

In the bleak mid-winter ❧

Meditations and Prayers for Advent and Christmas

By Herbert Brokering

5-part Home Study – pre-Advent 2009

Animated by Canon Jim Irvine

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Each 90-minute session concludes with the Holy Communion

★ *In the bleak mid-winter*

Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter,
Long ago.

*God knows when to rebirth earth
In calendars of time
When sun is low when cold has won
when poems look for rhyme
and in the middle of all cold
The warm will soon unfold*

WE KNEW WINTER IN THE COUNTRY. I made it come and go by breathing on a cold window pane, creating pictures. Winter drawings decorated the north windows. South windows were colored by frost, winter sun, and fractured light. I still hear myself after seventy-five years: "Mama, come see the winter picture I painted." Papa was the first to leave a warm bed and stoke a banked fire. Papa stirring in the cold country house rings clear to me, the way he wakened us for chores, and the long winter walk to country school. The best window paintings of all were by Jack Frost, who painted all night to amaze us with frosted glass in the morning. I was sure Jack Frost was a disciple of Jesus who only painted winter scenes.

Winter was not a night for a baby to be born outside in a barn, in Nebraska or in Bethlehem. Not even in the warm barn old Pastor Geyer had built for his six horses that we had now for our two cows and winter cats. The wind rattled our tin barn, and there was no stove to warm the hay in Nebraska, or in Bethlehem.

Incarnation is about God in the real world. God in a birth in the cold. God in a barn in a manger bed. God wrapped in a midwinter, a bleak long winter wrapped around a baby, a mother, a people, a nation: God wrapped around cold feet and hands, cold spirits, cold hearts. God among us, all the way into Bethlehem and Minnesota and Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. and Berlin and Stockholm: God in midwinter. In the middle of winter when the long cold is only half done and the beginning and the end of cold are still far apart God in the cold with any nation or person or baby when it is way too cold too long. God in the cold. Advent means God is coming in bleak midwinter, when things are far too cold.

*You know all seasons by name
The ones too cold, too warm
And did you send One to the earth
To save us from seasons that harm?

Now stay us, O God, near the stable
When hearts are too brittle and cold
To wrap us in winter's cold arms
Which in your old spring times unfold*

In the bleak mid-winter
★ *Frosty wind made moan,*
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter,
Long ago.

FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD MY MIND HAS BEEN FILLED WITH THE MOANING OF PRAIRIE WIND. Wind can sing. Wind can make song through reeds and the vibration of strings and beats. The most-played wind ensembles I know are the winds from any direction moaning around eaves and trees facing into wind. Prairie grass can whistle and make a summer moan. Frosty wind is moaning in another key. Awesome is too small a word. Awesome cold winter wind moaning. A fitting word for the season: awesome. Listen. Remember.

My mother was a warm woman. Her lap was always ready for us children. My mother moaned. It was more of a wintry moaning. Her hands were sometimes cold, and her head and neck hurt. Migraine; we knew the word. Mother moaned as she lay down: I massaged her neck. Her eyes were shut, she knew my child hands. It was a wintry moan. I still hear the moaning of my mother. The touch and the moaning sounds are in me. God came into a moaning world for us all.

God came into a moaning earth. There was and is a moaning too soft and deep to be heard. A moaning still frozen in eaves and rafters and treetops waiting for the one wind and breath that will sing the moan.

Earth was in pain, and God came to Bethlehem. There all earth's moaning could be heard, and from there a child would touch every moaning mother and father in Judea and the uttermost parts of the earth.

My mother hurt when the seasons were too full. I wanted her to be well for Christmas Eve and birthdays and every morning. So God came to all moaning nations and heard them, knew their voice, felt their moan, touched them, and heard each moaning word. I knew the meaning of my mother's moaning word was "Amen." I did not mention it for fear I was wrong. The moaning refrain was surely: Amen. Amen. Amen. So be it. Truly, truly, Yes.

*With is breath, life, and spirit
God knows the wintry moan
God hears the sigh of nations
Of moanings all alone*

*Wind is breath, want, and passion
God know the moan so still
That hides inside the silence
And lives inside the will*

*Wind is breath, hope, salvation
God knows our moaning when
Inside the hurt and wanting
God hears the word: Amen!*

In the bleak mid-winter
Frosty wind made moan,
★ **Earth stood hard as iron,**
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter,
Long ago.

