



Advent 2024

Radiance Community Church

MORE THAN WORDS: ADVENT DEVOTIONS

This year during Advent, Radiance Community Church is exploring four gifts from God that help us navigate the season of waiting: hope, peace, joy, and love. Each Sunday's devotion has been provide by Barn Geese Worship and is written by Victoria Larson and Emily Trubey-Weller. On Sundays, you will find a selection of scripture you may have heard in worship on Sunday, a reflection exploring the week's theme, a few questions to take with you into meditation, journaling, or prayer, a prayer reflecting the theme of the week, and words of wisdom from sacred and secular sources to offer perspective on the week's theme. Our church family has written devotions to share for the days in between each Sunday.

The Advent Wreath

Bring a little fire to your devotional life with your own Advent wreath! You can find Advent wreaths at almost any Christmas store, but you can easily create one at home using tea lights or votive candles, faux or foraged greenery, or whatever decoration you prefer. Place your candles in a pie plate or bundt pan for ease of arranging. The Advent wreath need not be a literal wreath: a circle, cluster, or row of candles will do. Place your Advent wreath somewhere you can return to it every day, like your kitchen table. Light it when you sit down to dinner and give thanks for the meal.



Sunday, December 1

Hope (Luke 21:25-31)

When I was little, my mom—who was and is a prolific gardener—let me claim a small corner of the yard for a garden of my very own. I chose to plant herbs because I read a lot of fantasy novels and cultivated aspirations of having a backyard apothecary. A nursery near our house stocked an absurd variety of herbs, and every year, I experienced an elated anguish as I narrowed down the options to what would fit in my little plot. I planted chocolate mint and tricolor sage, silver-edged thyme and lemon balm, Thai basil and bronze fennel, a riot of colors and textures and tastes. The garden delighted me as I tended it, tracking the progress of what had grown and what had not, what had bolted and what was about to blossom.

But one delight came entirely unforeseen. One January, I walked out to my little garden to see how it was doing after a winter storm and found the pineapple sage in full bloom, cardinal-red flowers brilliant against the snow.

I don't know why the pineapple sage bloomed that January. It never did again. But I do know that it has given me unending sympathy for the disciples, because it has taught me that when Jesus says that they will know when a particular moment has arrived because of what the plants are doing... it could happen anytime. The plants could do anything.

Nevertheless, Jesus' point stands: signs precede the coming of God's reign, and one can discern them if one is paying attention. The sudden blooming of the pineapple sage in January was only sudden to me: if I had visited my garden regularly that winter, I would have seen the signs of a plant getting ready to flower. I would have known what was coming, would have eagerly awaited it, would have visited the garden with a sense of growing anticipation. When the pineapple sage bloomed, I would have said, "Finally!" I would have rejoiced all the harder because I'd witnessed its slow, impossible growth telling me day after day that yes, this flower will bloom in the winter.

There's a German Advent carol, one of my all-time favorites, called "Maria Walks Amid the Thorn." In the carol, Mary wanders through a tangle of bare thorns that have not grown leaves in years, but she's not alone. A little child nestles beneath her heart, slowly growing in her womb. As Mary and her child walk through the thicket, roses burst into bloom in their wake, a carmine constellation of life and color, scent and softness in the midst of dead and thorny wood.

Advent hope is like this: a force that resists the way things are by imagining what they might be. Advent hope doesn't listen when it's told that tender herbs don't bloom in January or that the briar patch is as good as dead. Advent hope attends to the signs of God's work unfolding everywhere, anywhere, even in the most unlikely of situations. Advent hope believes, as Mary did, that nothing is impossible with God.

Victoria Larson of Barn Geese Worship

Weekly Prompt for December 1-7: What do you see blooming this week—a plant in an unexpected place, a friendship, a new project or hobby? Can you find hope for the future in its blossoming? How do you cultivate Christian hope when nothing seems to blossom?

Words of Wisdom

"Maria walks amid the thorn, kyrie eleison,
Maria walks amid the thorn, which seven years no leaf has borne.
Jesus and Maria."

Traditional carol, "Maria Walks Amid the Thorn"

"Let your hopes, not your hurts, shape your future."

Robert H. Schuller

Prayer: God, plant within me a hope for impossible things. But do not let me use it to escape from my grief or that of others. And do not let me use it to lull myself into passivity. Instead, bring it to flower when I am in the places where it is most needed and least likely. Let the hope in impossible things be a rose in the winter, a hot spring in bitter cold, the presence of Christ, growing within me. Amen.

