

Letter from the Editor

Illuminate [verb]: to supply or brighten with light; light up.

“What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn’t put it out.” (John 1:4-5 Message)

Christmas is all about the anticipation of Jesus's birth, of the light's arrival. Together, we wait for the darkness to fade and the light to arise. When Jesus is born, light has returned to the world—and it illuminates everything it touches.

Our devotions this year focus on the theme of light: how we are a light to our PTM students, how they are a light to us, and ultimately how Jesus came to be a light to all humanity. In a world that is continually perpetuated by darkness, we need a hope—a light to pierce through muck and mire of this world, and to shine brightly on the Kingdom coming.

At PTM, we see Jesus's light manifest itself in our children—breaking through the barriers of darkness to shine His light, overcoming the darkness in their lives, shining the light of Jesus for their families and for us. We see light break through walls and boxes and circumstances we think are too dark and hopeless to recover from. We see Jesus shine through our kids' actions, our volunteers kindness, our staff's love and devotion to making the world a little less dark for the Preston Taylor community. We see light changing our world, one student at a time.

As Wendell Berry says, "it gets darker and darker and darker... and then Jesus is born." Jesus came to be the light of life, to illuminate our paths and our lives with a light that cannot be put out by the darkness. Darkness is finally overcome by the light of life! And this devotion is about celebrating that light in the lives of those it touches.

If you are reading this, YOU are a light to our students at PTM—whether that's through volunteering at a site, donating money, mentoring a student 1-on-1—you shine the light of Jesus into their world, and we are so grateful for the impact you are making. May these devotions remind you Jesus is our light and our hope—and that His light will always overcome the darkness.

Gratefully,

Jordan Taylor, Editor

December 1

In the Darkest of Places

“For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands” 2 Timothy 1:6 (NIV).

Last night of PTM wide retreat, the camp fire was blazing... stories, prayers, laughter, and songs of praise were rising up to Heaven with the smoke. Nights are really dark at camp so far from the city, which is perfect for a bonfire. The darker the night, the more magnificent the flame... the more welcomed the light.

If you’ve ever been in a cave for long, you’re familiar with the beauty of that first ray of sunlight breaking through the opening of rock as you reach the end. You can’t help but pick up the pace as you chase the light. Why? Because it’s been so dark you could hardly see your hand in front of your face – we step out of the cave into the same world we knew before we entered in, but the light is suddenly more brilliant and the colors more vibrant than ever before. Prolonged darkness tends to have that effect.

The fire wasn’t the only thing exuding light that night. Two of my high schoolers, Kennedy and Jeraney, stood up and shared their testimonies with the younger students. Kennedy shared about how the Lord was confirming the call on her life to minister to girls; Jeraney spoke of the men of God in his life that have shown him the way.

I pray that I am a light to my students, but every time I see them shining, they are surely a light to me. They remind me of how good and true this Gospel is that we carry. Sometimes when we’re saturated in light for too long we can forget its glory; when we see this light that we have come to know so well burst forth from darkness around us, we’re reminded of its beauty and significance and the importance of its shine in us.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven,” Matthew 5:14-16.

One way to hide light is to put it under a basket, but do you want to know another way? Put it in a room that is already perfectly lit. It is not darkness that hides the light... it is too much light. Darkness cannot compete with light for space in the sky. Light always wins, because as most of us have heard before – darkness is merely the absence of light.

That’s why it is in the darkness of this world that we are called to shine. It’s not usually easy or comfortable or convenient, but it’s what we were made for – that others would see our good works and give glory to our Father in Heaven.

Jesus, thank you that you left Heaven and stepped into our darkness so that we might know your light. Help us not to fear or avoid the darkness in the world around us, but to hear its cry for the light that is in us. Let us be people who courageously carry Your light to the places that need it the most, so that all may give glory to You. Amen.

Contributed by Nicole Eaton, Dinner and Devo Director

December 2

Sharing, Sharing, Listening, & Caring

"...he shall hear my voice." Psalm 55:17 (KJV)

This has to be one of my favorite times of the day; all 50-55 of my little ones sitting on a carpet struggling to stay "criss-cross applesauce," extremely squirmy and chatty from the last transition and ready to break free for the day. I raise my arms, wiggle my fingers, drop my hands dramatically, and all the voices in unison chant:

"Sharing, sharing, listening, and Caring!! What's new [insert student name]?"

There are four names that are posted each day (chosen alphabetically from my roll). These four get to share something that happened and how they feel about it.

It's a beautiful time for me, a time where I get to hear the hearts of my dear ones. I get to celebrate getting an 'A'; I get to mourn the auntie passing away; I get to learn about a cool hobby. I get to experience the awesomeness of them letting me and their PTM family in on their lives. It's a sacred time: the invitation into someone's life, the transparency in which they display, the courage it takes to share. It's a simple time: 1-2 quick sentences of sincere honesty.

And they love it... And I love it. And, our relationship deepens in this exchange.

Through this time every day, I began to understand how God feels when we come to Him. Although He knows all, sees all, and is everywhere, there is something divinely special when a soul willingly shares--it's an act of love, of trust, of surrender. It's magnificently simple: when we share, He is listening and He cares.

And, our relationship deepens in this exchange.

Triune God. Thank you that you are a God who listens and cares. You listened to the cries of your people in need of a Savior and you responded. You cared for us so much you were willing to take on flesh and be born into a world full of sin. Thank you.

You are a God who is always available and ready for us to share our hearts with you. Thank you that you have made the act of prayer so simple, that we can just come to you.

Lord, help me come to you, help me share my joys and celebrations and my trials and sadness. Thank you for being available. In the matchless name of Jesus Christ,

Amen.

Contributed by Nikki Robinson, Wilson Center Children's Director

December 3 No Limits, No Boundaries

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Jeremiah 29:11.

We sat down on the back of a cracked porch, just as the sun was going down but the warmth of the day could still be felt. It was her first day in the high school mentorship program; so naturally, we had to get to know each other for awhile. As time went on, she began to unravel— opening up about her school, family life, and her path to ultimately moving to Nashville with her mother. It was a story that made me wonder how deeply she had been affected by the tumults in her life.

