmases away from home in the Philippines during the war? Was it lingering grief over the loss of his father whom he adored?

Christmas always seems to provide occasion to unlock things stored in our hearts, memories that are a mix of the good and the bad.

But gratefully, God had the last word for Mary and He does for us, too. It is the message of another angel visitant: "He is not here. He is risen just as He said."

May this glorious reality sanctify all of our memories, both good and bad, and fill us to overflowing with the Christmas joy that gladdens our hearts, lifts our spirits and restores our hope. This is the joy that truly has no end.

Rick Wolling is pastor emeritus of Beverly Heights Church.