

A Pilgrimage of Light, Part 1

Back when Sister Ave Clark worked as a special education teacher, her students made her an Advent wreath. Only it wasn't perfectly round like the store-bought ones. Instead, it was noticeably crooked. Sister Ave still has that wreath and uses it as a decoration every year. Why? Because, as one student told her, "It's not perfect, but it sure was made with love."

In her book *Advent~Christmas: A Pilgrimage of Light*, Sister Ave looks at ways that each of us, imperfect as we are, can help the light of love be born again in our hearts during the four weeks of Advent, just as God's love entered the world in the person of His Son on Christmas day.

During a *Christopher Closeup* interview, Sister Ave noted that the candles on our Advent wreaths are there to make us reflect on hope, peace, joy, love, and, ultimately, Jesus: "Make time each day to take that pause and to feel the light within so that we [can] carry it better into a world that's shaking a lot with wars, violence, and discord."

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Psalm 119:105)

Though I may not be perfect, remind me that I was created out of love, Father.

A Pilgrimage of Light, Part 2

Even though December can seem focused on the “go, go, go” of shopping and parties, Sister Ave Clark sees opportunities for stillness everywhere. While discussing her book *Advent~Christmas: A Pilgrimage of Light*, she said, “You can be still at a red light in the car...Just say, ‘Lord, thank You for this moment.’ Stillness can happen in a market when you’re waiting on line.

“Stillness can happen at home, maybe when you carve out 10 to 15 minutes. But stillness isn’t just sitting in a chair. It can be taking a walk, looking out your window. It could also be listening to somebody else on the phone telling you some good news—or some news they’re asking for prayer [for]. I’ve discovered that stillness comes in a variety of ways.”

Connection is vital, too. While Sister Ave was mailing her books at the post office, a stranger asked her what the book was about. Since she had an extra copy, she gave it to him as a gift. The man thanked her and promised to use it, even though he wasn’t Catholic. Sister Ave relishes those moments when God shows up in unexpected people and circumstances.

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for Him. (Psalm 37:7)

Help me find stillness in my day, Father.

A Pilgrimage of Light, Part 3

Sister Ave Clark admits that seeing God in times of darkness takes effort. That was the case when her car was hit by a runaway train 20 years ago, and she had to endure a year of intense recovery and rehabilitation. She reflected, “Do I wish it didn’t happen? Yes. But it brought different lights into my life, of understanding pain and having to adapt your life in a different way that you never thought you would.”

“I said, ‘I wonder what God wants me to learn along this way?’ I can remember my first Christmas after that accident, not being able to go to shops or anything. I said, ‘You know what? A phone call to somebody means a lot. A little note means a lot. Maybe the best gift we could give each other is that light of caring, the kind word, the extra listening, the forgiving, too.’”

“Advent can be a joyous, peaceful, loving, and hopeful time, and each one of us can make a difference in the world...[by] a kind word, a listening heart...But probably the most powerful is to pray, to give a prayer away to somebody...We have so much to give away and be thankful for.”

**Be kind to one another, tenderhearted,
forgiving...as God in Christ has forgiven you.
(Ephesians 4:32)**

*What non-material gifts can I share this
Christmas, Jesus?*

A Pilgrimage of Light, Part 4

Sister Ave Clark has a special place in her heart for those who are infirm or homebound, especially her fellow Dominican Sisters. Several of them are now in their 90s and 100s, living in Amityville, New York. “They used to be principals, nurses, college teachers, religious ed,” she explained on *Christopher Closeup*. “Now, they’re sitting in their rooms.”

After receiving Sister Ave’s book *Advent~Christmas: A Pilgrimage of Light*, the Sisters were taken by a quote on the back cover: “How will you be a Christ-bearer of the holy lights of Advent~Christmas time?”

They decided they would read the book as a group, reflect on its questions and insights, and share the answers in prayer. In other words, even though the Sisters can’t be physically active anymore, they remain spiritually active.

