First Presbyterian Church Covington



Home for the Holidays

An Advent Devotional

written with love and care
by our Church Family

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This Advent, as we prepare our hearts once again to welcome Christ into the world, we invite you to reflect on the story of home. As First Presbyterian Church celebrates 200 years of ministry together, we are reminded that the church is more than a building. First Presbyterian Church is a community of people, stories, memories, traditions, and relationships that God has woven together across generations. Our 2026 Advent devotional, *Home for the Holidays*, has been written by the people of FPC Covington with love and care for the holiday season.

We invited members and friends to share a short story about what "home" means to them. They took time to consider childhood memories, people who made them feel welcomed, holiday traditions, crowded tables, seasons when home changed, and moments when the church became home. We asked them to simply share a piece of their lives and consider: "Where was God in this story?" Together, these stories will guide us through Advent as we celebrate the God who, in Jesus Christ, chose to make a home among us.

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First Week of Advent

Sunday, November 29

"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

– Ephesians 2:19

Home: A place where people know me by Jodi Atkins

When I think of the word home, I think of somewhere warm and comfortable. Home is a place where you don't have to be anything other than who you are. The older I get, the more I realize that home isn't always about a particular place. It's about the people who make you feel like you belong.

I've been a part of First Presbyterian Church Covington since I was three years old! Growing up at FPC, I don't think I fully understood how special it was to have a church family. It was simply a constant in my life. A place where people knew me, watched me grow up, and made me feel loved.

One of my favorite childhood memories is the fall retreats we would take to Montreat, North Carolina, with our church family. I remember the beauty of the mountains, the time spent together at Assembly Inn, and the feeling of being surrounded by people who were such a big part of my life. To this day, my family continues to visit Montreat each fall. It's a tradition that has taken on a whole new meaning as our family has grown.

Bringing my own children to the same church where I grew up feels a little surreal. I'm not sure I've fully wrapped my head around it yet. But one moment that really brought it all full circle was watching both of my children be baptized in the very same font where I was baptized at eleven years old. There's something incredibly special about knowing that the church family that helped raise me is now helping nurture the faith of my children.

Looking back, I can see God's presence throughout the relationships I've built at FPC. Through friendships, familiar

faces, shared experiences, and people who have walked alongside me through different seasons of life, God has given me a place where I've always felt I belong.

As we celebrate Advent, I'm reminded that God's love isn't confined to a building or a particular place. I'm grateful that FPC has been that kind of home for me, and even more grateful that my children get to experience it, too.

Dear God, thank you for the gift of our church family and the love and belonging we find here. Remind us that our true home is found in You. Help us share Your love and make others feel welcome and at home. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Monday, November 30

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."
— 2 Corinthians 11:26

Devotion by Sam Hay

Growing up as a child with a Presbyterian minister for a grandfather, home and church have always been inextricably tied. One of my earliest and fondest memories of my church home was the celebration of communion during Advent. The pageantry, the color of poinsettias and grape juice, the warm yellow candlelight and the notion of the child with the animals appealed to all of my senses. My grandfather had a unique gift with intertwining personal stories that made it all so meaningful. And of course he did this in the old sanctuary of our church, where our offices are located now.

Distinct memories like this make "church" into "home". Advent was easy to celebrate because it built up for weeks to the crescendo of Christmas Day. Celebrating communion during Advent made it that much more special, though it has come to mean more and more to me as I grow older. The coming of Christ would not be possible without the communion table, and the communion table would never have existed without the advent of Christ.

As we celebrate Advent in the coming weeks, may we be mindful that the coming of the Christ Child is what we are celebrating, and that communing with Christ and with our brothers and sisters is what it's all about - until the second coming that Paul refers to in Corinthians. May "church" be "home" to everyone as much as it was to me as a child full of wonder.

God, help us to remember that your gift of the Christ Child allows us to commune with you, with all of your children and with all of your creation. Make us grateful for "home" and for all the ways our church serves as our home. Amen

Tuesday, December 1

"As for me and my house we will serve the Lord."
– Joshua 24:15

Devotion by David Pettis

Home is a place where we can escape the struggles and stresses of everyday life. It is a simple place where we can relax, find comfort, and enjoy a sense of peace.

Home is where we return after a trip and always say, "There is nothing like home!"

Home is where we enjoy the simple things in life and spend time making memories with our family. It is where we share laughter, celebrate special occasions, and appreciate the blessings God has given us.

Our first Christmas together was a special time in our lives. It marked the beginning of a new chapter as Judy and I brought our lives together with two stepsons and our pets to form a new family.

Blending our lives meant learning new routines, finding our places in this new family, and creating new traditions. One of those traditions involved staying up late on Christmas Eve putting toys together, which was another first for me!

As I reflect on that first Christmas and the years since, I am thankful to God for all the blessings we have received, the good

times we have shared, and the wonderful memories we have made together.

Lord, as we prepare our hearts for Christmas we thank you for the blessings of home. May our home reflect your love, our hearts remain grateful and our lives bring glory to you. Amen.

Wednesday, December 2

"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."
– Matthew 6:21

Home Is Where the Heart Is by Angie Woodham

We usually hear this verse as a warning about money and possessions. But Jesus is also giving us a gift: a way to find out what we truly love. Look at where your heart goes, and you'll find your treasure.