Monday, December 2
Hope in the Midst of Trials (Romans 12:12)

I found two translations of Romans 12:12 that I really like:

Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. (*New Living Translation*)

Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles and pray at all times. (*Good News Translation*)

I have a well-worn T-shirt from a long ago Relay-for-Life event. On the back it says "We must choose hope over fear." To me, it sums up Romans 12:12. Choose hope, choose joy. Fight to reject fear, be patient in troubles. Most of all, pray at all times.

Is it easy? Absolutely not. It's so hard to do. Troubles and trials have a way of drowning out the joy and the hope we look for. It's hard to find joy while waiting on test results that could change your life. It's hard to find hope with TV and social media constantly elevating the bad.

Trials and rough times will come our way. There isn't a way to avoid it. But we are charged to be patient, keep praying, let our hope keep us joyful. Look for the good in everyone and every situation. Hope in the midst of trials. There are so many all around us doing good - some in big ways like assisting hurricane victims to recover and re-build, some in smaller, quiet ways by offering a hug, a smile, a prayer, a listening ear.

Rejoice in our confident hope. Jesus came to give us hope of an everlasting joy.

Cindy Poff

Tuesday, December 3
Hope in the Company of the Saints (Ephesians 1:17-19)

Paul's letter to the Ephesians calls them to hope. There was hope for the Hebrew people to be freed from Roman oppression. There was hope for prosperity. There was hope for a Messiah. In the eyes of the people, this was the hope for freedom. When would the Messiah come?

Living in hope for something in the tomorrows of life is an important way to live. So many live looking back at what was, what happened in the yesteryears. Those who live that way are hoping to change what cannot be. Such people then find themselves living in regret, anger, and resentment. Hope is about the tomorrows of life.

In Luke's Gospel, we read of two people, two saints, who lived in hope. Anna went to the temple each day in hope. Simeon went to the temple where Anna already was and saw Mary and Joseph. Simeon's hope, too, was realized. When he saw the baby Mary was holding he said, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation,³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32)

Advent is a season where hope is alive. Advent is a yearly reminder to be people of hope, to live in hope.

May your prayer and life today be one of hope.

Rev. Steven Harris

Wednesday, December 4
Hope in Christ's Faithfulness (Hebrews 10:23)

Let us hold fast to the hope and faith we say we have in Jesus. He promised to be faithful to us. We are encouraged to hold fast in that faith and to not waiver. We can be sure he will not fail us because he promised to hold on to us and he is true in his promises.

When we have difficult times in our lives, those of us who walk with Jesus still hold fast because we have both faith and hope in our hearts. No matter what happens, we will remain hopeful and faithful because Jesus has promised do be with us. (Isaiah 44:13).

Vicki Wray

HOPE



Thursday, December 5

Hope in the Lord (Psalm 130)

My family has a tradition of hanging up stockings after dinner on the night of December 5th. Our hope is that St. Nicholas will come and fill them with small gifts instead of coal to be opened in the morning.

One year my daughter, who was 5 at the time, decided to switch out her little stocking for her dad's steel toe boots hoping that St. Nicholas would fill them both up. (He didn't.)

She had high hopes for St. Nicholas filling the boots like David did in Psalm 130 with the Lord. In verse 5 David wants to put his hope in the Lord while he waits. He also wants Israel to put their hope in the Lord. (verse 7)

During the month of December, we have high hopes of finding the perfect present, taking the perfect Christmas family picture, making sure this Christmas morning and Christmas dinner is the best. The list goes on and on!

Like David maybe this year we might want to consider putting our hopes in the Lord and not in the season's hopes of perfection.

M.J. Fanning



Friday, December 6
Hope in Christ's Second Advent (Revelation 21:1-5)



HE WILL WIPE AWAY
EVERY TEAR
FROM THEIR EYES
AND DEATH SHALL BE
NO MORE.
NEITHER SHALL THERE
BE
MOURNING
NOR CRYING
NOR PAIN
ANYMORE...
Rev 21:4

Don't we all crave new beginnings? A do-over. A clean slate. Haven't we all yearned to leave our disappointments, heartaches, illnesses, mistakes, angers, and sins behind, and move forward into a new day? God must feel that way, too. He tells us through John's revelation that there will be "a new heaven and a new earth ..." And that is what will be, a new heaven and earth together, with God dwelling among us. Isn't that our hope... that we will have a fresh start with God in control? Isn't that our hope... that there be no more destruction, chaos, and pain? Isn't that our hope... that God's majesty and glory continuously surround us? Isn't that our hope... that we will "dwell in the house of the Lord forever?" This is what we pray for every time we recite the Lord's Prayer "... Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven ..."