Sister Ave observed, “Christ took on humanity, so that we would know God’s love. So, we have to take on each other’s humanity, the glory of it, and sometimes the weakness and frailty of it, not push it aside...God holds up each person’s humanity, and that’s the wonderful gift of the baby in the manger.”

**Do not ignore the discourse of the aged.
(Sirach 8:9)**

Lord, help me show Your love to my elders.

A Pilgrimage of Light, Part 5

As she makes her way through the Advent season, Sister Ave Clark looks to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as her guiding light. She noted, “Mary said yes, not knowing fully where these lights were going to take her...But she said yes, and it’s the yes of trusting. I think that’s what’s needed in our world...Mary gave her son to everybody. Sometimes that’s what we have to do with our love: to not hold it back, not just give it when it’s comfortable or we’re being applauded. Give it unconditionally.”

That kind of love was witnessed by Sister Ave’s brother, Dr. Paul Clark, many years ago when he served in Vietnam during the war. A nun named Sister San Quentin (yes, that was her name) lovingly took care of lepers and demonstrated to him “how those suffering people were fellow human beings.” Dr. Clark said he “never forgot her brightness in the midst of war.”

In addition, one night Dr. Clark looked up at the night sky and saw the stars shining brightly. That moment reminded him that “the light will never leave us. It can feel hidden at times, but light never leaves us.”

Jesus said, “The light is with you...believe in the light.” (John 12:35-36)

*Help me to find the light when it is hidden,
Jesus.*

A Pilgrimage of Light, Part 6

One of the lights in Sister Ave Clark's life is James Palmaro, a poet who is blind. For Sister Ave's book, *Advent~Christmas: A Pilgrimage of Light*, James contributed the poem "The Advent Wreath." It beautifully captures the spirit of the season:

"The leaves are all gone,
the trees are barren and bare,
The autumn winds are chilling,
yet anticipation's everywhere.

It is the Advent season,
The winter nights grow near,
We search for the warmth inside ourselves,
Wreaths are everywhere.

Cousins to our Christmas trees
that bring us joy and brilliance,
We place them in and on our homes,
And they remind us of resilience.
Circular in shape, symbols of connection
That despite the cold and dark of night
We'll find light and resurrection."

**A shoot shall come out from the stump of
Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
(Isaiah 11:1)**

Jesus, lead me towards light and resurrection.

Youngster's Pearl Harbor Mission

When 11-year-old Harrison Johnson heard the story of Japan's December 7th, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, which drew the U.S. into World War II, he was intrigued. The North Carolinian read everything he could about the "date which will live in infamy," as President Franklin Roosevelt called it.

After visiting the Pearl Harbor National Memorial in Oahu, Harrison became concerned that his generation might forget the American heroes of that day, both victims and survivors. So, in collaboration with Pacific Historic Parks, which oversees the Memorial, he began the project Harrison's Heroes, to raise money to create and promote history projects about Pearl Harbor.

At first, Harrison raised money door to door and through local events. After a website for Harrison's Heroes went online, donations boomed. Within two years, \$100,000 had been collected. Harrison has been applauded by many, but the youngster remains humble. He told *WRAL*, "The real heroes are the men and women who sacrificed their lives to protect our freedom."

**Let no one despise your youth, but set the
believers an example in speech and conduct.
(1 Timothy 4:12)**

*Today, I pray for the heroes of Pearl Harbor,
Father.*

A Holy Disruption

During Advent, Christopher Award-winning author Amy Julia Becker (*A Good and Perfect Gift*) took to her social media accounts to explore two Biblical figures' very different responses to the news of Jesus's coming.

Becker wrote, "When Mary hears the message that she has been chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus, Luke tells us she was 'troubled.' When King Herod hears from the three magi that Jesus has been born, Matthew tells us he was 'troubled.' The news that Jesus is coming disrupts their lives.

"Herod responds with denial and violence. Mary responds with surrender and acceptance and receptivity. The news of God's love entering our world disrupts our expectations. It challenges us. It proclaims our belovedness apart from our achievements or worth. It exposes injustice.