But, then, she abruptly changed the course of the conversation to talking about her dreams. As an avid artist, her face lit up as she began talking about opening up her own art store. She talked about travelling the world to visit Egypt and Paris to gain inspiration for her work, and perhaps to sell a few of her drawings. I was immediately drawn out of my fixation on her circumstances to this God-sized declaration that she claimed over her life. I was encouraged by her child-like faith to believe there was more in store for her.

Jesus's birth was a God-sized declaration of hope in a world plagued by circumstances. Through Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, we were freed from the power of sin in our lives so that we may be the people that God destined us to be. Still, it's so easy to let the positives and negatives in our lives predict how far we'll go in our careers, relationships, and spiritual journeys. But, God has given us His guaranteed promise of prosperity and abundant life that knows no limits and no boundaries.

Lord, help us remember that You can do exceedingly, abundantly above all that we could ever ask or think. We thank You for seeing us in our destiny, not in our current position in life. Help us remove the mental blocks that stop us from seeing You as limitless, God. I pray that we would cling to You, knowing that You hold each of days in the palm of Your hand. Amen.

Contributed by Taniesha Williams, HOD Intern

December 4

Standing in the Light

“For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ.” Hebrews 3:14

I have a student who took a chance this year and tried out for his middle school basketball team. He had never played organized ball before, and wanted the opportunity to play with his school. He felt good about the effort he had put forth, but felt even better about the many suicides the team had to run because of other teammates laziness (talk about sacrifice!). However, as we talked more about the tryout experience, I could hear in his voice and see in his body language how nervous he was; the anticipation of knowing whether or not he made the team was wearing on him well. He continuously recalled different aspects of the tryouts he wished he could have done better in. Repeatedly he would say: “there were some talented guys out there, Mr. Dwight.”

He wouldn't say it, but I could pick up on the emotional rollercoaster he was on; feelings of inadequacy, of not being enough, and not being better attempted to consume him during our car ride. I shared some wisdom with him I picked up along the way in my very limited basketball career: “you can only be who you are, you can only utilize what you've been given, and no matter where you are or what you're doing, that's more than enough.”

We are placeholders in a society that seeks after toppling over one another. It is in the makeup of this society where inadequacy takes out the best of us; we tend to look at our neighbor to behold the glory of their gifts and of their lives and we fall prey to the evil deed of comparing and contrasting. We hope to fill the voids of our lives by being better than our neighbor when, in this circular pursuit, we are always led back to square one: feelings of inadequacy and incompleteness.

You see, the light of Jesus isn't for us to just bear witness to; it isn't just for us to behold and to “look on from the outside in.” Rather, the light of Jesus is something in which we embody. It serves as a bridge of completion for our shortcomings and victory for our feelings of defeat; it is when we choose to stand and live in the light of Jesus that we obtain our security. Standing in the light of our beautiful Savior allows for us to rest in the truth of his blueprint of our life. When we choose the light of Jesus, we not only choose salvation, but we choose a life where we are not concerned about performance, but are concerned instead about purpose. Standing doesn't mean that you won't fall some, but it does mean that you will always have a reason to rise.

Father, help us to stand firm in the light of your Son so that we won't fall to the darkness of inadequacy. Help us to know full well your purpose for us and the lives you have called us to lead. Amen.

Contributed by Dwight Johnson, Youth Minister and Middle School Director

December 5 OK, Let's Do This.....

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit." Psalm 51:10-12

There he was, on "The Wall" again. Wow, was there a day when I didn't see this young man in our safe place time-out chair for his anger. He used it to protect himself from feeling his feelings and it came out in all sorts of unhealthy ways. We'd tried sitting with him, talking things through, journaling, even sent a counseling request form home-- but nothing was working. Finally Dwight, the Community House Site Director, felt like it was time to get his parents involved. I decided to drive this student home. That news made him very anxious and out came all of his deflecting tactics.

"My mom doesn't like visitors."

"My dad sleeps during the day so you can't go inside."

"We're not allowed to call her during the day."

I pulled into the driveway and saw no one home; he had calmed down in the car enough to confess that his mom worked till 7. To honor his Mom's request, I asked him to unlock the house for his brother and we sat on his front stoop to talk. I asked if I could pray over him before we started; as I prayed, the tears started flowing. It didn't take long to hear about how this 5th grader was the man of the house, responsible for making dinner for his little brother and helping him with his homework while trying to get his own homework done. He worried about his mom, he worried about school, he worried about the bully that walked alongside him as he walks to PTM every day. He just didn't know how to cope with it all.

We talked about counseling again and how it would give him a chance to work through his fears and anxiety with a safe person. He listened intently, shook his head with conviction and said, "OK, let's do this." I saw the resolve in his countenance; I saw the hope in his eyes. I knew that he knew that maybe this could be a way to shed this burden of fear and worry.

The day of his first session, the counselor told me that he put his backpack away, walked across the gym looking straight at her and said, "hey, you ready? Let's do this!" And he's been doing it ever since.

God, thank you for the transformation you are doing in our students at PTM. Thank you for offering them hope when the world deems them hopeless. May you continue to bring light into their lives through the people they meet at PTM, and may you continue to bring them joy and peace despite their circumstances beyond PTM's doors. Amen.

Contributed by Lisa Lentz, Community House Program Director

December 6 Shining A Light in the Dark

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a Holy nations, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" 1 Peter 2:9.

It was only a few days into the first week of programming when I learned that many of our students at PTM live in homes full of darkness. I'm not talking about physical darkness, even though that is certainly a possibility; I mean that a heavy weight is resting upon these homes-- hope seems to be missing. It breaks my heart when I know I am sending children back to difficult home situations at the end of every day. God did not send His son to die on the cross for people to continue to live in darkness.

But I've learned that while I can't physically change the home, I can allow Christ to work through me.

From personal experience, I've been in a very dark place before. I know how it feels to be pulled out of the darkness: it hurts. Just like the sun causes you to squint your eyes- it's the same as when I was brought into the light. I squinted-I wasn't sure if I could handle the joy and glory that was being laid before me. Sometimes it just takes a nudge-a helping hand, a consistent invitation-in order for the weight of the darkness to ease, and rays of light to begin streaming through. We are the Lord's people, His light, called to bring more people out of the dark arena of life and into His glorious love.