EARTH IS SOFT. Now the song: “Earth stood hard as iron...” Earth is soft. I know the earth as a bed of green in spring and soft beneath September leaves. Now the song: “Earth stood hard.” Earth stands? Earth in winter has no warm lap; earth has no soft mother’s breast. Earth is cold deep down. Winter earth, cold sometimes seven feet deep, deeper than a grave, hard as iron, standing. Upright, solid in midwinter. Such a world is a different world, a hard world. Into this world. God comes.

We have felt this iron underfoot. I watched farmers dig through this iron to create winter graves. My brother’s grave was in this iron earth. How hard the Kuhlman boy dug to make his friend a winter place. I was little and watched. Years later I heard a North Dakota boy look into his father’s wintry tomb and shout: “Is it cold in there?” He shivered; I put army robe around him.

We wrapped the urn containing my wife’s ashes in a homemade blanket made by the grandchildren. The grave seemed warmer with a blanket. Their young souls felt the warmth.

Hearts can be hard as iron. Hearts can be too cold for seed and can be too silent. I have known hearts that stood as iron and lost their warm beat. Mine has done so. I heard a mail curse his best friend and hurry out to take his friend’s life. How awful it must feel to have such a heart in you. God came to warm these places oil earth.

Bethlehem was not a safe place. A shed is warm but not warm enough for a newborn. Earth always needs warming so we can lie on the grass and walk barefoot. Earth needs a warm safe place where seed can wake and rise and where ground can green. Earth needs at least a cave with straw and a warm mother and father and a tiny fire or blanket. A people cannot be safe in a place that stands hard as iron.

*God, I know the cold
That turns a heart and mind
Too hard for winter breath
Just right for sudden death
In me and humankind*

*How deep you warm your earth
With life and summer sun
As in the stable straw,
While angels sing hurrah
You send us Christ, your son*

★ *Our God, heaven cannot hold him,*
Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When he comes to reign:
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable place sufficed
The Lord God incarnate,
Jesus Christ.

HOW BIG IS HEAVEN? Will all the saints and the saved fit? Will there be room in heaven for everyone forever and ever? What little believer has not wondered about the size of heaven?

Now a more amazing picture: Heaven cannot hold an infant. "Heaven cannot hold him." A new thought for the child alive in me. If we sing, "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus," why can't heaven hold him? Did the Christ want to come to fill the earth? He came to Nazareth, to a woman, and then rode on a donkey to Bethlehem. He took the bumpy ride, the discomfort, the excitement of a new mother who pondered in her heart while the Word rode to a stable to be born. Heaven cannot hold him; heaven gave him to earth.

God, why did you send the Word to dwell among us? Did he ask to come? Did he know what this could mean? Did you warn him about the garden, and the stone. and the swords and lanterns. when he would sweat blood and kneeling learn to say: "I will"? Was it his will to come to earth?

Sometimes I believe he had to come. Heaven was too small; the grace of heaven was overflowing. Heaven had the key to Eden, and he came to open the garden gate. This was his work.

Some call him Immanuel, some Messiah, and some name him Adam. Eden is not gone. Eden has a new gate, and the child holds the key.

Adam wants back into the garden. Adam is looking, for the tree. Eve is looking for her children. Heaven will open the garden that is shut. The child will do it. The child has the key to the garden of grace, the garden of God. Look! I believe. The child holds the key; heaven cannot hold him.

*My God, my God, how can this be
That heaven and eternity
Are full of grace, so full of love
That Christ did come from far above
And bring the gift of your Amen
In choirs and child to Bethlehem?
And since Messiah hold the key
Unlock your garden deep in me*

Our God, heaven cannot hold him,
★ *Nor earth sustain;*
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When he comes to reign:
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable place sufficed
The Lord God incarnate,
Jesus Christ.

WHAT A THOUGHT BY THE SONGWRITER. "Heaven cannot hold him." And now a counter-thought: "Nor earth sustain" him. Heaven is too full, overflowing but earth is too empty and cannot keep him alive. Such contrasts tell a story beyond understanding. These two thoughts turn truth into wonder. Be amazed with me at these two pictures. The Christ torn because heaven cannot hold him and yet earth cannot sustain him. This is a season of wonderment, contrasts, mystery, and faith. It is a time to feel the torn world.