For me, that treasure has never been a place. It has always been people.

I've seen this over years of travel. In the Blue Ridge Mountains during Covid, when the world felt closed off, our little family made a home in a rented space with nothing but each other. On a Caribbean cruise, we found it again on the deck and on white sand beaches with palm trees blowing in the breeze. In Washington, D.C., we found it on a spring break full of sore feet and shared laughter. This past spring, Troy, Braden, and I walked through the Scottish Highlands, and it felt like home, even an ocean away from our own front door.

And then there was Australia.

I went there carrying grief over the loss of my first husband. I was far from everything familiar, and yet I was surrounded by my dad, my brother, and the family who live down under. No house in that country was mine, but I was home. Those who loved me held my heart, and they held me. That is when I knew for certain that home is not an address. It is wherever your treasure is.

Christmas tells this same story.

Mary and Joseph had no home in Bethlehem. There was no room at the inn, only a stable and a feeding trough. Yet the Son

of God was born there, and for the people gathered around that manger, home was wherever He was. Jesus left His heavenly home to dwell among us. He is called Emmanuel, God with us. He is not God in a faraway palace, but God who came close, pulled up a chair, and stayed.

This is the heart of Christmas: *our truest home is found in love, and love came down to find us.*

So, this season, some of us will gather around full tables. Some of us will sit beside an empty chair, missing someone dearly. Some of us will be far from the people we love. Wherever you are, you are not without a home if your heart is held by those who love you and by the One who was born to love you most.

Lord, thank You for coming to dwell among us. Teach us to treasure the people You have placed in our lives, and let our hearts rest in You. Be near to those who are grieving or far from home this Christmas, and make us a welcome to others as You have been to us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Thursday, December 3

"As for me and my household we will serve the Lord."
– Joshua 24:15

Devotion by Carol McGiboney

I grew up in Henry County where my family operated a 100-acre cotton farm. I had two older siblings and was the baby of the family. Growing up, we were poor but never knew it. I attended Ola Elementary School and graduated from Henry County High School in 1958. I met Guy McGiboney, my husband, during my school years. We married in 1959 and have three daughters. Guy always preferred Newton County to Henry County so that's how we ended up here in Covington.

Memories from Christmases past include my mother always baking fruit cakes. I would go to the grocery store with mother and help pick out all the different candies to go into the cake.

Sliced apples were always placed on top of the cake, and the apples were picked from the apple trees on our farm.

We had fun decorating our Christmas tree each year. We decorated with tiny bells hooked onto the branches and tinsel. Tinsel was always added last to help the tree sparkle. Traditions made our house a home.

Church has always been very important to me and my family. Church is home. We attended Sardis Baptist Church every Wednesday and twice on Sundays. “If the church doors were open, we were always there.”

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of my home and family. May our home be a place of peace, love and safety. Amen.

Friday, December 4

"But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart."
– Luke 2:19

One Christmas at a Time by Luke Usry

Christmas Eve 2017 was a cold Sunday night in Byron, Georgia. Downtown, inside a former school building older than integration, fifty or so people sat huddled together in the small but drafty classroom, our breath visible even in spite of the three space heaters, spirals of steam rising from our coffee cups in the candlelight. The eight o'clock meeting of the Byron Warehouse Alcoholics Anonymous group was under way.

It was a much bigger crowd than our fifteen or twenty "regulars." Even though I had been sober barely ten months, I had already been to at least two hundred meetings in this room. As shabby and stained as any sixty-year-old classroom would be, to say that it had become a spiritual home for me would have been a profound understatement. It was the first place I had gone after being discharged from detox in February, shaking like a weathervane in a wind tunnel and fighting for my very life every time I passed a liquor store. The time I spent in that room with others facing the same impossible task as my own provided me with more strength, hope, and wisdom than I

can understand even today. I learned more about God in that room than I have in any church.

Nearly ten years later, I can't recall a word that was said in that room that Christmas Eve night, but the experience will live forever in my heart. Gathered there in the semidarkness, sharing our stories of hope, hard-won wisdom, and tears of grief and gratitude, I could not have felt closer to the miracle of the manger. Drunks, junkies, and ne'er-do-wells, we were all shepherds kneeling in awe of the presence of the Christ that had been born again in our hearts, granting the gift of another day, another hour, another moment of freedom from the tyranny of the grave and the bottle.

Although my spiritual home has moved, that grimy little room will always be a cathedral in my heart. I will carry the strength and hope I received and shared there for the rest of my life – one day at a time.

"God, I offer myself to Thee - to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!"

– Third Step Prayer
from *Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book*: pg. 68

Saturday, December 5

"Let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice."
– 1 Chronicles 16:10

Devotion by Stephanie Scarborough

I love Christmas! The tables get set, and three trees get decorated. I collect Christmas ornaments.

When I was fifteen, we moved into my parents' current home. My brother Wayne was supposed to clean out the storage room off the carport. It was where we stored our Christmas decorations and other miscellaneous items. He did not clean it out, and when we went back, our decorations had been stolen.