"The news of God's love entering the world invites us to healing and freedom. It threatens us with radical acceptance and grace. God's love is a holy disruption that might trouble us deeply. How will we respond?"

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to Your word. (Luke 1:38)

Jesus, may I strive to surrender my heart and will to You.

The Silent Saint

During Advent, author Joy Clarkson reflected on the life of St. Joseph for *Christianity Today*, pointing out that he is “known as the silent saint...[because] he does not say a single word in any of the Gospels.” Despite this, Clarkson notes that Joseph is “a man of decisive action emerging from a rich inner life.”

For instance, when he learns of Mary’s pregnancy—and suspects infidelity—Joseph does not subject her to public embarrassment or worse. Instead, he devises “a merciful and wise plan” to divorce her quietly. When an angel comes to him in a dream, telling him not to leave Mary because her baby was conceived of the Holy Spirit, Joseph obeys the angel.

Clarkson observes, “[Joseph] let people think that he, a thoughtful and self-controlled man, had gotten her pregnant...He took Mary’s shame onto himself, perhaps foreshadowing what Jesus would do for all humankind. And all this he did without saying a word. Ours is a world drowning in words. In Joseph, the silent saint, I see a different way of being—a way of silence and action, where sometimes the most important words are the ones we don’t speak.”

**The prudent are restrained in speech.
(Proverbs 10:19)**

*God, in the silence of prayer, may we listen for
Your call.*

Kindness Eases Blue Christmas

After legendary singer Tony Bennett passed away in 2023, stories of his numerous successes filled the news. But, as with any life, there were also times of struggle. Christmas Eve, 1965, was one of those times.

As recounted by author Robert Sullivan in his book *Tony Bennett in the Studio*, the crooner was alone and depressed in New York City's Gotham Hotel that night. His marriage was headed towards divorce, and his two sons were spending the holiday with his wife. Professionally, the advent of rock music threatened Bennett's career performing American standards.

Meanwhile, a few blocks away, Bennett's old friend, bandleader Duke Ellington, was conducting a concert of sacred music. Ellington had invited Bennett to attend, but the singer was drowning so deeply in the blues, he didn't have the energy to go.

Later that evening, Bennett heard sounds outside his hotel room. When he opened the door, there stood the choir from Ellington's Sacred Concert, performing a private Christmas serenade to lift his spirits. Bennett relished that gesture of kindness for the rest of his life.

Show kindness...to one another. (Zechariah 7:9)

Help me make someone's blue Christmas brighter, Savior.

Operation Holiday Cheer

In 2004, a woman went to Dees' Nursery in Oceanside, New York, and asked if she could buy a fresh Christmas tree to ship to her son, who was serving in the U.S. military in Iraq. The nursery's owner, Tom Di Dominica Sr., was happy to give her the tree for free, but was unsure how to ship it overseas.

Di Dominica reached out for guidance to local businessman Jim Adelis, whose son was also stationed in Iraq. He, in turn, got in touch with the shipping company DHL Express, and their plan came to fruition. But they didn't just send one tree. They collected more than 100 trees, plus lights, menorahs, and holiday cards. The effort, dubbed Operation Holiday Cheer, has been going strong every year since then.

In December 2023, a caravan of volunteers traveled from Dees' Nursery to Kennedy Airport to deliver its donations. Joseph Dee told *CBS News'* Jennifer McLogan that this effort brings soldiers stationed in the desert a beautiful touch—and aroma—of home. Volunteer Lucy Adelis added, "That's the least that we can do, besides praying for them to come home."

**The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life.
(Proverbs 11:30)**

*May those in the military feel Your love,
Father.*

A Sweet Memory of Christmas

“Shall we bake cookies today?” Every December, Jeffra A. Nicholson’s grandmother greeted her with those words whenever she would come over to bake Christmas cookies as a child. Writing at *Guidedposts.org*, Nicholson recalled they would laugh and tell stories while decorating their delicious snickerdoodles.