This passage promises enduring hope for Christians everywhere who are suffering in our weary, hate-filled, aching world, and are seeking the light of the world. We can take great comfort in God's promise that He will come and dwell among his redeemed people on the new earth where there will be no more pain. God's word is perfect truth. Come Lord Jesus, Come.

Kathy Kinsey

Saturday, December 7
The Spirit's Gift of Hope (Romans 15:13)

As I read through the Bible verse for this day, I am drawn to the word "hope" and its relation to the Holy Spirit.

God promised us a savior (redeemer of sin and saver of souls), and as we read through the Bible, we look for the Savior to come.

We find the Savior coming to us as a baby lying in a manger surrounded by animals, kings, and angels. The angels proclaimed his birth and the kings travelled far to see this child. The baby, named Jesus, gives us so much hope and provides so much joy and peace in our lives.

Jesus is the one we have waited for to deliver us from our sins and save our souls.

At this time of the year people are focusing on giving gifts and picking the perfect one for their friends and family. God gave us his only Son, and he gives us so many gifts every day so that we can be thankful. We know from his words that the gifts are given freely and never ending. Gifts do not always come in the form of a physical item, but by trusting God to provide us with forever love and forgiveness. So, at this time of the year, and all year long, we need to be thankful for the gift of hope given to us by the Spirit.

Thank you, God, for being in our lives and sending us the greatest gift of all, your Son Jesus.

Cathy Howell

Sunday, December 8

Peace (Luke 3:1-6)

It is hard to think of something I long for more than peace. Our world is in desperate need of peace. In just the past few years, we've seen the rug of economic stability pulled out from under many people by invasion and greed. We've seen homes in many places flattened by bombings and made unsafe by turmoil. We have seen tens of thousands of lives lost to retaliation and hate. We have seen war lead to mass famine and to millions becoming refugees. We are told not to look away, but I cannot always bear to watch, especially when it seems like there is so little I can do.

My city is in desperate need of peace, too. Hardly a week goes by without news of another young person lost to gun violence, often within blocks of my church. I've participated in prayer walks for elementary school kids lost to drive-by shootings and firearms accidents in their homes. I've counseled people who return to houses characterized by domestic violence. I've sat in school cafeterias and heard children speak with great longing about getting their own guns.

In much smaller ways, but no less real, my life is in desperate need of peace. I am a parent of three small children who are often just as loud and intense and needy as I always suspected my children might be. My spouse and I both work full-time jobs and manage our own businesses on the side, so there's always something to interrupt a rare peaceful moment, not to mention the stress that often torpedoes restful time. So I long for peace: peace in our world, peace in my town, peace in my home, peace in my heart. And as I long for peace, who does scripture introduce this week? John the Baptist. Smelly camel's hair and crunchy locusts. Wild shouting and railing at the powers that be. Chilly baptismal river dunks.

Does John the Baptist evoke a peaceful image for you? He certainly doesn't for me. It may seem counterintuitive to approach this wild prophet on a week when we are considering peace. The work of a prophet seems to be inherently not peaceful. Prophets are called to the work of stirring things up and disrupting the status quo. Prophets' work involves tearing down, calling out, and upending the powers that be.

The words from the prophet Isaiah embedded in this week's passage from Luke about John describe the preparatory work John has been sent to do. It's no small task: straightening roads, filling valleys, and leveling mountains. It's a big job.

Leveling mountains is work that requires either dynamite and serious construction equipment or millennia of erosion.

Even if it is not peaceful, a prophet's work prepares the way for peace. To create a truly peaceful home, city, or world demands incredible effort. It would certainly require tearing down many current systems, calling out corruption and greed, and upending much of the status quo. When we consider the hard work involved, preparing for peace is certainly prophetic work. It's the tough work for which a tough character like John is well suited. God works through prophets like John in scripture and throughout human history to prepare the way for Jesus and to make peace a possibility for all people. I pray that God will use us for the hard work of peace, too.