The worst thing that was stolen was the manger. Wayne and I playfully fought over the manger with the pieces that could be moved. "The sheep go on this side of baby Jesus." "No, the wise men do!" All during Christmas, the manger would be changed.

I said I would never have another manger under the Christmas tree. That year for Christmas, my mom bought me a new manger, but the pieces do not move. It goes under my big tree in the den.

Since I collect ornaments, I have three trees, and all have mangers near them. One is musical, and the other is a shadowbox. None have pieces that can be moved.

The mangers remind me that the reason we celebrate Christmas is that the little baby in the manger became the man who died for our sins and forgives and loves us every day, if only we ask.

Dear Lord, thank you for family and memories. Amen.

Second Week of Advent

Sunday, December 6

"Keep loving each other like family. Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it. Remember prisoners as if you were in prison with them, and people who are mistreated as if you were in their place."

— Hebrews 13:1-3

Devotion by Jenn Arndt

The word "home" makes me think of my son and I each going to live with, and eventually being adopted by, total strangers before either of us was even old enough to know the word "stranger."

Home also makes me think of one of my friends who is finishing the last stages of adopting a hearing-impaired eight-year-old from India. If all goes well, this child will arrive in the U.S. with her new mother shortly before Christmas and eventually learn a new language and a new type of life outside of an orphanage.

Home also makes me think of the children that I had the privilege to foster before adopting my son. They were taken from chaotic situations and abruptly placed in my home, bringing only a bag or two of their most precious belongings with them. Once there, they had to adjust to the house, the food, the schedule, the pets, and the stranger who had agreed to care for them the best she could.

People across history and lands have had to leave home to find safety and wellbeing in the home or country of strangers. We read in the Bible of Pharaoh's daughter adopting baby Moses, and of Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt with Jesus. Strangers provided safety for them when they were in need of it. The Bible repeatedly encourages us also to care for widows and orphans and to welcome the stranger. When we

have the courage and compassion to provide refuge for people of any age who need it for whatever reason, God makes our home a more special place for us all.

God, show me ways to care for the stranger, whether in my physical home or in my hometown, and give me courage to make them feel at home with me.

Monday, December 7

"For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

— Isaiah 9:6-7

Devotion by Janet Carmichael

Yes! There is a certain atmosphere of real achievement here at FPC coming up during this Advent Season that is so much a replica of an earlier one I experienced decades ago; that I feel the need to share it!

I was ten years old, and my church in the far-off, then British Guiana, where my grandfather with whom I lived was Pastor, was celebrating its one hundredth anniversary. One hundred years!

That day, the choir, dressed in its brand-new robes, appeared at the church door, led by its youngest member, me, and sang its way up to the choir loft with the congregation joining in and making the sound oh so heavenly!

Never before have the pews in that church been so filled with members and visitors—many of the latter having travelled from far and wide—and who were now, all together in a combined celebration of one hundred years and, at the same time, welcoming Advent.

Yes! It truly had brought family members and friends together.

The choir offered two renditions that were enthusiastically received by the large congregation; and at the end of the

service, everyone gathered once more in another area for some well-prepared snacks and drinks, with opportunities to greet and love one another.

It's truly amazing that in a short time, there will be a similar experience for me at FPC, Covington, bringing back those lovely memories. Advent and a special Church Anniversary close to each other.

Heavenly Father, You sent your Son, Jesus, as the greatest gift of love to our world. Let us continue to heal the divisions and misunderstandings that exist, as we approach an amazing anniversary, praying to You as One Church. Amen!

Tuesday, December 8

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

— Matthew 7:7-8

My Heart - Christ's Home by Theodosia Wade

When I was in high school, I attended Young Life meetings. I grew up in the Presbyterian Church and always went to Sunday School and worship with my family on Sundays. As a teenager I was really beginning to question what God was all about. My Young Life leader, Sue was always there to listen and help guide my thoughts.

One of the little books she gave me, *My Heart - Christ's Home*, made a huge impact on my life. It talked about inviting Christ into my life (my house) and letting Him come into every room…not just the cleaned up presentable rooms but the messy, (the hot mess), embarrassing rooms where I did not want to let anyone see, much less Christ. It helped me see that Christ wanted to be involved in all of my life, not just the Sunday part of my life. It took me a while for this to really sink in but it finally dawned on me that I really wanted God to be a bigger part of my life, that I wanted to have Christ come into every part of my

life, that I could acknowledge Christ as my Savior and Lord, that I could try to put myself aside and let Christ be the ruler of my life. It has been a journey for sure!

Not a straight and narrow path but a winding, rocky path where going off the trial, even getting lost is part of the journey for me. So coming Home for Christmas means a chance to focus each year on Christ's coming into my life, every part of my life, becoming Lord of my being, walking beside me through the ups and downs. Christmas is a time to celebrate God's coming into this world to renew his relationship with us in the birth of a baby, the Christ child.