By the time Nicholson was a college senior, her grandmother lived in a nursing home because her body and mind were failing. While visiting her one December, Nicholson “prayed that God might awaken her spirit, just briefly, so I could see some spark of recognition in her eyes.”

At first, Nicholson’s attempts to trigger a memory in her grandmother failed. Then, they went for a walk in the sun. Nicholson was shocked when her grandmother suddenly asked, “How’s school?” Nicholson happily responded with plenty of details, then noticed a look of determination on her grandmother’s face, followed by the words, “Shall we bake cookies today?” With joy, Nicholson answered, “Absolutely!”

Nicholson still treasures this final, poignant memory with her grandmother.

**The memory of me is sweeter than honey.
(Sirach 24:20)**

May all families create happy Christmas memories, Savior.

A Christmas Prayer for the Lonely

At *Guideposts.org*, Bob Hostetler shared a heartfelt Christmas prayer for the lonely and forgotten. Here is an excerpt:

“Lord God, in this special season, I come to You on behalf of those whose holidays are mournful reminders of loss or lack in their lives. I pray for those who, perhaps like Mary and Joseph upon their arrival in Bethlehem, feel forgotten or excluded over the holidays.”

“I pray for those who, perhaps like the shepherds, are required to work while others sleep or celebrate. I pray for those who, perhaps like Simeon and Anna, have outlived many friends and loved ones...”

“I pray also for prisoners, patients...along with those who are stranded or sidelined during this blessed season.”

“I cry out to You who ‘is close to the brokenhearted’ (Psalm 34:18 NIV). I ask You to be close to and shower Your favor on all of the above, in the name of Jesus, Your beloved and only-begotten Son, Amen.”

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. (Psalm 25:16)

Holy Spirit, help lonely people find companionship during this holy season and beyond.

Beauty in a Broken Manger

The Baby Jesus was missing, and the quest to find Him was on! This was the scene in Christine Lenahan's home as she and her family began to decorate for Christmas and were ready to set up the Nativity scene.

At first glance, their creche looked old and replaceable. After all, the small figures had taken a beating over many years. A donkey's leg was held on by Scotch tape, Lenahan wrote in *America*, and one of the wise men had lost his myrrh. Still, Lenahan saw a deeper meaning there.

She reflected, "This Nativity scene offers something a new one cannot. It has been uniquely touched by a family of fallible humans, and in its very brokenness is a reminder that Christ entered into our littleness. God came to be with us once, and God is still with us. Most of all, we believe that even in our brokenness, God will come among us again."

Thankfully, the baby Jesus was soon found in a corner of the living room. Lenahan concluded, "Our Nativity scene, in all its shining imperfections, is complete once more."

Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)

Help me to find You in this world of imperfections, Jesus.

Christmas Lights Unite Neighbors

In an essay for *Loyola Press*, Christopher de Vinck recalled his former colleague, Ralph, having a warm and welcoming personality—and always being full of the Christmas spirit. One year, having just moved into a new home with his wife, Ralph decorated the entire outside of his house with Christmas lights.

As Ralph admired his work, one of his neighbors came out and congratulated him on doing a wonderful job. Soon after, several more neighbors joined in and welcomed Ralph to the community. Ralph then asked when they would put their lights up. The neighbors chuckled, responding, “Ralph, we’re all Jewish on this street...You are the first one ever on our street with Christmas lights, and we love it.”

One of the neighbors invited Ralph and his wife to his home for the lighting of the menorah during Hanukkah, and Ralph happily accepted. Ralph told de Vinck, “When I went back into the house, I told my wife about how welcome they made me feel and how much our Christmas lights pleased them and how they all have menorahs. She said right away, ‘Christmas lights, the menorah... Same light, Ralph.’”

In Your light we see light. (Psalm 36:9)

May Your love and light draw us closer to each other, God.