He came from heaven to earth, to Bethlehem, a gift from heaven. And earth sent him back to heaven from Calvary. Was the Christ so bright and right and good we could not comprehend or grasp him? Do we vacillate with Pilate so that we do not know what to do with him?

He came to reopen paradise. Paradise is the garden of human birth. It was closed and an angel came to guard it. The garden became a grave. Now Messiah, the baby, came to live, die, be laid in a garden, a grave, and be raised. What is this second garden? The garden of human rebirth! The angels are no longer closing the entrance. Read the gospels: They stand at the entrance, opening the tomb, declaring: "He is not here; he is risen and goes before you."

That is why the baby in Bethlehem came. To bring the key to unlock the grave, and to waken from death. Earth cannot sustain him. Earth flogged him and crucified him. This season is about a God who goes where we are flogged, despised, betrayed, denied, and killed. For this reason, God came to Bethlehem, to hear Rachel weep and to hear the feet of Herod's soldiers and angels marching in Berlin and Salem and Korea and Columbia. The boots of Herod's army still walk the earth and make the babies of Bethlehem cry and mothers weep.

The good new? The door to paradise is now open. Death, you have no more sting.

*Dearest Jesus, little one
Come as stranger, sister, son
Gift of heaven, Light of light
Angels' music, God's delight
Heaven in a woman's womb
Born to open wide the tomb
Keep for me the golden key
To unlock eternity*

Our God, heaven cannot hold him,
Nor earth sustain;
★ *Heaven and earth shall flee away*
When he comes to reign:
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable place sufficed
The Lord God incarnate,
Jesus Christ.

SHEPHERDS AND KINGS CAME. All hurried to kneel and worship. Hurry. God is on earth, in the hay, in a town, with people, with us. Immanuel means God is with us. God is asleep: the Prince of Peace sleeps in Mary's lap. God is with us as an infant.

God lives, grows in stature. God lives, suffers, is crucified, risen, ascended. God walks the human way, our way. This is the way that goes all the way to the grave and to glory. He ascends and is at the right hand of the Father. From there he will come again.

The child will return. The child who was at Mary's breast is at the right hand of God. The one in the manger is on the throne, and he will come again. Heaven cannot hold him. Heaven and earth shall flee away.

O the glory when he came to Bethlehem. Glory filled the skies, and all angels sang it once. The heavens were ablaze, and earth was dumbfounded. We still make bright lights, and choirs rehearse nonstop. We now glorify! Jesus came to Mary and was born in secret in a cave, one child born in all the world, and he will come again.

He will come again in a cloud and the holy angels with him, in bright glory and with trumpet sounds and with sight and light so great, so brilliant, so blinding, so glorious that earth will flee away, and heaven too. "Heaven and earth shall flee away."

Jesus Christ is too big for heaven and for earth. Heaven and earth will flee and be made new.

Where do they flee? I do not know. How do they flee? I do not know. Why do they flee? He will open a new earth and a new heaven. Is this the reopening of Paradise? Is this heaven and earth become one? He will make a new beginning. The Word will say: "Let there be a new creation," and it will be so.

*Heaven and earth shall flee away
And then the great surprise!
All things made new
And glory the surprise.*

*Heaven and earth shall flee away
And God at human breast
Then life and death, the open grave
The cloud, God's peace and rest*

★ *Enough for him, whom Cherubim*

Worship night and day,
A breast full of milk
And a manger full of hay;
Enough for him, whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.

THE STABLE, STRAW, MARY'S BREAST, AND CHERUBIM WERE ENOUGH FOR HIM. Enough. Not too little, but enough. No complaints. No calling the health department or the front desk for more service; no demanding new clean sheets and a midwife. The stable was enough.

Breath of donkeys, sheep, and camels will warm the air. My cow in midwinter warmed the air in the little barn my father had built. The body temperature of a beast in a stable can help warm a baby. Dogs have kept trapped skiers from freezing. A donkey and a sheep can make a difference. The stable was enough.

Joseph had a coat. Mary had a shawl. Together they could warm a place for the child in the hay. The child could sleep between them. We have all huddled in the cold and warmed each other. In our country church, a cold pew, the pump organ, and father preaching were enough. When still too cold we sat close with blankets over our laps. It was primitive, and it was enough. How many are born each day with little comfort and protection: they have enough. When there is no more to have, many soon know they have enough. Jesus had the hay and donkey, Mary's shawl and breast, and Joseph's coat.