Dear God, we thank you for the Christ Child, for sending Jesus into this world so that we might better understand what it means to be a child of God, a disciple of Christ. Help us to open the doors to our lives even wider this Christmas season so that your love can rule even more parts of our lives and we can be your hands and your feet in the world that others might see your love and your light grow in their lives too.
In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, December 9

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted in the earth."
— Psalm 46:10

"'Whom shall I send?' Then I said 'Here am I! Send me.'"
— Isaiah 6:8-9

Devotion by Carolyn Watson

My life has been full of change. I have lived in five different states. That equates to ten different homes with new neighbors, friends, communities and church families. I have been blessed with wonderful parents, a beloved husband, children, grandchildren, a great-grandchild and a very large extended family (to include in-laws). God has been in the midst of all of these changes. I was told at an early age to "Believe like Mary, Trust like Joseph, Hope like Shepherds, Seek like Wise Men, Worship like Angels and Love like Jesus".

Change has provided the opportunities to practice these things. John Wesley once wrote: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, to all the people you can, in all the places you can, as long as ever you can".

Dear God, Christmas is coming soon. We know that Christmas is a reason, not a season. We pray that your kindness finds us easily and that we will pass it on without even trying. We thank you for sending your Son to us so that we may celebrate his coming and look forward to spending eternity with you. Amen.

Thursday, December 10

"Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations."
— Psalm 90:1

She Felt Like Home by Rebecca Joyce Cooper

Home was always my grandmother. Nanny. Joyce. Mother. Sister. Aunt. Friend. All who knew her loved her. When I was just months old, my mom and I moved in with my grandparents, and their house is the first home I remember. Later, when I lived with my mom and dad in a house of our own, I was never much more than a mile away, and I knew I was home the moment I walked through Nanny's door.

The smells greeted you first: homemade biscuits with lots of butter, and bacon and coffee calling you to the table. In summer, tomatoes from the garden lined the countertops. Whether Nanny was canning, baking, building a fire, or resting on the couch, she was there, and her presence felt like home.

Her house was our family's Grand Central Station. She was a worrier, so we all called the minute we arrived anywhere, and she scurried to answer every ring. We cousins gathered there, coloring at the little table her brother Snooks built for us, messing up her kitchen, and parading around the front yard in dress-up clothes from her closet. She rocked us while singing her little song about the frog, took care of us when we were sick, and baked birthday cakes made to order, down to the color of the icing.

I remember her hands, always caring, always doing. Where was God? God was in every prayer offered over meals, in every kindness, and in the faces gathered around her dining room table. It was there I first knew comfort, love, and safety.

I know not every child is so fortunate. Not everyone had a Nanny's door to walk through. But the love I found there was a glimpse of something bigger: the love of a God who has been our dwelling place in all generations, and whose door is open to all of us. That is what a church home can be, too. Home was always my grandmother. And through her, I came to know the God who makes a home for us all.

Faithful God, thank you for the people whose love first showed us what home feels like. Make us that kind of home for others, especially those still searching for one. Amen.

Friday, December 11

"Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations."

— Psalm 90:1

A Heritage of Faith by Sara Chini

When the holiday season approaches, our minds naturally drift toward the concept of "home." We think of cozy living rooms, familiar foods, and the warmth of family gathering together. But there is another kind of home that shapes who we are—our church home.

In my life, I have been blessed to be a member of four different churches. Recently, looking at these spaces, I realized something remarkable. Three of them are celebrating major anniversaries right now or early next year. Two of these faith communities have stood the test of time for centuries—one celebrating 200 years of ministry, and another an astonishing 225 years.

When I walk into these sanctuaries, I am doing more than just finding a seat in a pew. I am walking into history. These are the exact places where my ancestors, and generations of believers

before me, called home. They prayed at these altars, sang the same hymns, and found refuge in the exact same grace that sustains me today.

It is a powerful reminder that our faith is not a solitary journey. We are part of a vast, living tapestry. The walls of these historic churches have witnessed centuries of heartbreaks, celebrations, answered prayers, and quiet moments of devotion. The saints who went before us built these homes of faith, brick by brick and prayer by prayer, so that we would have a place to belong.

This holiday season, as we celebrate what it means to go home, let us give thanks for our church homes—past, present, and future. They are the physical anchors of God's timeless love, proving that while generations come and go, His faithfulness remains our ultimate dwelling place.

Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of our church homes. We praise You for the legacy of the believers who came before us, especially the ancestors who paved the way in faith. Thank You for the centuries of ministry represented in the communities that shaped my life. As we gather this season, help us to honor that heritage by being a welcoming home for others. Amen.

Saturday, December 12

"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

— Ephesians 2:19

Home Is Where You Belong by Robert Lane

For most of my adult life, I've been surrounded by women. First as a college soccer coach, where I spent years trying to convince young women that they were capable of more than they believed. Now, as the father of three daughters and the husband of a Presbyterian minister, I've come to realize that perhaps God has been trying to teach me something all along.

During my coaching career, we talked a lot about family. We wanted our teams to feel like home, especially for players who

were hundreds or even thousands of miles away from theirs. But I learned that belonging isn't something you can put on a locker room wall or manufacture through a team-building exercise. It's built through showing up, loving people through their mistakes, celebrating their victories, and reminding them that their worth extends far beyond what they accomplish.

These days, my greatest lessons about home come from three little women who call me Dad. Our house is rarely quiet, seldom clean, and almost never running on schedule. But somewhere between the laughter, the disagreements, the endless activities, and the occasional chaos, I've discovered that home isn't about having everything in order. It's about knowing you are loved, even when life is anything but orderly.