Expect to Meet the King of Angels

On the Daughters of St. Paul YouTube page, Sister Mary Martha offered words of wisdom about preparing our minds and hearts for the coming of Jesus.

She said, “Our lives are God’s Bethlehem, the place where He dwells among us. God sanctified time and humanity when He entered our history and claimed it as His own in Jesus Christ. Thanks to this gift, we can encounter God at every moment and in every person. But if we are not looking for Him, we will most likely miss Him.”

“The same Child born for us at Bethlehem comes to us at every Mass. We receive Him into the stable of our hearts at every Eucharist. Thus, even in the midst of Advent, Christmas joy is never far away. What would our lives look like if we approached every moment, every person, and above all every Eucharist expecting to meet the King of angels?”

**My God in His steadfast love will meet me.
(Psalm 59:10)**

I don't want to miss seeing You, Jesus. Open my eyes and my heart to Your presence in every person and moment.

Christmas Gifts of Hope, Part 1

Charlotte Maya wasn't feeling the Christmas spirit. Earlier that year, her husband, Sam, had committed suicide, leaving her a widow with two young boys.

One evening, the doorbell rang in their Los Angeles home. Maya's six-year-old son answered the door, but all he found was a package containing a kit to make a gingerbread house. The gift tag read, "On the first day of Christmas..."

The family relished the mystery and joy this unusual experience brought them, but they didn't expect their doorbell to ring again the next night. This time, wrote Maya in *The New York Times*, a package with two snowman mugs and hot cocoa mix awaited them. The note read, "On the second day of Christmas..."

Now, the kids were getting excited and hoped to identify their benefactor when he or she came back. The person avoided detection, though, always showing up when nobody was around. Maya reflected, "In those dark days of intense grief, somebody was shining a light our way with a simple but powerful message: 'You are seen. You are loved.'" More tomorrow...

Every perfect gift is from above. (James 1:17)

Help me ease someone's grief, Prince of Peace.

Christmas Gifts of Hope, Part 2

Gifts kept showing up on Charlotte Maya's porch, much to the delight of her two young sons. The presents were always simple, she noted in *The New York Times*: "Six apples, seven clementines." She no longer wanted to know who was delivering the gifts, however, noting, "I made it my mission to protect their generous, sacred act."

Maya felt that the true gift brought by their benefactor in the aftermath of her husband's suicide was akin to the gift of Jesus's birth. She observed, "It was such a strange feeling to be wrenched so hard by grief and darkness on the one hand—and drawn so firmly to hope and light on the other."

On Christmas Eve, the family returned home to find 12 gifts on their porch. Four for each boy, and four for Maya. The note simply said, "Merry Christmas!" Maya concluded, "Fifteen years later, I still don't know who gave us those 12 days of hope...The not-knowing quickly became my favorite part. That mysterious light pushing its way into our ineffable darkness. Not a miracle. Not magic. Just generous, selfless, human love."

Serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. (1 Peter 4:10)

Help me to practice generous, selfless love, Lord.

A Soldier's Musical Promise

It was Christmas Eve, and Frank Farmer found himself feeling lost and dejected. He had been a soldier in World War II and was now in a Denver, Colorado military hospital where doctors and nurses tended to his injuries—at least the physical ones. The emotional and spiritual wounds the war had inflicted on him would be harder to heal.

Suddenly, Frank heard carolers in the hallway singing the beautiful Christmas songs he remembered from his childhood. The melodies and lyrics served as a balm for his soul.

On her Instagram page, Christopher Award-winning writer/producer Martha Williamson (*Touched by an Angel; Signed, Sealed, Delivered*) shared Frank's story. She wrote, "That night, Frank promised God that if he ever got out of that hospital, he would start his own little choir of carolers and return to others the blessing of hope that he was given that Christmas."

That was the beginning of the Frank Farmer Octet, which spent the next 40 years caroling at Denver's hospitals every Christmas Eve. And for 30 of those years, Martha's father directed that choir. What a fitting hymn of praise!

Sing praises to the Lord. (Psalm 30:4)

Help me share the blessing of hope, Holy Spirit.