In my early ministry I often guided young people to unforgettable experiences. Several times we celebrated Christmas in garage, for the stable of the inn was a garage for beasts of burden. I hid New Testaments in a hayloft, and we found Luke 2 and read the story while sitting in straw. God in the hay is beyond imagination, so we imagined and believed.

God is a God of abundance. See what God spent on his own Son. There was no private birthing room for the family. The cave was enough. See the wardrobe. There was no baby shower. Swaddling clothes were enough. The God of abundance did not lavish attention on his own dear son. There is enough for all newborns. See the child in Bethlehem asleep. He had enough. There is always enough when we know what is enough.

*Jesus, your wardrobe was so very small
A knapsack, dream, some hay and drink
Very small that is all. Enough, that is all*

Enough for him, whom Cherubim
★ *Worship night and day,*
A breast full of milk
And a manger full of hay;
Enough for him, whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.

*Shhh. By faith we hear a heaven sound
Angel hymns upon the ground
By faith we hear them any time
As song in harmony and rhyme*

CHERUBIM WORSHIP THE CHILD SAY AND NIGHT. In worship, do you hear the white sound of their singing? They kneel, and the manger is surrounded by holiness. Holiness is God's light, and light makes warm. If angels are blessing, then their breath will warm the room. If they hold infants, as angels do, those newborns will feel the comfort. I only begin to know what cherubim do for a child they worship.

Cherubim tend us day and night. Whatever God came to Bethlehem to bring I will take as a gift. I will ask no questions but only give thanks. Angels bring worship by their mere presence.

When little, I learned an old prayer I still pray in the dark. In the old German prayer, angels surround my bed and protect me with weapons gilded with gold. Night after night I was kept safe in my upstairs bedroom. In cold subzero winters and in the warm silent summer dark, I was protected. There was never a battle around my bed. Who would war against a circle of cherubim? We sang the old prayer of Paul Gerhardt: *Breit aus die Pflügel Beide* (Spread wide your wings). The hymn was our battle cry in the night. No enemy could penetrate the cherubim and our singing.

In Bethlehem, I noticed Orthodox priests worshipping when no parish members were present. Their house of prayer was a few feet from the nativity site. How did they worship without the people? I heard the answer. Heaven is always in worship, night and day. What the priests do is tune into heaven's liturgy at any time. Heaven with seraphim and cherubim lead the universe in worship. Creation is called to worship at all times, night and day.

*When spirits battle in my room
And fill my soul with gloom
I call on Cherubim in flight
To come by day or come by night
With songs and candlelight*

Enough for him, whom Cherubim
Worship night and day,
★ *A breast full of milk*
And a manger full of hay;
Enough for him, whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.

IMAGINE, GOD AT A MOTHER'S BREAST. Jesus at Mary's breast full of milk. A sacred picture of "Give us this day our daily bread." A child at mother's breast like someone taking Eucharist. What more is there? This milk is life to the child, as bread and wine are to us. Often I have wondered if this is in fact their first communion. See their eyes and fingers grappling the full breast of milk. I saw it often in our country church as mothers of infants moved close to the steel stove and nursed their children. On the holy day of communion I marveled while mothers nursed and the adults went forward to drink of the one cup. I thought of all mothers' milk al, one drink for all babies. I still think this way.

"A breast bill of milk" has been painted by many master painters. El Greco's *The Holy Family* is a beautiful portrait of the Virgin Mary breastfeeding. The child is reaching to grab his mother's hand. Her breast is serving him well. He has only to take and drink. Mary is like the new Eve, unashamed of her body as she was before the Fall.

There are many pictures and paintings of grace. Is Jesus at a breast full of milk not a picture of grace? Is not every infant nursing at a mother's breast a sign of grace? All the child does is receive the milk, take, and drink. The child must receive it, must drink to benefit. Grace does not force itself on us. Grace is then for us to embrace and take and impart. *Grace is* nourishment, nurturing, satisfying, healing, and sacramental.

When our children nursed there was rocking, humming, stillness, peacefulness, contentment in the whole house. I did not try to understand; the spirit was holy. The whole world was satisfied, as was I. In the common stable, as in all places with just enough, there is a peace that passes understanding. I do not wish to comprehend the great meaning of Jesus Christ and a breast full of milk.