Being married to a pastor has given me another understanding of home. I've watched a church family celebrate together, grieve together, disagree, forgive, and keep showing up for one another. And isn't that what home is supposed to be?

As we celebrate 200 years of First Presbyterian Church, I'm reminded that God didn't come into the world looking for a perfect place to live. He came to dwell among imperfect people.

Perhaps that's the greatest gift of Christmas: God didn't wait for us to make room in a perfect home. He came to make a home with us.

Gracious God, thank you for the people and places that remind us we belong. Help us make room for others, just as you have made room for us. Amen.

Third Week of Advent

Sunday, December 13

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."
— Romans 15:13

Treasures from the Heart by Larry Kennon

Behind my father's drugstore in Memphis, Tennessee, there was a public dump. We kids loved to "check it out," hunting among the castaways for whatever might be interesting or valuable. Sometimes we would take our BB guns and shoot rats among the rubble. Then, there were the "dump people" — people we watched who would scavenge these public garbage disposals, looking for food or whatever valuables they might use among themselves or pawn for money.

One woman, in particular, I remember. She was usually there with a dirty laundry bag and a boy-child of two or three years hanging onto her skirts. We kids called her "the lady of the dumps" because of her constant presence there on the dumpsite. We assumed she found shelter nearby but were never sure where she lived.

One day near Christmas, I was riding my bicycle delivering packages and prescriptions for the drugstore. I was twelve years old and wanted to make some Christmas money, and my Dad let me run delivery services for his customers. On that Saturday afternoon in December, I saw a crowd of people at the corner of the street where people waited for the local bus. There were accusing voices and angry shouts. I moved closer and saw the woman from the dumps on the bench, her coat opened up, holding the little boy to her breast to let him nurse. "Such indecency," someone shouted. "That kid's too old for that."

Another voice rang out, "Somebody get her off the street. White trash anyhow." The woman never said a word, never pulled the nursing child away, but there was great torment in her face. As the commotion increased, the local cop intervened,

and after listening to the accusations, he took the woman roughly by the arm. "You're under arrest," he said, for being a public nuisance and exposing yourself." He ushered her away…with the child still at her breast.

I ran to tell my Dad what had happened, how pitiful it had all been, how alone she seemed, how helpless I felt. "We'll see about it later," he said. After dinner that night, my father looked at me: "Want to take a ride?" I didn't ask questions but jumped and ran to the car.

We drove directly to the jail. My dad talked to the jailer and we went inside. The Memphis jail was a rude and inhospitable place. Each cell had an iron cot, but no real mattress, a toilet with no seat. The only light was over the door away from the cells. The room was cold and damp and smelled of disinfectant. Moving closer to the shadows, our eyes adjusted to see the woman in the folds of the dark, holding the child in her arms. She would not look at us. My dad slowly moved to help her stand and softly said, "Let's get you back to safety." We drove back through the streets, and no words were spoken until my Dad asked, "Do you need a place to stay tonight?" "Our house is nearby." But she shook her head and firmly spoke, "No, just by the drug store."

A day after Christmas, my Dad brought home a paper bag with a card attached. He said, "This is for you." Inside the stained sack was a bicycle handlebar, one often used glove, and an old, faded, folded crossword reel. They carried no names, but inside were the printed words: "We live by hope." Dad said this was left at the store back door. Probably from the lady we met at the jail. It had to be her gift – the "lady from the dumps." I swallowed hard at this Christmas memory. She had given me treasures of the heart. And we all do live by hope. Selah!

Gracious God, open our eyes to see the dignity and worth of every person, give us hearts filled with compassion and hands ready to serve, and remind us that even in the most unexpected places, your love and hope shine through. Amen.

Monday, December 14

"He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God."

— Psalm 62:6-7

Home Is Where God Is by Miriam Wheeler

When I think of home, I think of family. My grandparents, Lois and Jim Gardner, and my parents, Jimmy and Miriam Gardner, have shaped my understanding of home. As an only child, I spent countless hours with my grandparents, who lived right next door. Whether on Usher Street, David Circle, or out in the county on Davis Ford Road, home was always a happy, quiet, and safe place.

Home is where you are loved. It is where friends gather to visit, share stories, and enjoy a meal together. Home is also where faith lives. Through daily devotionals, opening my Bible, and praying often, I give thanks to God for watching over me and my family. God is my rock and my salvation, and I depend on him every day.

Home is not just a house or a place. God meets us in our church, in the yard at Prema, and wherever life takes us. Wherever God is, there is home.

For me, HOME means:

H - Happy and cheerful
O - Open and warm
M - My safe place
E - Exciting

With God at the center, home is more than a place to live. It is a place to belong, to love, to grow, and to give thanks.

Gracious God, thank you for the gift of family, the memories that shape us, and the places where we feel safe and loved. Thank you for being my rock, my refuge, and my constant companion. May my home always be a place of warmth, laughter, welcome, and faith. Wherever I go, help me remember that you are with me. May your love always be at the center of my home and my heart this Advent. Amen.

Tuesday, December 15

"By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures."