The Joy of the Giver

From the time she was a child, Molly Cahill looked forward to a unique tradition: every Sunday during Advent, her mother would give her and her sister a gift at dinnertime as they lit a candle on the wreath and read a prayer. The gifts were small, but always geared toward each girl's likes and personality.

Molly's mom has continued this tradition, even though her daughters have reached adulthood, and Molly works in New York City at America Media. She sends the gifts through the mail, and they connect as a family over Facetime each Sunday for the wreath-lighting, prayer, and gift-opening.

In 2022, Molly made it home for the fourth Sunday of Advent. She noticed the joy in her mother's eyes as she watched her daughters open their gifts. Molly observed, "For a couple of decades, I've felt the joy of being the recipient of this tradition. Looking at my mother's face, I sense the joy of the giver. The Christmas miracle came to us in the form of a person. Maybe the graces of this Advent season are little reflections of that miracle, given to us by people, too."

God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

Jesus, may people sense Your love through the gifts I give this Advent and Christmas season.

A Life-Saving Christmas Kindness, Part 1

The blizzard that hit Buffalo, New York, on Dec. 24, 2022, was the worst in half a century. That's why Sha'Kyra Aughtry was shocked when she heard someone crying outside her home.

As recounted in the *Washington Post*, Sha'Kyra and her boyfriend went outside and discovered a 64-year-old mentally disabled man named Joey White trapped in a snowbank. He had left his group home to go to work, even though he had been told not to. Sha'Kyra and her boyfriend carried Joey inside, deduced he had severe frostbite, and did their best to warm him up.

Joey remembered his sister Yvonne's phone number, so Sha'Kyra called to apprise her of the situation. Yvonne couldn't get out of her house, so she stayed in touch with Sha'Kyra by phone. It was soon evident, however, that Joey needed more help than home care could provide.

Sha'Kyra and Yvonne called 911 close to 100 times, but ambulances were having trouble getting around. All seemed hopeless until Sha'Kyra issued a cry for help and the best of humanity was revealed. More tomorrow...

**In the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge,
until the destroying storms pass by.
(Psalm 57:1)**

*Allow me to be someone's shelter in the storm,
Savior.*

A Life-Saving Christmas Kindness, Part 2

Though mother of three Sha’Kyra Aughtry had gotten 64-year-old mentally disabled man Joey White out of the snow, his severe frostbite needed medical attention. With ambulances unable to get through the streets of Buffalo, both Sha’Kyra and Joey’s sister, Yvonne, issued pleas for assistance on Facebook.

“Within half an hour,” reported the *Washington Post*, “neighbors offered to help. Several showed up to plow around Aughtry’s home. They wrapped Joey in a warm blanket and carefully transported him to the Erie County Medical Center. Aughtry accompanied him for the ride.”

Though Joey needed to have all his fingers amputated, his life was saved. His boss, Ray Barker, who had told Joey not to come to work, said of Sha’Kyra, “This kind woman came out and heard a human being deep in distress and did something about it...She saved his life.”

Yvonne added, “This stranger opened up her heart and opened up her home...This was such a Christmas miracle.”

When they call to Me, I will answer them...I will rescue them and honor them. (Psalm 91:15)

Creator, instill us with the compassion to help human beings in distress.

The Star of Bethlehem Shines

In 1982, shortly before her death, Princess Grace of Monaco (aka actress Grace Kelly) filmed a clip for the Family Theater Productions Christmas special, *The Nativity*. She offered a reflection on the light of Christ. Here is an excerpt:

“Christian tradition tells us that Christ was born during the night. Usually, nighttime is associated with the dark side of life in which the familiar shape of our world dissolves, and we quickly lose some of our confidence. Indeed, we can sometimes lose our way. Isn’t this a rather strange time for such a joyous event as the birth of the Savior? Not at all.