One of the beautiful aspects of being a child of God is that we have been gifted with the responsibility of being the light and love of Christ to everyone we encounter. When we allow the spirit of the Lord to work through us, anything can be conquered, anything can be accomplished, and we can bring the Lord's light into this dark world. It might look like reaching out to a neighbor you've lived next to for years but never formed a relationship with; perhaps it will be you becoming a prayer warrior for people in your life who need a touch from the Holy Spirit. It will look different for each person, but there is always something that can be done to spread the light of Christ in even the darkest of places.

Be willing to step out of your normal, cozy routine, and brave the uncharted waters. There is no better time than now to start intentionally spreading Christ's light and love.

Lord, I am only one—but you are an all powerful, all consuming God. Open my eyes to ways I can best love your people. Let your light shine through me as I pour myself into others. Break through the darkness—throw off the veil, and bring your people into your glory. Use me as your vessel.

Contributed by Amy Goodwin, LEAP Staff

December 7 Y'all Ain't Never Tried Zaxby's

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10

Josh and I took 5 boys to Temple Hills Golf Course to make a funny video of our students giving tips on how to play golf. Josh put together this video to tell a little bit of PTM's story in a creative way for our annual golf tournament. Ar'Kee (5th grade) and J'Twann (6th grade) provided the substance, and Camarion, Cha'Shawn, and Cha'Anthony (all 1st grade) provided the comic relief. We had fun on the course—all the boys got a chance to "drive" the golf cart, we putted around a little, and they got to be on camera. The best part, however, came when it was time to load the bus and choose a restaurant for lunch. The younger boys all wanted to eat at McDonald's-- it's the only restaurant they know. J'Twann advocated for Zaxby's.

Cha'Shawn: "McDonald's is too good. I don't even like Zaxby's."

J'Twann: "Y'all ain't never tried Zaxby's. Mr. Chan, we want to go to Zaxby's."

Chan: "J'Twann, you need to influence everyone to make a decision together."

J'Twann: "Listen, you got to try new things. You won't know until you try. Zaxby's has great chicken—it's not fake like McDonald's chicken."

We stopped at Zaxby's and ordered boneless wings and chicken fingers for the group. We all ate as much as we wanted. As we left Cha'Shawn said, "Zaxby's be bussin', the chicken was bussn', and my stomach be bussin' " (this means he really liked it).

I think sometimes we settle for McDonald's. We stick with what is familiar in our lives; we avoid taking too many risks or trying new things or living outside of our comfort zone out of fear, laziness, or faithlessness. As the light of the world, Jesus not only breaks through the darkness, but invites us to break out of the dullness of lives spent settling for the familiar and safe. He promises us as we follow him that he brings to us not lives that are safe and secure, but lives that are abundant and full.

Abundant God, forgive us when we settle in our lives and ignore your call to abundance. Show us the ways that we choose the good rather than the great. Give us the wisdom and the courage to follow you so that you might be honored and we might receive all that you have for us. In Christ's name, Amen.

Contributed by Chan Sheppard, Executive Director

December 8

Children of Light

“For you are all children of the light and of the day; we don’t belong to the night or the darkness.” 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

It’s easy for me to see Jesus as the light of the world in children, but when it comes to adults, things get a little more difficult. As a recent graduate with an elementary education degree, I always knew I wanted to work with children; children remind me of the goodness and innocence of the world in a time when everything appears to be spiraling out of control. Entering my new job as an elementary site director, I prayed to be aware of the simple ways students show and encounter Jesus’s love.

One day, I was talking with two volunteers from a local university, one of whom was a freshman, the other a sophomore. The freshman expressed feelings of loneliness and without skipping a beat, the other volunteer grabbed her phone, put in her number and said “let’s hang out! We can even ride together to PTM next week!”

In a small way, community was formed in that vulnerable moment. The wall broke down that she was not alone; she had brothers and sisters to walk alongside here in the darkness. Community on Earth is God’s light breaking through the messy darkness we have created-His kingdom manifesting here.

I had put Jesus in a box, telling Him I could only encounter Him through young children. Thankfully, He punched through the box and let His light shine through in a new way—gently reminding me that every person I encounter is a child of God. Darkness has to be present to see light, but in the end, Jesus’s light shines brighter than any mess we could make or experience.

Father, thank you that your light always pierces through the darkness. That you call us your children and place your light in us to shine for all to see. Let us step into the freedom of being a child of light and answer the call to illuminate the world with your love. Amen.

Contributed by Sarah McCormack, Community House Elementary Site Director

December 9 **Lights Shine Brighter Together**

“Two are better than one because a good return comes when two work together. If one of them falls, the other can help him up. But who will help the pitiful person who falls down alone?” Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (The Voice)

At the end of each Breakfast and Bible Study, the kids slowly taper off by school to get on the bus. Things get quiet in Community House, with the exception of our McKissack kids; they don't go to school until later, so they hang out until it's time for them to leave. On our first Thursday gathering, Chan challenged them: if they could help us adults break down all the tables and chairs and clean up the gym, they could play a game of Gotcha. Most of the students quickly accepted this and helped us clean so they could play before leaving for school.

The next week, a group of the McKissack students started breaking down tables and chairs as the other students filed out of the building without being asked. I was pleasantly surprised, and walked towards them to help.

Ar'Kee was one of them, quickly picking up chairs and trash. He soon saw me trying to lift a heavy table by myself, and walked over and grabbed the other end to put it in its rightful place.

I laughed as we one by one began putting the tables on the rack, me this tall, grown adult with this small, sweet, and strong 5th grader. An odd pairing, but it worked for us.

"Teamwork makes the dream work, Ar'Kee!"

Ar'Kee looked at me and nodded. "It sho do." I smiled, and we continued our task together until we finished.

I struggle a lot with asking people for help, and accepting said help. I've always been a fiercely independent, I'll-do-it-myself kind of girl. Slowly over the years, the Lord has been changing my heart on this matter. I'm learning that I need to let others help me when I need help. I've learned that even the simplest tasks are easier when I let others help me. I could have done the heavy lifting myself—but it was a lot easier (and more fun) to have Ar'Kee work alongside me.

The light of Jesus within us works better when we work together with each other towards our goal. The light shines brighter when we realize that the person beside us also has the light of Jesus working in them, and together we can shine as bright as the stars. Life is a lot easier when we help each other carry the load life has given us—and we shine brighter when we tap into each other's light and gifts the Lord has given each of us. We are not called to do this thing called life alone—we need each other, whether we want to need each other or not. And when we choose to shine our lights together, there is no stopping us from doing what the Lord has asked of us to do.