— Proverbs 24:3-4

Devotion by Randy Layton

My parents were married in 1940 and began their life together in a single bedroom in his parent's home. Eventually they built a house next door to my grandparents, and over a 16-year period the family grew with five children. The foundation of that home was strong, built on Christian principals of love, compassion and faith that God would guide the family through hard times as well as good ones.

By the official government standards of the 1960's, I'm sure our family was considered to be poor. However, my father worked hard at his postal job and on the farm tending crops and livestock.

My mother could stretch a dollar at the grocery and clothing stores and she used her culinary and sewing skills to make sure we were all fed well and clothed. All of our basic needs were always met. And our parents made sure that we all attended Sunday school and church each week.

Although Thanksgiving ranks near the top of my list, my favorite memories of growing up were the Christmas holidays. The family of seven grew with the addition of spouses and then grandchildren. December was a month that was filled with anticipation—the coming of the Christ child and the gathering of the family to celebrate that birth. My parents' greatest joy was to see all of their family gathered in the den exchanging gifts or gathered around the tables enjoying a delicious meal and, most importantly, talking and laughing and creating the strong family bonds that continue to this day.

The simple house that my parents built became a home that was filled with the rare and beautiful treasures of a loving family. And that is a treasure you cannot put a price on.

Dear God, I thank you for giving me parents that built a loving home that met our individual needs. And I thank you for blessing me by filling that home with the rare and beautiful treasures of wonderful family members. Amen.

Wednesday, December 16

"Suffer the little children to come unto me…And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them."
— Mark 10:14-16

Home Lives in my Heart by Lori Frix

Back in the 70's, I tagged along with my dad to our local Food Giant grocery store. As we walked inside, I noticed my grandparents on the opposite end of the store. My granddaddy immediately knelt down and threw his arms wide open as I ran towards the frozen food isle for the embrace of a lifetime. Who was more excited to see whom is a question I often ponder. I lived next door to my grandparents as a child. His home was mine and mine was his. I saw him every single day. My grandmother made dinner for all of us every single night. But there was something special about seeing him that day in the grocery store that has stayed with me throughout the years. I have yearned for that embrace. It felt like home.

I yearn to be home. It is a feeling when my heart feels comforted and at peace. Some memories of yearning for home include waking up on a birthday as a child to see how my mother decorated the kitchen while I was asleep (way before Pinterest), sitting around the Christmas tree in my grandparents living room, watching my children sleep while we were all living under the same roof, coming home after a vacation, experiencing the joy of watching my children raise my grandchildren in their own homes, and worshipping together with sisters and brothers in Christ in the house of the Lord.

Today, my husband and I enjoy opening our home to friends and family for every excuse of a celebration I can think of. He is always thrilled with my ideas! We are that house. Those memories have made our house a home.

The houses and the people have changed over the years, but each one lives on in a special piece of my heart. My heart yearns for home. Home lives in my heart.

Dear God, thank you for family and friends who make our hearts feel home. Thank you for a church where everyone is loved, valued, and welcome. And thank you, Jesus, for making a way so that we can look forward to our eternal home together in Heaven. Amen.

Thursday, December 17

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will."
— Romans 12:2

Devotion by Jake McCarthy

I distinctly recall sitting on my childhood porch watching the wildlife, the sunset, and feeling the fresh outdoor air. My parents would talk about their own childhoods and life experiences while also giving me guidance for my own. We made fond memories and laughed.

However, as a teenager, I was pulled in many directions by outside influences. While it's unfair to solely blame social media, it quickly turned a happy, healthy 16-year-old boy with the world at his feet into someone who didn't feel he was worthy of anything. Instead of appreciation for the experiences with nature and with my family, resentment grew over the misconceived notion that somehow everyone else's life was better than my own.

While I was resistant to that life at the time, craving to become an adult and forge my own identity, I can now look back on it and admit those were some of the best and most formative memories. My parents' stories have helped me in more situations than I can count. If there's one thing I have learned, it's not to conform to the pattern of the world, but to be your own authentic self to fulfill God's will for you.

Now, as an adult, the weight of a career, bills, relationships, health, and so many other responsibilities weigh heavily. Despite this, I don't look back on those teenage years with regret that I didn't appreciate it more. Instead, I choose to view it as a learning lesson. The lesson is to fully appreciate every season of life regardless of its hardships, and to never compare myself to others. Whenever I return to that porch, I cannot help but smile and thank God for all that those memories have taught me.

Dear Lord, give me strength to accept your plan for me and to utilize the gifts you have given me. Please always guide me in fulfilling your will. When I fall down, please pick me up. When I stray from you, please lead me back to your path. I know through you all things are possible. As for my whole life, whatever it brings, I am eternally grateful for you and your presence. Amen.

Friday, December 18

"This is My commandment that you love one another as I have loved you."

— John 15:12

Unforgettable Memories by Darcel Tabb

When I was a child growing up in a household with four children and two parents, decision making could get crazy at times. As a family we would load everyone in the car and head to the Christmas Tree farm and get ready to pick the perfect tree. Daddy would make us wait until one week before Christmas, even though I had been asking for WEEKS to get our tree up.

We eventually, with six different opinions, would finally come together and agree on the perfect tree. The joy we found in each other while Mama had Christmas music playing, apple cider and donuts, and Daddy made us throw one icicle at the time on the tree, was unforgettable. We decorated the tree until it was shimmering and shiny.