“Happily, God seems to come to us at an hour when He is most needed. The darkness of night is not only a realm of helplessness and fear. It can be a time of hope and healing...the time for the coming of truth and the incarnate love of God.

“The Star of Bethlehem might well have passed unnoticed in the blaze of noon. But set against the velvet of the midnight sky, the whole world knew its brilliance. A bright light that still shines through the dark, a light that darkness has not, and cannot, ever overpower.”

I have come as light into the world.

(John 12:46)

Jesus, lighten the dark paths that lay before me.

The Wonder of Christ's Birth

In her book, *Have a Beautiful Terrible Day*, Christopher Award-winning author Kate Bowler shared a Christmas prayer. Here is an excerpt:

“You are here. What a wonder.

Robed in the everyday majesty of a newborn,
so beautiful, so soft, so new...

God become human...

All wisdom and power poured into a smallness
that knows hunger and gravity
and unseeing urgency for your mother's skin.

And Mary, so newly parted from you,
turns her thoughts to the impossible angelic
visitation that promised you'd come...

Blessed are we when our hearts warm with her.

You're here. And we are too,
newly come to worship
with kings and shepherds and
barn animals and angels
as you light up the world on this holiest,
loveliest night.”

**To you is born this day in the city of David a
Savior, who is the Messiah. (Luke 2:11)**

*Prince of Peace, may Your light guide me
always.*

The Joys of Christmas

People often complain that secular Christmas celebrations leave out the religious aspects of the holiday. But Tom Hoopes prefers to look at what society gets right.

Writing at *Aleteia*, he says, “Our delight in receiving gifts is a beautiful proxy for our delight in receiving God.” Though Hoopes decries consumerism, he relates getting gifts to receiving God’s freely given love. And the fact that gift giving happens at Christmastime associates it with Jesus automatically.

In addition, says Hoopes, “Our delight in giving teaches us our true human vocation.” Christmas, in other words, promotes selflessness and putting others ahead of ourselves. “This transforms people’s purposes in exactly the way Jesus intended: Like His, our vocation is to give to all and not to count the cost.”

Christmas also brings families together, reminding us that Jesus entered our world as part of a family. And finally, even in our secular world, Nativity scenes can be spotted all over. “[Jesus’s] presence in a manger...shows that He is open to all of us, if we are willing to seek Him out.”

Be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share. (1 Timothy 6:18)

May all the world see Your loving, giving nature, Jesus.

A Christmassy New Year's Resolution

Greg Erlandson's Christmas wish is that people actually celebrate Christmas for the full 12 days! He even thinks this would make a great New Year's resolution.

Writing at *OSV News*, Erlandson notes that Christians used to fast during Advent, so they made up for it by feasting for the full season of celebration which, in some cases, lasted until the Feast of Candlemas on February 2nd. But Erlandson would be happy convincing more people to keep the spirit of Christmas alive at least until the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th.

Indulge in some favorite foods, and keep up your ornaments. Take extra time for prayer, and reflect on what you have to be grateful for in life. Reach out to an old friend or neighbor. Spread joy at work, and "say thanks to those who waited on you, rang up your groceries, and wrapped your presents during the Advent frenzy."

"If we have one New Year's Resolution to make this year," Erlandson concluded, "let's commit ourselves to celebrating what Christmas really means for just a bit longer."

Again, I will say, Rejoice. (Philippians 4:4)

Abba, may we keep the spirit of goodwill flowing throughout the Christmas season and beyond.

A New Year's Eve Miracle

Two years ago, on New Year's Eve morning, 17-year-old Griffin Evans was fast asleep when his dog, Macho, started barking and nipping at him, awakening the teenager and alerting him to the fire blazing around them.

Griffin's mother, Nicole, was out of town that day, but she received a Facetime call from her son and dog, once they were safely outside, letting her know what was happening. According to *WFLA News*, the house they had lived in for nearly two decades, was a "total loss." But Nicole maintained that thanks to Macho, they were able to save what was most important and "not replaceable"—her son and their heroic canine companion.