We weren't meant to just shine our light alone—we were made to share our lights with one another and shine together for the Kingdom. Two lights working together towards the same goal are always better than one.

Lord, you did not make us to go through this life alone. You call us into community with each other, to help lighten each other's loads and to help each other look towards You. May we shine our lights together for Your glory, knowing that working together we can do anything You call us to do. Teach us to ask for help when we need it, so we can shine brightly together for You. Amen.

Contributed by Jordan Taylor, LEAP Staff

December 10

ACEs

“Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Romans 5:5

As a social worker, I am very aware of the statistics that hover over our students everyday. While attending a conference in the spring, I was confronted with information about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and how our students are affected by them. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are stressful or traumatic experiences that disrupt the safe and nurturing environment that children need to thrive; by living constantly in a state of toxic stress, the developing brain is harmed so profoundly that the effects show up decades later. ACEs are linked to chronic disease, mental illness, and violence later in life. The original ACEs study measured experiences such as having an incarcerated parent, or living with someone who suffered from mental illness or substance abuse; other ACEs include poverty, witnessing community violence, and death of a parent.

The ACEs research shows that children who are resilient, who are armed with protective factors, have a chance at changing their outcome. I am convinced that PTM serves as a protective factor in the lives of many children and families. PTM’s protective factors are the people who volunteer selflessly everyday and point our students to Jesus. PTM’s protective factors are the donors who give sacrificially, and by doing that, enable us to continue to point our students to Jesus. PTM’s protective factors are staff members who are present, loving, and grace-filled examples who point our students to Jesus.

If outsiders just looked at our students ACEs, they might believe that there is no hope. They might think that their situations are so dark, so bleak, so hopeless. But every day students come to PTM, they learn about God’s love for them. They learn that they are valued and that God has a hope and a future for them. They learn that God’s light in them shines brighter than the darkness. They realize that statistics and ACEs don’t define them because Jesus gives them identity and new life.

Jesus provides a hope that does not disappoint.

Lord Jesus, remind our students that they are not a statistic. They are your beloved children, and you have a plan and a purpose for their lives. Teach us to hope in your power and your grace. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Contributed by Carmen Reese Foster, LMSW, LSSW, Intern Director

December 11

Shining Bright with the Light of Life

"Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life." John 8:12

There are very few moments that I am thankful our students know the lyrics to a popular song on the radio.

Usually, I'm asking the students to not sing certain songs at PTM because the content is inappropriate or disrespectful. However, this summer I had the pleasure of sharing a room with a very spirited 2nd grader at camp, and I couldn't have been more happy that she was singing along to one particular song.

One afternoon, I caught her belting out the lyrics to Rihanna's song "Diamonds" while looking in the mirror. She flipped her braids confidently, pranced around, and sang "shine bright like a diamond!" I'm sure at that moment, this sweet girl was only thinking about how brightly she shined because of her appearance-- but my hope is that our students would shine brightly in deeper ways.

The book of John tells us that Satan is the prince or ruler of the earth, so it should be no surprise that we experience utter darkness in our nation, communities, and families. The good news is that as our students follow Christ, they do not have to walk in this darkness-- but they have the light of life.

Statistics will tell our students that their future is dark based on their demographics -- but as believers, they have the power through Christ to overcome their projected future and walk confidently into the good plans that God has for them.

Light of the world, kindle a fire in our hearts to follow you. As we are surrounded by darkness in our world remind of us that your very light dwells within us and that we can take heart because you have overcome the world. As we walk in the light, help us to stay rooted in fellowship with you and one another and may the world look upon our obedience to you and glorify you. In Jesus name, Amen

Contributed by Nina Borum, Program Director

December 12

Replacing Fear with Hope

“The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine. You will enlarge the nation of Israel, and its people will rejoice. They will rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest and like warriors dividing the plunder. For you will break the yoke of their slavery and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders. You will break the oppressor’s rod, just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian. The boots of the warrior and the uniforms bloodstained by war will all be burned. They will be fuel for the fire.

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies will make this happen!” Isaiah 9:2-7

When I first became involved in inner city ministry four years ago, I never thought that I would learn so much about the Lord, the realities of this dark world, and the redemptive love of Christ. I pulled up to the neighborhood on day one a little scared to get out-- scared to walk in alone, scared to leave at the end of the night alone. What if someone mugged me, hurt me, or broke into my car? After about a week the darkness I had associated with that Knoxville neighborhood was washed away by the light of Christ radiating from that place. The kids came from different backgrounds with stories that made my heart literally ache, but the smiles on their faces, the way they worshipped Jesus impacted my life forever.

Jesus came on a starry night thousands of years ago for us. He came for them. He came to create a light in the darkness, hope in the midst of tragedy, love in the midst of sin and hate. The Lord has shown me so many things in my time with inner-city children and their families, but one thing I see over and over is hope. It comes through parents, kids, staff, and volunteers. It pours in the cracks of brokenness and slowly begins to repair that which has been damaged for a long time; it redeems relationships, heals old wounds, and creates an environment where kids and their parents can feel safe and loved. It is so evidently the hands of Christ holding each of us up, pulling each of us together, making the darkness disappear if only for a few hours at a time. That hope erases fear and creates a desire in our students to be more and do more than they ever thought possible.

Now when I drive into the Preston Taylor community I don't feel a sense of fear. I feel at home, I feel a part of something so much bigger than me. I see hope when I walk into Mt. Nebo each day I actually feel the light wrapping around me, I see it on the faces of my students, I hear it in conversations with volunteers. It is one of my greatest blessings to see Christ's light so clearly enveloping the lives of all it touches here.

Where is God creating light in the darkness of your life? What areas of your life have you been trying to keep in the darkness that the Lord wants to shed some light on? Spend some time in prayer asking the Lord to remind you of all that He has done and to help you trust Him to continue to meet your every need and meet you in the midst of your darkest moments.

Father God, I pray that you continue to bring light to the darkness. That you reveal in me ways to show your light to others. Help me to see where you are working in my own life and in the lives of others around me. Help me to be open to your love gently washing away the darkness and replacing it with your glorious light. May it all bring glory to You. Amen.