The lessons I learned from such a simple experience have influenced me on this very day. I learned that everyone has an opinion that is valued. It may not match my opinion but through God's grace and love for each other, we too can work together to pick the perfect tree.

Lord, during this Christmas season may we find joy in our family, friends and those around us. May we rejoice in the fact that you have created us ALL in your image. Let us accept each other as a child of God with all our differences. Amen.

Saturday, December 19

"Through wisdom is a house builded; and by understanding it is established: And by knowledge shall the chambers be filled with all precious and pleasant riches."

— Proverbs 24:3-4

Devotion by Curtis Watson

This verse speaks not only about building a house, but making it a true home filled with wisdom, understanding, and blessings.

I hope everyone feels at home with First Presbyterian Church Covington. I am sure that the words "feels at home" evokes different thoughts and images from many of us. To "feel at home" hopefully means to feel safe and comfortable in your surroundings and with the people around you.

In my life I have found that Home is not the structure you and your family occupy. Throughout the years of our marriage Carolyn and I have had many places that we called home. We have made a few big geographical moves that took us across the United States and back. At each new location the moving boxes were unloaded and our things were put in place to made the house begin to feel like our home. With every move one constant need that we had to make us feel at home was to find a loving, caring church family. We knew that through a church family God would help us settle in and overcome any obstacles. At each location we found a church where we could participate

and thrive. We found the city didn't matter as long as we had each other and a foundation in church we would find our way in what God wanted us to do.

One recollection I have of a day that really made me feel at home was in Houston, TX. I had just been transferred there and we had not moved yet and were still house hunting. Carolyn had come from Jackson Hole during her school's Christmas break. She surprised me with a small artificial Christmas tree for the hotel room we were staying in. That night with Carolyn with me and the small Christmas tree lighting up the room, I truly felt at home and felt that God would take care of us.

Dear God, please open our eyes to the blessings you have given us. Make us aware of the need to share the feeling and meaning of home to everyone, especially those without shelter, without family and without you. Show us the way to share our sense of belonging to the church with our friends and with the friends we have not yet made. Please make us the light that shows the way home to those that are in the dark and are without you.
In your name we pray, Amen.

Fourth Week of Advent

Sunday, December 20

"A virgin shall conceive and bear a son; and they will call his name Immanuel, which means 'God with us'."

– Matthew 1:23

Remember by Billy Wade

A painting of my grandmother's house, done by a Charleston artist who was in our congregation, hangs above my bed. The table in my kitchen once sat in my grandmother's kitchen. It has benches on either side of it which look like church pews- and I suppose, in a way, they are. Because that is a holy place and what has gone on around that table, I have no doubt whatsoever, has been in some sense religious ritual.

What I remember are the stories told by my parents, uncles and aunts, and most of all by my grandmother, as we broke bread around the table; some serious, some humorous, told over and over so that they became etched in the minds of all the grandchildren; stories mostly about family and faith, passed down to the next generation of us, and now in my kitchen, to two more generations.

The Christian Church moves to a different rhythm than much of society around it. That is what Advent and all the seasons of the Church year are about. Following the seasons of the Church year, and celebrating the high holy days, is a way we remember who we are and to whom we belong. We are reminded that this world is God's world, despite the way things often look.

Throughout Scripture the people of God are told to remember the old stories- not simply the stories of what their ancestors did, what they accomplished. What they were told to remember first of all was what God had done. They were to remember God's acts among them, God's deliverance of them again and again. They were told to remember because they kept forgetting, kept worrying, kept looking for other ways to save themselves rather than trusting God's promises.

God has not abandoned us. As Matthew begins to tell his story, he brings to our remembrance the words of the prophet Isaiah : "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son; and they will call his name Immanuel, which means 'God with us'". We are part of the story and that is the hope in which we live: that God is with us also, working among us, in us and through us. Remember.

God, help us to remember the Good News of Immanuel and to pass the story to the next generation.

Monday, December 21

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

— Luke 2:29-32

Devotion by Alice Walker

The holy period of Advent gives an opportunity for us to draw near to God as we get ready for the celebration of Christ's birthday at Christmas. Scriptures remind us that Jesus' birthday was foretold centuries before it occurred. Simeon, a faithful man of God, was waiting for Jesus' divine birth. God had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the promised Messiah.

"Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word…(Luke 2:29-32)..,". are the opening words of the Nunc Dimittis, also known as the Song of Simeon. After seeing the baby Jesus, Simeon was ready to go home to Heaven.

Following the birth of a male child in Israel, the parents brought the child to the temple at eight days for Circumcision, at thirty days for a Redemption ceremony, and at 40 days for Purification of the mother and presentation of the baby.

In our scripture today, Simeon, a devout man of God, was in the Temple and recognized Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus.

Simeon was watching and waiting for the Messiah, so he was permitted to see Jesus at His first visit to the Temple.

What are you watching and waiting for this Advent season? How are you preparing your heart and home for the birth of the Christ Child?

Dear God, we today are watching and waiting for Jesus. If we are open to God, He will enter our hearts anew during this holy season. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Tuesday, December 22

"I lift up my eyes to the mountains– where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore."