Emily Trubey-Weller of Barn Geese Worship

Weekly Prompt for December 8-14: Where do you long for peace to arrive? Who are some contemporary prophets whose hard work brought about change that fostered peace? What do you admire about them?

Words of Wisdom

"Come now, O Prince of Peace, make us one body.
Come, O Lord Jesus, reconcile your people."

Geonyong Lee, "Ososo ososo, pyonghwa eui imgum"

"A negative peace...is the absence of tension... a positive peace...is the presence of justice."

Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963

Prayer: God, give me room to lay this down: I've longed for a peace built on platitudes. I've cultivated silence because I needed the quiet. I've looked with suspicion on those who speak out, wondering whether they're just stirring the pot. I've wanted peace that's tamed, well-behaved, house-broken. But you give me John the Baptist instead. Okay, God. Lead me down to the Jordan River. Remind me that baptism is no spa bath. Bring me up gasping from water chilly and cold, shocking, enervating. Cause the prophet's words to reverberate in me, stirring up the desire for true peace. There are hills to bring low in this world, God, and there are valleys to lift up. God, hand me my shovel. Amen.

Monday, December 9
Coming Home in Peace (Psalm 126)

Israel was coming home. The dream of returning to the place of promise was being realized.

We all have had and still have dreams for ourselves and others. These dreams are the anchors of our hope. One cannot live without dreams and hopes, nor can congregations, groups, or nations.

Perhaps you have heard someone say, "We build this on a dream and a prayer." Israel was returning home to rebuild on a dream and a prayer, their hope. Read and listen to their prayer, verse 4 and 5:

"Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy."

The prayer was that the streams would flow water, that the harvest would be plentiful. Water and harvest would mean a sustaining life. Then there would be joy. The dreams would be reality.

We are in the season of hope, Advent. Israel hoped for their return from exile, for a time when dreams would be realized, and joy would be felt deep within the self; the time had come. The picture of Israel traveling to the homeland shouting for joy with the sheaves of grain on the people's backs was a dream coming true.

What are your dreams and hopes this Advent season? What is required so you, too, can shout joy?

Rev. Steven Harris

Tuesday, December 10
God's Law Brings Peace (Psalm 119:164-168)

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible, containing 176 verses. A theme of Psalm 119 is that the Word of God is all sufficient. 8 different terms are used that refer to the Word of God, and in this passage, "law" is the focus.

The Psalmist writes that "Great peace have those who love your law" and it is enhanced by keeping it. Notice that the Psalmist points out that peace comes from loving God's law. He seems to suggest that because we are human, we will fail despite our best efforts to follow the law. "Keeping" the law enhances our peace, but ultimately, it comes from loving the law/Word.

Many will recognize the Hebrew word "shalom" as meaning "peace". Some resources I've seen indicate that "shalom" can be translated as "make full restitution" or "to make something whole." So, loving God's law/Word makes us whole!

At the time this Psalm was written, one could say that it was "looking back", looking to the law/Word of God as the provider of peace. Yet we have advantage of Christ, knowing that he as the Word came to fulfill the law. Essentially, Jesus makes the law complete.

As we have heard in recent Radiance sermons looking at the book of Matthew, being righteous is not just about following rules or laws, but about having right relationships with God and with others. Jesus instructed us on this in Matthew 22:37-40 that the greatest commandments (law) were to love God with all of our beings (heart, soul, mind) and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Our complete selves, having been made complete by the Word, thus bring us the peace that helps us have those right relationships.

We are traveling through Advent, and as we do so, we are looking – back to when Jesus first came and dwelled among us, today as we journey together with Christ, and ahead to his coming again. As we pause to reflect on how the law or Word of God brings us peace, remember that Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) and that through his coming – 2000 years ago, today in our lives, and at whatever point in the future, this peace is ours to remember and celebrate.

Steve Light

Wednesday, December 11

Peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)

As we journey through Advent, we anticipate the arrival of the Prince of Peace. Jesus' words in Matthew 5:9 remind us of the sacred calling to be peacemakers—those who actively work to bring reconciliation, healing, and harmony into a fractured world.

Peace, in the biblical sense, is not simply the absence of conflict but the presence of wholeness and restoration, a state of flourishing where relationships with God, others, and creation are rightly ordered. Jesus himself embodies this peace, reconciling humanity to God and breaking down walls of division.

Being a peacemaker isn't passive. It requires courage, humility, and action. It means stepping into situations of discord with the intention of bringing God's love and truth. It calls us to forgive when it's hard, to listen when we'd rather speak, and to build bridges where others might build walls.

