

## Favorite Advent Memory

If I were to ask about your favorite Christmas memory, most of you would have no trouble recalling one or two from your childhood and maybe even more from holiday celebrations with your own children and grandchildren. Here are a few of mine that I shared with you in a 2022 "Chapel Chimes".



"I think of the Christmas Eve that my Dad and older brother were trying to sneak my new bike into the living room and one of them accidentally hit the horn and I woke up and went running in to catch them red handed. I think of decorating the Christmas tree with my family and my Mom never being satisfied that we had done it just right. I remember my grandmother and aunts waiting outside our house until they saw the lights go on Christmas morning and then joining us for presents and brunch. I remember my other grandmother's mantle crowded with so many stockings for all the cousins that I wondered why it didn't crash to the ground.

Perhaps you remember sitting atop Santa's lap or watching your own children smile as they enjoyed that same tradition. Or, perhaps your fondest memory is singing *Silent Night* in a darkened sanctuary during the candlelight service on Christmas Eve..." And, I am certain that if you and I were to sit and share a cup of hot chocolate you might spend considerable time recalling many more of your favorite Christmas memories.

But, what if I were to ask you about your favorite Advent memory. I'm going to predict that this might present a challenge for you. Perhaps your family had a tradition of using an Advent Calendar to count down the days until the birth of Jesus or maybe your family led the Advent wreath lighting liturgy in worship one Sunday...but after that, most of you would draw a blank. And, I bet that some of you actually came from a Christian tradition that didn't even mention Advent let alone celebrate it. So, let me share with you one of my favorite Advent memories.

The year was 2014 and I was the brand new pastor at the Chapel in the Pines. Here I met a wonderful lady, Reverend Fran Stark who had served this church for several years as its associate pastor. As Fran and I were making plans for Advent she began to tell me about a worship service that she had initiated here at the Chapel called "Blue Christmas". This service was designed to speak to those who had lost a loved one in the previous year and for whom the tinsel and carols just didn't seem the same and definitely couldn't overcome the constant reminder of the empty chair at their dining room table. Fran wanted to make sure that everyone attending this special service knew it's goal and purpose.

So, Fran and I came up with this idea. To open the service I was to play my guitar and sing *It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year*. I told her that I was no Andy Williams but I would give it a shot.

So from the lectern I began singing...

"It's the most wonderful  
time of the year  
With the kids jingle belling  
And everyone telling you,  
"Be of good cheer!"  
It's the most wonderful time  
of the year

It's the hap-happiest season of all..."

And this is where Fran would interrupt me...seemingly, rudely interrupt me, to let me know that the Advent and Christmas seasons are not always "a wonderful time of the year" for those that have recently lost loved ones and that the purpose of this service was to give those for whom the holidays were not "merry and bright" this particular year a place to celebrate the coming of the Christ-Child in a more quiet and meditative environment.

So, having been corrected by my elder, I began singing once more...

"It's the most wonderful time  
of the year  
There'll be much mistletoeing  
And hearts will be glowing when loved ones are near  
It's the most wonderful time  
of the year

There'll be parties for hosting  
Marshmallows for toasting  
And caroling out in the snow..."

And, Fran would once again...even more aggressively interrupt me, to let me know that some in our sanctuary might have had other types of losses this year. Some may have lost their job, their spouse may have had significant health problem, they may have had a change in their economic security...some may be lonesome or even depressed as they anticipate a season when everyone else will be "mistletoeing" and "caroling out in the snow".

Fran and I repeated this back and forth throughout the entire song until she was sure that everyone who had come to worship knew that whatever their situation, whatever their frame of mind this Advent season, that it was O.K. because God loved them and Jesus was on the way to meet them wherever they were in their spiritual journey and however they felt it best to greet the child who was coming to save them and save the world.



Yes, through the years Fran's "Blue Christmas" has evolved into what we now call "A Service from Darkness to Light" but we still celebrate it on the Thursday evening of the first week of Advent and the message of the service still revolves around the same scripture:

In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.  
He was in the beginning with God;  
all things were made through him,  
and without him was not anything made that was made.  
In him was life, and the life  
was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.  
- John 1:1-5 -

Fran taught me that during Advent everyone experienced darkness of one type or another and it was my job as pastor to meet them where they were and attempt to lead them and love them out of their darkness and into the light of Christ.

This is one of my favorite Advent memories and I tell it in part to honor and remember Fran and also I hope to encourage you to make your own Advent memory this year by joining together on Thursday, December 5th, at 4:00 for our service of "Darkness to Light". I pray that you will take this opportunity to get out of the hustle and bustle of the holidays to worship the one who has come, is coming, and is still yet to come again.

(Don't forget the covered-dish soup, bread, and dessert supper following the service. Hope to see you there.)