With a little help from their friends in Safety Harbor, Florida, the Evanses soon had the means to start over. According to *WTSP.com*, in just two days, "the community raised over \$5,000" for them, not including "gift cards, food and house supplies."

"I'm overwhelmed," Nicole concluded, "Thank you...They're...just boats floating on an ocean of gratitude I'll never be able to express."

Give thanks in all circumstances.

(1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Savior, we thank You for the gift of good neighbors.

A Legacy of Remembrances

Father Michael J. Noonan was serving his second term as superior of the Priests of the Sacred Heart when he died suddenly one day. But his community continued to remember him decades later because he had a way with words.

The things he said and wrote are now known as “Noonanisms.” Here are a few:

- “Hope is not a fire extinguisher to be used in case of discouragement. It’s a muscle that must be flexed regularly, so that it can operate in times of aridity, like it was designed to.”
- “The difference between the saint and the sinner is not that the saint never falls; it’s that the saint never stops getting up. The only mistake one can make in the spiritual life is to quit trying.”
- “All of God’s demands upon me are the demands of one who loves me infinitely.”

If you have gained wisdom in life and want to share it with future generations, set your thoughts down on paper or make a recording of them. People may turn to them time and again for support and inspiration.

**The memory of the righteous is a blessing.
(Proverbs 10:7)**

Show me how to inspire others, God.

Breaking the Complaining Habit

Complaining is a natural part of life because we all get frustrated at times. When complaining becomes a habit, however, that is a problem. It is not healthy for you—or the people around you—to be in a negative mindset all the time. Writing at *Aleteia*, Krispin Mayfield offers suggestions on breaking the complaining habit:

- **Set boundaries.** If you are burdened by other people's demands on you, learn to say “no” sometimes. And if someone's behavior is constantly aggravating you, discuss it with them personally instead of complaining behind their backs.
- **Give yourself credit for completing a hard task.** This allows you to “replace feelings of frustration with pride and satisfaction.”
- **Ask for help.** Instead of complaining about being overburdened, request support from those around you.
- **Connect in new ways.** Complaining can seem like a good way to connect with others. Instead, share the positive parts of your life, and build bonds based on those.

Do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. (James 5:9)

Help me to cultivate a more positive mindset, Jesus.

The Best Advice

Towards the end of 2023, *The New York Times*' Melissa Kirsch asked readers to send in the best advice they had received during the past year. Here are a few of the answers she received:

- “Keep a running list of the nicest things anyone has ever said to or about you. It’s a lifesaver on days when the world is getting the best of you.”
- “Life is too short not to tell the people you love that you love them.”
- “Instead of calling someone out, call them in: Invite them into a judgment-free conversation with the intention of promoting understanding.”
- “Every time you receive a box containing something you bought online, fill it with items to donate.”
- “Before doing something, ask yourself, ‘Is this something that someone who loves themselves would do?’”

**Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you
may gain wisdom for the future.
(Proverbs 19:20)**

*Open my mind and heart to wiser ways of
living, Paraclete.*

The Gift of a New Year

Theologian Henri Nouwen once shared these words on the best way to approach a new year: “We must learn to live each day, each hour, yes, each minute as a new beginning, as a unique opportunity to make everything new...Imagine that we could walk through the new year always listening to the voice saying to us: ‘I have a gift for you and can’t wait for you to see it!’”

“The problem is that...there are many cunning foxes jumping on our shoulders and whispering in our ears the great lie: ‘There is nothing new under the sun.’...When we listen to these foxes, they eventually prove themselves right: our new year, our new day, our new hour become flat, boring, dull, and without anything new.”

“We must open our minds and our hearts to the voice that resounds through the valleys and hills of our life saying: ‘Let Me show you where I live among My people. My name is ‘God-with-you.’ I will wipe all the tears from your eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone’ (Revelation 21:2–5).”

**See, I am making all things new.
(Revelation 21:5)**

*Jesus, guide my steps through the new year,
and lead me towards a renewed sense of hope
and joy.*