*Early life begins as sacrament
Take and eat; take and drink
Which causes me to wonder and to think
That Mary knew, and Joseph too
That holding Christ where ere they went
They held for us the sacrament*

★ *Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air,
But his mother only,
In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.*

*What angels in heaven would not wish to stay
To see the Lord God sound asleep in hay?
What angels in heaven would not swing low
To see believers come and go?*

TO HAVE PRINCES AND PRINCESSES ATTENDING A NEW-BORN IS MORE THAN ONE WOULD HOPE FOR. But what if kings and queens were present also? What if presidents and judges were trained as midwives or nurses to tend mother and child? Oh, to have them “gathered there.” Gathered there with their staff and servants and singers and medical teams and wise men. What a royal visitation that would be.

I remember how Bishop Pautke from Lübeck, Germany, whom we knew through refugee work, arrived in time for the birth of our second born. He stood before my wife and infant son with a bouquet hid behind his back. What honor and glory and royalty he brought to the birth room. There he was with a smile, fire in his eyes, and a halo on him like an angel or archangel.

So what do Archangels bring to the stable? Raphael, who are you? “I Am the angel who is the healer, the main physician serving Almighty God. I can summon healers for the child.” Michael, who are you? “I protect the earth: I battle Satan.” Gabriel, who are you? “I am the messenger of Almighty God who brought the promise directly to Mary. I told her she would be a mother: she said, ‘So be it.’ Then she sang the *Magnificat*. I, Gabriel, will keep God’s message clear.”

How many angels are in the room with the child? Angels fill the stable to the ceiling, ready to serve the child, embroidering every cloud. As a boy I loved sitting on our living room floor at a conference of clergy talking about matters beyond the imagination. My favorite debate year after year was how many angels could stand on the point of a pin. If that many could stand on a pin point, then imagine how many could stand inside the stable ready to serve the child.

*How good to be served from heaven’s side.
Where grace is deep and far and wide
And angels serve from every side*

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
★ ***Cherubim and seraphim***
Thronged the air,
But his mother only,
In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

*Ah the watchful wings of angels
Warriors shooting darts of love
Medicine now born of heaven
Sent to earth from far above*

ANGELS SERVE AND SING; THAT IS HOW I ALWAYS SAW ANGELS. Early in my life, I believed that cherubim served and seraphim sang. Whether true or not, these two words covered all that angels did: they sang, they served. This is an image I have remembered for eighty years. So through the years I have had angels singing and serving. These two words have grown in my mind to cover the ministries of God. Serving and singing have guided me for eighty years.

A cherubim is a many-winged angel, sometimes part animal: they served to pull the chariot of the Almighty. Their overarching wings decorated the temple, and beneath them rested the Ark. They were in the vision of Ezekiel. The divine throne rested on four cherub wings. So they were the guardian spirits for the Ark of the Covenant, the Tree of Life, and of my bed in Nebraska.

A cherub is a small angel portrayed as a child with a chubby rosy face. So what does this child angel do? They may guard, and with their arrows they shoot sheathes of love. Love is the greatest weapon of angelic warriors; they battle with love.

We all have childhood pictures of angels. In our bedroom we had a picture of angels carrying a child over a bridge to safety. The artist portrayed at least two times in a child's life: angels carrying a child over pain and danger to safety, and angels carrying a child over a river into heaven. They must have been cherubim, God's guardians.

*Ah, to hear old hymns of angels
Savored in the mystery of grace
Seraphs, Cherubs singing, serving
Continually the human race*

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
★ *Thronged the air,*
But his mother only,
In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

THE SPACE OVERHEAD IN THE AIR SEEMS ENDLESS AND WILL SURELY HOLD A THRONG OF ANGELS. As a child I studied the air above and around. I did so lying on pasture grass and looking up and out. In December, I looked out the north window into stars and stars. During Lenten evening services, I often lay in a pew or on my mother's lap and stared into the vast empty space overhead to the old tin ceiling. Then I would close my eyes and look past the ceiling into the night sky outside. I measured space with imagination. There is room to throng the air. Looking out and up, there is room.

I have seen migrating geese flying through the air and known that on the other side of their formation was more space, endless space. Migrating geese cannot throng the air; there is still space. I have seen bees swarm and darken the sky like a cloud; when I saw them all follow the queen to an apple limb, I saw there were not enough of them to throng the air. Only angels can throng a Space, even the whole air. I never worried that when they filled the air they might create a traffic jam or huge impasse. Angels allow us to work through them and not be hampered.