Contributed by Katelyn Knowles, Mt. Nebo Site Director

December 13

We are a Shining Light

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." Matthew 5:14

"Lights, camera, action!"

How often I recited those words as a little girl. I LOVED performing! Whether I was playing the piano, singing, dancing, or acting in plays, anyone could tell that putting on shows was in my DNA. I came from a family of people who loved the stage. When I became older, that desire to perform even played into my career. Because what are teachers, especially in the arts, if not performers? (How many of us can think of kids at PTM that are geared towards the stage? Hint: it's probably the kid who tries to make people laugh while an adult is talking...)

Sadly though, this desire has also been a struggle for me when it has come to my spiritual life. Performing righteous acts to be seen by others and doing things for praise and eye-service has plagued my own service to the Lord at times. Ever since I heard a mentor teach on Matthew 6 and doing things not to be seen, God has brought that concept to mind; I serve Him while in secret, since He sees what is done in secret. Ultimately, I perform for an audience of One.

Inspired by a friend, I recently started praying verses over myself each day. One verse that has stuck out to me is Matthew 5:14, speaking of us being both the light of the world and a city on a hill that can't be hidden. And that last part—"can't be hidden"—especially struck a chord deep in my heart. To a performance lover, this phrase was so freeing! I don't have to strive to be seen or promote myself as a Christian. If I am a believer, I am a city and a LIGHT that can't be hidden, even if I wanted to be! Wherever I go, whether performing or not, I am a light. What pressure this takes off of us to promote or strive in the flesh to be seen as a Christian or to influence others spiritually. And even more than that, HE can't be hidden. Even if His name is profaned or His people misunderstood, I don't have to worry. I, and way more importantly, He, will shine brightly into the darkness. He can't be snuffed out because ultimately all will bow to Him.

Lord, thank You that we get to join with You in being light! You say that our light can't be hidden, and we praise You that no matter what happens around us, You can't be hidden. Help us to believe You and trust You with that promise as things around us grow darker. Teach our hearts to find great comfort that we are always seen by You, and let us rest in Your ability to shine through us this season. Amen.

Contributed by Kim Danforth, PTM Reading Teacher

December 14

Too Much for Someone Like You to Handle

“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. And for those who lived in the land where death casts its shadow, a light has shined.” Matthew 4:15-16 (NLT)

The smell of barbeque had made its way through the room almost as quickly as the kids had made their way to the front of the line. Community Supper, I’ve learned, is not something you miss. As I scooted my way through the maze of chairs and conversations, I scanned the room for someone familiar.

“Carson!” I said, “it’s good to see you!” I was moving toward the back of the line-- but as the 6’2” 10th grader leaned in, I could tell there was much more to this moment than a plate of pulled pork and coleslaw.

His upbeat approach and positivity was well-worn, but nonetheless impressive to a good Christian like me. A few head nods and affirmations later, we had successfully steered our way through a conversation that would settle well with both of us.

“I write a lot, raps mostly. I can’t let you read them, though. It’s too much for someone like you to handle.”

“What makes you say that?” I was ready to prove him wrong.

He explained as I shifted the weight from my left leg to my right – half-listening, half-preparing the sermon I was about to save him with.

He paused. My turn.

“Wait – I know what you’re going to say.” I froze. No way. “You’re going to tell me that I’m crazy, that I should just pray a little longer, a little harder. Pay attention in church or something.” Abort mission, abort mission.

“Actually, I wasn’t.” I lied. “Thank you for trusting me enough to share.”

Carson and I sat there in the darkness, as together as the moment would allow. His despair felt more permanent than mine in my efforts to find the light switch I knew was there. The light, Carson, let’s go! Just wait until you see it. It’s real, it’s better, it’s right here. Jesus, He’s right here.

I started to leave.

“Carson – let’s go!” His mom called a phrase all too familiar from across the Wilson Center. He apologized for keeping me so long, trying not to laugh at the noises my stomach was making. A hurried “see you around,” and he was gone.

Jesus, thank you for the moments that remind me that the mess - the humanness of those around me- is too much for someone like me to handle. Thank you for handling it with your obedience to the cross, and the suffering that got you there. Help me to be with people in a way that simply reminds them that you’re already there. Amen.

Contributed by Maggie Blanchard, LEAP Staff

December 15 God Disciplines Those He Loves

“And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?”

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” Hebrews 12:5-11

Fernando was frustrated.

The way our discipline system works, after a verbal warning, students who misbehave are sent to “The Wall,” our time out chair/location. Here, they are eventually met by a PTM staff member who will talk through their “time out” with them, discussing why they think they were sent to The Wall, why what they did matters, and why we as PTM care about it. That last part to me is the most important part: that’s where behavior management meets the gospel.

“I feel...frustrated!” groaned Fernando.

“Mmm, that’s a good word for that. Why do you feel frustrated?” I replied.

“Cuz I keep getting sent to The Wall! Clearly Miss SJ doesn’t even like me!”

Just as I so often do with God’s discipline, Fernando was misunderstanding our disciplinary intervention as evidence that we don’t like him. But look again at Hebrews 12:6 (quoting Proverbs 3:12): “The Lord disciplines the one he loves.” Theologian John Piper emphasizes this, saying how “it says that God is disciplining us; he is teaching us and correcting us and transforming us. God has a purpose and a design in what is happening to us.”

I grabbed my Bible and opened it to that passage. He uncrossed his arms; his scowl softened. In his third-grade-level, broken English, he received the Truth: The Lord disciplines the one he loves. In that moment, I got to explain how, just as a good father would discipline their son, just as God disciplines his children (us), we sent him to The Wall and disciplined him because we love him, because we care about correcting his behavior and shaping him to look more like Jesus.

Lord, thank you for disciplining me. Please help me to receive your discipline and celebrate that because of what your son Jesus did on the cross, I get to be adopted as your child. You are a good, good Father, Lord. Amen.

Contributed by Hannah Laskey, HOD Intern

December 16 **Lighting the Way with Our Gifts**

"The fruit of the Spirit may grow in the dullest, slowest, weakest, as well as in the brightest, fastest, and strongest. Astonishingly, God chooses to work through available vessels, no matter how broken or worn we seem to be, in whatever circumstances we happen to be. Royalty and servants, bosses and workers, able bodies and infirm—all have one basic vocation. All are called to consent to the work of Christ in their life; all are called to show the love of Jesus to others by the same Spirit." - "Responding to our Call- Companions in Christ" (via Upper Room Ministries)

I love the power that words have to inspire and encourage!