— Psalm 121

When Home Changes by Buncie Hay Lanners

In 1979, I left Covington and FPC to matriculate to Davidson College and attend Davidson College Presbyterian Church (DCPC). When I left, I remember my family gathering around with my Hay grandparents, and Gand, my grandfather who graduated from Davidson in 1916, leading our family in reciting the 121st Psalm.

In March of 2026, I left for the second time my town of origin, my church of origin, my family of origin, our Lanners home for 35 years, and my beloved "calling", my arts work. My mom came to tell me goodbye, and I reminded her she sent me off to Davidson 47 years ago. It was quite an adjustment then, and it was a very real adjustment this year, 47 years later. However, the leaving has helped me redefine what home really is, though

missing home is a real feeling, for sure. In our new town, new house and new church, we have been the recipients of true community embracing us and welcoming us into the fold. Just like Covington, Davidson is built around community; I am reminded of home being the Kingdom of God right here in our midst, wherever we are. Our new community of faith is very different from FPC Cov., but is a home built on the same bricks as FPC—radical bricks of hospitality and acceptance. In this community of faith, we have been welcomed with open arms.

Celebrating the past and missing our "home" has given us the foundation for helping us find a new home and move into the future. I am so very grateful to FPC for loving me from the day I was born where I witnessed my retired grandfather in the pulpit, my reverend mother in the pulpit, our children baptized, nieces and nephews and family tenderly nurtured and loved. Watching our beloved church grow into its mission and calling, even from afar, brings such joy. The Creator, like a mother hen, helps us "nest" in our homes of love and joy, embracing the old and the new, the sadness and the joy together. "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore." Perhaps this is truly what home is about.

Happy 200th Birthday, FPC! I am eternally grateful for your being the Kingdom of God in my midst for 65 years!

God of goings and comings, thank you for the Kingdom of God in our midst and for this community you built 200 years ago and nurtured like a mother hen. Thank you for keeping us in the going out and the coming in forevermore. Amen.

Wednesday, December 23

"Be still, and know that I am God!"

— Psalm 46:10

Devotional by Erin Stillerman

Growing up, one of our family traditions was to get a puzzle on Christmas and then have it finished by New Year's Day. For those seven days, we would work on that puzzle while watching

holiday movies, while drinking egg nogg, while just talking. It was a family activity that brought us together for sometimes just a few minutes during those hectic days of driving to see family and opening presents. It was a time to have peace, concentration and moments of quiet to really celebrate the Christmas season by being with each other.

Sometimes holidays can be so overwhelming with picking the right gift, balancing work obligations with family time, or cooking favorite foods while your back still hurts from wrapping presents or putting up Christmas trees. Trying to get all the kids in the car at the same time can seem so hard, but having those few quiet moments with my family now to do puzzles is such a gift. It is something we can create together and allows us to just slow down a little to treasure our time together. I hope during this Christmas season you can find some time to pause and really live in the moment of being with your loved ones. To see that God truly has given us so much.

Gracious God, in the midst of the hustle and bustle of this Christmas season, help us to slow down, treasure the gift of time with those we love, and recognize your presence in the simple, quiet moments of being together. Amen.

Christmas Eve

Thursday, December 24

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us."
— John 1:14

The Christmas Eve We Sang Silent Night at Home
by Rev. Neeley Rentz Lane

Our first Christmas in Covington was simple. We had just moved into a rental house December 2019, and our only decoration was a tree with lights. We woke up in a new house that had yet to become home. But it didn't take long for Covington to become just that.

Recently, when asked to describe our congregation, I shared our Christmas Eve story of 2022. It was an exceptionally cold season.

I was at church preparing for worship when Robert called. Our pipes had burst, and our basement was flooding. He was ankle-deep in water while I was trying to get three little girls into smocked Christmas dresses, bows and all!

But this is where the story becomes one about home.

A neighbor helped dress the girls. Church members arrived with towels and fans. Someone picked up the girls for worship. Christmas Eve was beautiful in our sanctuary, and we proclaimed the good news of the Christ Child!

Our church knew how much I cherished singing Silent Night by candlelight. But with Robert still battling the flood, our family wouldn't share that moment together.

After worship, someone handed me candles so we could sing Silent Night together at home. The girls and I went home to help Robert and the church kept showing up with towels, fans, pizza, and spirits!

That Christmas Eve was anything but picture-perfect. Yet it remains one of my favorites.

Because home isn't about perfect houses or perfect plans. Home is the people who show up when life falls apart.

Isn't that the wonder of Christmas? The Christ child breaks into our lives amid the holy chaos! That first Christmas was anything but picture-perfect. In a world longing for hope, amid uncertainty and disorder, a baby's precious cry announced that God had come near.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

That Christmas Eve, amid our perfectly imperfect chaos, Emmanuel showed up through neighbors, church members, candles, and pizza. Our house became a home because love showed up.

And our church? It was already home.

Emmanuel, thank you for entering our holy chaos. Help us find you in imperfect moments and become people who show up with love, grace, and hope. Amen.

200th Anniversary Celebration

Remember, Imagine, Rejoice



First Presbyterian Church Covington, GA 1827-2027

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