When angels throng the air, I imagine they fill space with energy, spirit, life, light, power, and calm. They glorify the air with light.

Joseph could get in the way, so Mary might say: "Joseph, where you are standing I cannot see the child." If angels were between Mary and the child, she would boast: "I see my child so plainly; today he is more beautiful than yesterday." Angels bring light.

I remember a scene in Poland. Standing in a typical, pure white chancel, focused on a medieval crucifix, I heard someone with a camera say to her friend, a fellow traveler, "Please move. You are standing, between me and Jesus." The woman between her friend and the crucifix began to scream. She thought that she was not only blocking the view of the camera, but that she stood between her friend and Christ. She, with her body, blocked the view; angels as Spirit would glorify the view.

Angels do not hide Jesus; they cast light on Jesus. They throng the air.

*God, your angels throng the air
Left and right and everywhere
Now close my eyes and give me sight
To find them on my left and right
So much there is I do not see
Except by faith inside of me*

★ *What can I give Him,*
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part, -
Yet what I can I give Him,
Give my heart.

THE FINAL VERSE OF THE HYMN IS THE MOST WELL-KNOWN AND -LOVED. Now we are drawn into the stable. Angels, archangels, Mary, Joseph -- all have given the child a gift. What shall I give? What does he need: or, what do I need to give? What do I want to give? What am I able to give? What does he ask me to give? Which is it?

I saw an Orthodox woman in Russia give devotion. For hours she stood motionless before an icon of Jesus and gave herself. Standing there, it seemed she gave nothing. She only received. It was as though this old iconic painting wrapped around her and pierced her spirit and fed her with all of Christ. She was giving herself to Jesus' glory. She was surrendering completely and looked saved. As she gave herself, she received. What shall I give him? Devotion.

In the streets of Erfurt I saw Pieta, Mary holding her deceased son in her lap. It was in a church niche along a busy street, which people have passed by for four hundred years. Jesus' right thumb was shiny. It had received countless kisses by passersby through the centuries. Mary's kiss is alive. What shall I give? The kiss of peace.

Judas kissed Jesus in the garden. "The One you want is the One I kiss." This kiss of betrayal was not a kiss of peace. Though at that moment Jesus called him "friend." Perhaps this was a kiss of friendship. Perhaps Judas did expect Jesus finally to show his power and glory and do miracles to set the people free. Jesus had come to set another kingdom free, the kingdom of spirit, soul, mind, heart. It is a kingdom hidden. We see the kingdom and don't see; we hear and don't hear. What shall I give film? Eyes to see, ears to hear.

The *Pax* in the chaplains' school was hidden inside the huge altar. Only as we studied the altar with the priest for many minutes did we get past the stone and beauty and splendor and relic. As we looked and thought deeper and deeper into the altar we found the "sign and symbol" of Christ. As always, Christ was concealed and revealed in a sacred sign. What shall I give? A deeper look.

God is hidden in Christ. Inside, in Christ, we find the peace and then we pass it to each other and find it in each other. What shall I give him? The gift of peace he gives me. I will give this gift to another.

*God, you hide and we are to find you
We close our eyes, give us a clue
Like children we seek in all places
As we seek it's sure to be you*

*So in faith I come to the manger
What is the gift that I give?
That my eyes and my ears be quite open
And I find what you give me to live*

What can I give Him,
★ *Poor as I am?*
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part, -
Yet what I can I give Him,
Give my heart.

*Were I poor, I would know
What I am to give
The gift I'd choose, I know, I know
Is bread, the bread I need to live
The child, the child is now my living bread
As he once said, as he once said*

WHAT HAVE WE TO GIVE? Something? Everything? I read a devotion that reminded readers it was a leap year. This means one extra day. The writer suggested that the reader give this extra day to someone as a gift. We have been given a free day, now give it to another. So what was given that we now give? A day.

What if someone poor gave me a full day?

Have you seen the eyes of the poor when given more than they can eat? Their eyes shine. The poor can see beyond what is in front of them. A whole baked potato or partially eaten sandwich is a feast. I have seen the poor eat a small piece of bread with both hands. The poor know the size of a gift. A widow's mite is more than they can afford. What if I gave the poor one whole day to give away?

We are poor when standing before a king or queen. We are poor when standing before the King, of kings and Lord of lords. But the one in the manger does not see us as poor. He is as poor as we, and dependent on his mother for life, an infant, helpless, needful, poor, yet of God. We too are of God, queens and kings, a royal people. So what do poor people give God?