I found myself recently doing a deep-dive study on the topic of spiritual gifts, while helping to plan the PTM fall event Coffee + Connections 2016. This event was geared towards ladies in the "second half of life"--which includes me!

It is certainly a time of reflection--this entrance into the second half of life. What have I done so far that has made a difference? (I certainly hope something/many things!) What can I do in the future that will make a difference and give my life meaning?

A good definition of spiritual gifts: God-given assignment, capacity, and desire to perform a function within the body of Christ with supernatural joy, energy, and effectiveness.

I love that PTM offers all of us a chance to shine our light by using our gifts with that "supernatural joy, energy and effectiveness"! Seeing all the different ways volunteers and staff serve and all the different gifts/talents they bring to the table has been one of my favorite things as a volunteer.

In my study this fall, it became clear to me that the meaning we search for in our lives is directly connected to using these gifts that God has bestowed on us. In return for giving our gifts away, we are blessed ten-fold in return as we all know. So amazing the way God works, isn't it? *"God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another."* 1 Peter 4:10

God, thank you for giving us different talents, gifts, and assignments to further your kingdom. May we use whatever gifts you've given us to shine a light on who you are. May we use the gifts you give us with supernatural joy, energy, and effectiveness, and may we always use our gifts to love you and your people better.

Contributed by Donna Moffitt, PTM Volunteer

December 17 A Light in the Heart of the Dark

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” John 1:14.

It was around 6am on a Friday morning; the streets were quiet, the air was still, and my heart was pounding. It was my first time in Nashville. My GPS was set for 4014 Indiana Ave; after about a nine-hour drive from Chicago, my wife and I finally arrived to The Hal and Martha Wilson Center at Preston Taylor Ministries. After a couple days of visiting with the PTM staff, Fun Friday and the city of Nashville, what I appreciated the most about PTM was its location and what I felt that communicated. The Wilson Center is located right in the heart of the Preston Taylor Community; I did not know much about the Preston Taylor Community before coming here, but after serving here for a couple months I now see beyond the beautiful colored homes and into the darkness that some of our students live in. Abuse, violence, poverty, and hopelessness are some of the words that would describe the setting-- just last week there was a young man who was walking home from the store who was robbed and shot 4 times.

This is the neighborhood where elementary school kids wake up in the morning and wait for the bus to go to school. This is the neighborhood where middle school students walk home from school during the week and where high school students play basketball at the neighborhood park. This is neighborhood that is home to so many youths whose stories are not the ones that people would hope for their kids to have. This is the neighborhood where PTM is present.

Sometimes we can look at the world and see the beauty and wonder of what is here, but behind all that is a dark place without hope. Jesus came to this dark place and made His dwelling among us; this act was the first demonstration of his love and commitment to the world he loved. What inspires me about PTM is how it models the life of Christ to the Preston Taylor Community, bringing light, healing, and hope through Jesus-- a mission that I am blessed to be a part of.

God, thank you for your light. Thank you for PTM and how it shines your light into this community, how it provides hope and love and community right into the heart of the neighborhood and into the hearts of your children. May PTM continue to do your work in the heart of this community, and may all of us that are a part of this mission continue to shine brightly for you in the neighborhood. Amen.

Contributed by Jay Thompson, High School and Thrive Director

December 18

United in His Light

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” Psalm 133:1

On Fun Fridays I lead SPARK, a sports and fitness program, at Community House. I'm not sure how I got this specific job duty, since my sports playing experience is limited to 2 soccer practices I attended when I was six. Nevertheless, I spend my Friday afternoons teaching various sports in 4 week segments.

The first week of SPARK football was what I can only describe as a trainwreck. We spent the whole time getting over bad attitudes, complaining about what team we were on, and trying very hard to find nice things to say to each other. At the end of our time together, almost every student was either in tears, stewing in anger, or sitting against the wall (or even all three). It was safe to say that I spent the next week dreading Friday afternoon, when I would have to face another week of what I was assuming was going to be just as disastrous.

Prepared for the worst, I divided everyone into teams; to my surprise, there was no complaining. As teams worked through the warm ups, I watched as the two teams encouraged each other, helped each other, and followed directions. I was in shock, but didn't show it, as to not jinx anything. We continued through two different games, with no complaining, no cheating, and no crying. Even with the odds greatly stacked against one team, they didn't give up, continuing to encourage and strategize with each other. At the end of our time, the losing team accepted their loss with dignity, and everyone walked away with a smile. I'm pretty sure my mouth was hanging open in awe.

It was like a dream. Seeing 30 minutes of 25 kids living together in unity, I felt like I had just witnessed a miracle. In a world that seems so dark, so full of anger, bitterness and strife, those 30 minutes were a glorious light in the darkness. I can't even imagine what it will be like when someday we are all living together in unity; I can't even imagine what it will be like to live with no conflict, no tears, and no suffering. I can't even imagine what it will be like when someday we are all united in eternal worship in the presence of God-- but I can imagine that it will be a little bit more than good and pleasant.

Father, thank you for uniting us under your presence. Thank you for the moments where your light shines brightly in the darkness of this world, for the times where hope appears when all feels hopeless. Thank you for surprising us with your light in the places and times we least expect it; may we live continually in surprise of your light and how it unites us together for you. Amen.

Contributed by Bethany Jones, LEAP Staff

December 19 **Illuminating Through Hearing**

*“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.”
John 10:27-28*

We were at The Farm at Four Springs on a field trip. There were 16 students—half of them on a farm for the first time. One girl incorrectly labeled a pear tree as a potato tree; another child wondered aloud if the hamburgers we were eating had been grown by the cows. Our hosts, Farmer Doug and Mr. Bob, were patient as they explained about spring water, fruit trees and bushes, chickens, donkeys, goats, and cows. “The rooster is a bright color so that he can distract predators from the hens. He really protects the ladies,” explained Farmer Doug. “Water cress can only grow in water that is pure. The water from this spring stays at 66 degrees year-round so it will never freeze.” The students were soaking in these life lessons of a creative and powerful God, with a little bit of mischief interspersed in between.

The biggest attention-getter of the entire day was when Farmer Doug looked out in the pasture and said, “watch what happens when I call out to the cows.” There were over 50 cows grazing contentedly in the field when he let out a call (something like “ooooo weee, hey girls”) and over 100 ears perked up at the call. The herd sounded in unison, “mooooo” and they waited for his voice. Farmer Doug further explained that the cows recognize his voice as the one who feeds them, shelters them, protects them, and cares for them. Many of our students tried to get the same reaction from the herd, but it was Farmer Doug’s voice that they heard and responded to.

Farmer Doug made the connection to Jesus calling his sheep—and that as children who belong to Jesus, he calls us. Not only does he keep calling us, but he lets us follow and he gives true life. He holds us in his hand, so that no one or no thing can remove us. We see most clearly when our ears are tuned to the sound of our Savior’s voice.

Great Shepherd, thank you that you speak to us, that you call us by name, and that you offer us life that is abundant and true. Give us ears to hear and the courage to follow. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Contributed by Chan Sheppard, Executive Director

December 20

Children of the Light

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” Matthew 18:1-2

As Ms. Nicole walked up to the bus stop, she stopped to talk to Duane (the father of 2 Wilson Center students). Ms. Nicole asked him how things were going; Duane shared that his cousin was set to bring his children over to play with Duane's children the previous night, but he never showed up. He'd then found out that his cousin had been shot at the park and died. His family for whatever reason did not share with him where the funeral was, and he was having a very hard time dealing with the loss of his cousin who felt more like a brother.

When Ms. Nicole saw him the following week, he shared that he had had problems sleeping, but that his first grade daughter, Maranda, had been praying for him when he'd wake up. This spoke to my heart-- so often we are praying that the students' hearts and lives would be transformed by God that we forget about the parents and families who are also struggling. I think so often I would talk to the students as if they were my mission and needed to be saved from their sin, but in essence they are becoming missionaries and speaking life within their own communities, families, and schools. They are part of the kingdom coming.

Savior,

I pray that your kingdom would come and your will would be done in our own broken hearts and that we would have the faith of a child knowing that you are in charge of all things and you are good. Amen.

Contributed by Sarah Norberg, Literacy Director

December 21

The Pursuit of a Friend

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant, or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.” 1 Corinthians 13:4-5

We were at the Read and Weed— a group of PTM girls partnered up with Girl Scouts of the same age to craft, read, and get to know each other. Kemauni had gotten upset over something said to her, and was tearfully hiding away from the rest of the group in the bathroom. I coaxed her out with the promise of me reading with her, and she begrudgingly joined me in the main room. As soon as we walked towards the books, a brown haired girl bobbed down the ramp of the Wilson Center.

“Hi! Will you read with me?”

Kate, the sweet, quiet girl scout, had been waiting on Kemauni to return so they could read together as partners. Kemauni was still being distant, but she quietly agreed and followed Kate to the book table. Despite Kemauni trying to avoid her by walking away, following me, and not listening, Kate continued to try— continuing to pursue friendship with Kemauni. She followed her, got new books, continued seeking her out in spite of Kemauni’s refusal to accept her friendship. I was so humbly surprised by Kate’s continual pursuit— no matter how Kemauni acted, she continued to follow, continued to love her anyway and seek her out. By the end of our time together, Kemauni relented and let Kate in, calling her a friend during our circle time.

Jesus constantly calls us into life with him— he pursues us jealously, no matter who we are or what we do. He wants us— no strings attached, just friendship and a willingness to love Him back. Kate and Kemauni’s friendship mirrors the pursuit Jesus puts on our life— and the way we are to seek Him. Even when we run or try to hide from Him, His light captures us and pulls us back towards Him. And we are called to pursue Christ in the same way— arms wide open, willing to love with full abandon.

May we be like Kate in our pursuit of Him— and may we live knowing that we are constantly pursued by a God who loves us in spite of ourselves.

Father God, thank you for being a God who loves and pursues his people as sons and daughters. May we seek you with our whole hearts and pursue you with our whole lives, knowing that you light our way— even when we try to run and hide from You, You seek us out from our hiding places and call us Yours. Amen.

Contributed by Jordan Taylor, LEAP Staff

December 22

Choosing to See the Light

"Jesus continued from there toward Jerusalem and came to another village. Martha, a resident of that village, welcomed Jesus into her home. Her sister, Mary, went and sat at Jesus' feet, listening to Him teach. Meanwhile Martha was anxious about all the hospitality arrangements.

Lord, why don't You care that my sister is leaving me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to get over here and help me.

Oh Martha, Martha, you are so anxious and concerned about a million details, but really, only one thing matters. Mary has chosen that one thing, and I won't take it away from her." Luke 10:38-42 (The Voice)

Children have the capacity to feel many different emotions at once, without hiding them from others; they have this amazing ability to be truth-tellers and prophets-- just by not hiding from what is really going on in their hearts. I remember the first time I walked into my site and the apprehension I was feeling. Would these kids like me? Would I be able to connect with them? The worried feelings of not being enough plagued me.

As the months went on, however, I realized something that Christ was trying to show me: that these children love in a way that is pretty spectacular and authentic. They are simply seeking to be my friend, and for me to walk with them hand-in-hand.

On one particular day, students were playing outside while I was rushing around trying to make sure everyone was okay when one of my students kept calling my name. At first I was too busy doing "more important things;" eventually she quietly just walked up to me and tapped me on the shoulder, saying, "Miss Ashley, can I talk to you?"

As we walked inside, she slipped her hand into mine and had this big grin on her face. She began to tell me about her day and all that she had happened at school. Once she was done sharing, she looked up at me and said "I am glad you are here, Miss Ashley and I'm glad you are my friend." I smiled back, and a feeling swept into my heart of total contentment and peace. At that moment, I was exactly where I was supposed to be: sitting and listening to this child. She didn't need me to fix anything or do anything for her-- she just wanted me to spend time with her.

These kids just want to be heard and seen and known, just as we all want to be as well. Christ's light is always trying to break in around us, and when we can stop all the noise and chatter, we can focus on that simple truth: that he just wants us to spend some time with him and let us rest at his feet.

Rise, shine, for your light has broken through! The Eternal One's brilliance has dawned upon you.