My children gave me homemade thing. Scribbles, valentines, hand-drawn letters, colored hearts, sealed envelopes with loving notes inside, special stones with pretty markings, a feather, walnuts autographed with special words. Each Christmas season as a child, I gave my mother a gift. It was never something I bought, for I do not recall having spending money. I was poor and always had a good gift, a homemade gift. The poor have their own shopping mall.

What if someone poor gave me one full day? What kind of gift would that be?

*O children, show me how to be poor
Give me your scribbles and homemade valentines
Find me a bumpy stone or broken glass that shines
Give me a hug, you know just how to hug
Show me your friend, a tiny ladybug
None of these a gift that you did buy
Priceless, homemade, poor, that's why*

What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
★ If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part, -
Yet what I can I give Him,
Give my heart.

*If I were a shepherd
I'd loan him my own staff
We'd climb the highest mountain top
We'd play a flute diet and never stop
And laugh and laugh and laugh*

TO BE A SHEPHERD WAS A CHILDHOOD DREAM. Then I could live in a homemade corral with Sheep all around me. I would protect them with a rod or slingshot and lead them. I'd know each sheep by name, and they would know my voice. My brother Harold would help. All the pictures of Jesus the good Shepherd would come true in me.

What could I give the Christ child? If I were little, I'd give him my best slingshot, homemade out of an inner tube from our '28 Chevy. The Y-shaped wood would be smooth as glass, and my initials would be carved near the bottom. This I'd give the Christ child.

I had two goats to give, and I knew -oats were in the shepherd's flock. If I gave him a goat this would be half my flock. That would be fifty percent, more than a tithe. If the gift went straight to Jesus, this would not be too much.

I like wood; since childhood I saw myself as a wood carver. If I were a shepherd there would be many hand-carved staffs in the corner of my cabin. I do have many walking sticks, and I would carve one of them as a gift.

One walking stick is a young maple tree too quickly transplanted by my eager Son. It did not grow long or live. It is taller than I, waiting in the corner of my garage to be a special gift. I would ask a woodcarver to carve it as gift for the Christ. Walking canes are important to me; a good Shepherd needs a very good staff.

I could give the infant a harmonica so we could play songs together. I have five, and most are in mint condition though twenty years old. They are waiting to make a first sound. We practice shepherd songs.

Shepherds need time for musing. Were the shepherds aware of the irony of their visit to the child? Did they see the contrast: lowly shepherds, and King of kings?

*God, make me a shepherd and show me some sheep
Lost in some pasture. I hear them bleat
I hear the pleading; it's someone I know
You are my shepherd and so I will go
This is my gift: I will show them the stall
Where there's grace for each one and there's room for us all.*

*Communion under
Special Circumstances*

In the Bleak Mid-Winter

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
God calls us to faithful service
by the proclamation of the word,
and sustains us with the sacrament
of the body and blood of Christ.
[*Hear now God's word,
and*] receive this holy food from the
Lord's table.

Most merciful God,
**we confess that we have sinned
against you
in thought, word,
and deed, by what
we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole
heart;
we have not loved our neighbours as
ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly
repent.
For the sake of your Son
Jesus Christ, have mercy on
us and forgive us, that we
may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your name. Amen.**

The priest shall say...

Almighty God have mercy upon
you, pardon and deliver you from
all your sins, confirm and

strengthen you in all goodness,
and keep you in eternal life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Before Communion...

As our Saviour taught us, let us pray,

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.**

The gifts of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God.

After Communion...

Glory to God,
**whose power, working in us,
can do infinitely more
than we can ask or imagine.
Glory to God from generation
to generation, in the Church
and in Christ Jesus,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

Dismissal...

Let us bless the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Our **Epiphany Study** will begin Tuesday, January 12 and Thursday, January 14. We will use John Claypool's book *Mending the Heart* as our study guide. The focus will be the discovery – the *epiphany* – of Jesus in the relationships we encounter. This study will lead us to Lent.

Our **Lenten Study** will begin the first full week of Lent. We will study William P. Young's novel, *The Shack*. Participants are encouraged to get their own copy and read it before the study so we can discuss it.

Both books are available from ANGLICAN HOUSE, 116 PRINCESS STREET, SAINT JOHN.