Amen

Contributed by Ashley Andrews, St. Luke Site Director

December 23

Waiting On the Light

"The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." Revelation 21:23

Tasha was ready. She'd asked for a new lunchmate mentor and was sure they were on their way. For a while, she talked daily about how lonely her lunch time was, how she was feeling sad without a lunchmate mentor, and how she was ecstatic for the day her lunchmate mentor came! However, after a few weeks of this, Tasha began to lose hope. She asked less frequently about her lunchmate mentor, and told me she just wasn't sure if her lunchmate mentor was going to come.

Mary was ready. She had emailed about becoming a mentor with rapid responses, used excessive exclamation points, had set up a meeting at the earliest day possible. She spoke of how she couldn't wait to pour into a student, how excited she was to be with them, and how she already loved her lunchmate mentee!

The day had come. I met Mary in the front office, her enthusiasm abounding. We walked to the cafeteria to introduce Mary to Tasha for the first time. Before I had the chance, Tasha walked up to Mary bursting with a smile and said, "You're my new lunchmate mentor, aren't you?" Tasha and Mary united in a long awaited hug. Almost simultaneously they exclaimed, "I've been waiting for you to come!"

Living in this dark world, it is easy for us to lose hope of the light to come. Our hearts desire is to be united with our hope, our satisfaction, and our light, but we are surrounded by darkness, evil and sin rampant in this world.

And yet, we have the most faithful, steadfast promise to hold to in times when the darkness seems to be too much to overcome. One day, the light of the world will be here! His glory, goodness, love, and light will be bright enough to illuminate His entire kingdom! Our Father is up in Heaven eagerly waiting for the day He will come to this earth, wrap us up in His arms, wipe away every tear and replace every fallen thing with a limitless amount of Light. What a beautiful union it will be when we can look at our Father and He can look at us and exclaim, "I've been waiting for you!"

Father, may our hearts eagerly be in waiting for the day you will restore this broken world. May we never lose the hope of your promises. May we have our sights firmly set on the day when your Glory will be made known throughout the Earth. As we are sojourners, may we see glimpses of your light in our broken world as a reflection to what your brilliant light will one day be. Lord Jesus, come soon to restore the long devastated places of this Earth. Amen.

Contributed by Nicole Happ, Lunchmate Mentor Coordinator and Park Avenue Site Director

December 24 Lighting the Way for Each Other

"What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out. " John 1:4-5 (Message)

Growing up, my family's favorite church service was the Christmas Eve candlelight service. As in many such services, each member of the congregation received small, sword-looking candles with plastic candle holders that lit the imaginations of my brother and me for all kinds of reasons. After some variation of the Christmas story, the sanctuary lights were dimmed, "Silent Night" was played on the organ, the first verse was sung in the dark. The pastor approached the main Advent candle to light his candle; that candle was then used to light the lead usher's candle, who lit the next candle, and so on until the entire sanctuary was bright enough to sing the less familiar later verses from the hymnal.

Christmas Eve, 1974. Second Presbyterian Church, downtown Chattanooga: My brother observed that the Advent candle wasn't losing any light. The other candles were not losing any light either as the flame was passed from one small candle-bearing person to the next. While the science behind that is a mystery, it mirrors what goes on in and around Preston Taylor Ministries.

May 14, 2016, Crosspoint's Dream Center 5k Run, Preston Taylor Homes Nashville. My running buddy, Dezmund, and I are about 500 yards into the run, we look left and see the Wilson Center; about a quarter mile later, Dezmund points out his house on the right, then we started downhill (which seemed like a good thing). Miss Nina runs past us and calls out some encouragement to keep running; then Mr. Chan does the same thing, followed by Mr. Collin and Miss Abbie. Then Mr. Josh. Each of them was a light for Dezmund and for me.

And here's the beauty of God's mystery: about 27 minutes later, we are tired. We are struggling on our way UP 40th Avenue, both of us in need of some light. Suddenly, Dezmund is inspired to push on by the thought of passing his house. "There's my brother" he puffs over his shoulder to me – and we hear "Go Dezmund! Go Dezmund!" from his little brother followed by his mother's "Good job Dez! Good job!"

In the context of the mission of Preston Taylor Ministries, maybe Dezmund is becoming a light in his family thanks in part to God's light showing through the Wilson Center and countless volunteers leaning into his life.

In a very real sense, in big ways and small ways, by running or reading, by eating or studying, by praying and leaning into the children and youth of the Preston Taylor community, each person reading this is a candle of light for another. Thanks be to God.

God of Light, in a world that often seems quite dark, thank you for your light that refuses to dim. Help us in turn be lights for our sisters and brothers in Christ. Amen.

Contributed by Gordon Brewer, PTM Board Member and PTM Life Volunteer

December 25

Bedtime Stories: Turn Out the Lights

“And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be in your heart: And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up.” Deuteronomy 6:5-7

“Tell us a story,” were the cries of the boys sitting in their sleeping bags as I turned out the light. The PTM nightly tradition requires a bedtime story to be told on overnight camps. So the first night I told a not-so-scary story about a pink jellybean – one of my Boy Scout classics.

Unfortunately, and maybe unsurprisingly, it flopped. So, I decided to take some requests on what I should include in my stories. This provided a hilarious combination of nouns; my most challenging request was to incorporate a werewolf, a bumblebee, and the color “earth.”

This night, I had the boys on the edges of their bunk beds. I was turned into a werewolf with “earth” colored hair; a band of bumblebees named after the boys in my cabin helped me escape the girls’ cabin, where the girls wanted to tie me down and do my hair and makeup. Talk about a story of overcoming adverse challenges!

I am still learning the craft of telling a quality bedtime story, but I learned a few tricks that week. I learned the story is only as good as what the main character overcomes. Truth be told, even for me, stories of overcomers never get old.

And as we round the corner to Christmas, let us not forget the most dynamic overcomer story ever told – Jesus. Jesus overcame something no one else could-- He overcame sin. That is the best story every written, and a story I want to make sure I take the time to tell.

God, thank you for not turning out the lights on us when we sin. You do not leave us in the dark with our fears, our failures, or sin against you. You left us with Jesus - the light of the world. His overcomer story is powerful and true. Let Christ’s story be one be the first in our hearts, minds and mouths.

Contributed by Collin Spindle, Director of Operations