In a world often marked by division, peacemakers shine as children of God, reflecting God's character. During this Advent season, let us ask ourselves: How can we actively participate in God's mission of peace? Where can we sow seeds of reconciliation in our families, communities, and beyond?

Perhaps we can begin by:

- **Praying for Peace:** Spend time asking God to reveal areas in your life or relationships that need His peace.
- **Extending Forgiveness:** Is there someone you need to forgive or seek forgiveness from? Take a step toward healing.
- **Promoting Reconciliation:** Look for ways to mediate or restore harmony in a conflict around you.

Thanks be to Jesus, the Prince of Peace, for reconciling us to the Father and calling us to be peacemakers. May we be filled with his Spirit so we can bring peace to the world.

Thursday, December 12 Peaceful Hearts (Philippians 4:6-7)

I am writing this devotional on the day before the presidential election of 2024. I'm aware of the great anxiety in this nation because we are more divided than ever before, and there is much that is uncertain here and on the world stage, with wars, rumors of war, hunger, disasters, etc.

According to the dictionary, anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.

Peace is the opposite of anxiety. It is a feeling that all is well. It is not the absence of trouble, but it exists in spite of trouble.

Jesus said in John 14:27 that he came to bring peace to the world, but that his peace is not the kind of peace that the world gives. Peace is a gift that Jesus wants us to receive. It comes from giving all our situations to God in prayer, believing that he has the power to keep us in perfect peace, free of anxiety and worry.

Accept this wonderful gift this Christmas with gratitude, and live with peace in heart and mind.

Judy Conner



... do not be anxious
about anything,
but in everything
by prayer and
supplication with
thanksgiving let
your requests
be made
known to God.

Philippians 4:6

Friday, December 13
Peace at Jesus' birth (Luke 2:8-14)

I have always been curious to why God chose the shepherds to make such an important and grand announcement about the birth of the savior. I recall that David was a shepherd, and he was a very important person in the Old Testament, and I believe in the symbolism that we are all sheep in the eyes of the Lord, and the Lord guides us and prods us to do the right things.

The shepherds were really scared on this night, and the angels appeared to reassure them and to make a marvelous announcement of good news and great joy for everyone, and to provide instructions on where to find this baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. I am sure the shepherds were overwhelmed and their hearts were full of joy and love. And to top it off, a great company of heavenly hosts appeared to the shepherds saying "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests".

God wishes for us to have peace and good will, for our hearts to be full of good will and peace. On a global front, we find peace to be elusive and difficult to achieve. But on an individual level, we are taught to love our neighbor and to be there in support of family and friends and people who need our assistance, and this is a very beautiful thing. So in the days leading up to Christmas, don't get caught up in the material things of the season, but let God's love and goodness overwhelm you, and do kind deeds and acts to help benefit others in your neighborhood, at our church and with your families.

May the peace of God be with you.

John Urquhart

Saturday, December 14
Peace as Jesus departs (John 14:23-27)

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt lost, unsure of what was coming next? That feeling of fear and anxiousness can be crippling, especially when you are facing it alone. It can cause you to halt in your tracks.

Jesus knows our every fear, our anxiety, our worries. He reminds the disciples to stay on the course... the path that he laid out for them. Jesus reassures them that they will not be alone and that his words will be followed by God's actions-that God will send the Holy Spirit to them...to wrap them in knowledge & remind them of what Jesus told them.

Jesus offers them a blessing of peace; but not just any peace. The sort of peace unlike what the world has to offer. The peace in knowing that not only will they not be alone, but they will have the support of our loving God sending the Holy Spirit to accompanying us forward in our journey.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, grant us meaningful peace in times of uncertainty. Help us remember that there is no need to let our worries cripple us, as You are always at the wheel. Let us hear your whisper in the wind of "Let go and let God" to us in the times that we need reassurance. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Karen Viele

Sunday, December 15

Joy (Zephaniah 3:14-20)

I'm working on a doctoral degree in theology. It's a five-year program, and as I'm writing this, I have just finished the second (and last) year of coursework. I almost missed the milestone. The end of April was a fog of frantically-written final papers, rushing deadlines for a separate writing project, and preparing for a retreat I was leading the weekend after the semester ended. The end of course-work blurred into the rush of oncoming projects, and I barely clocked it when I turned in my last paper for my last class for my last degree. But on the evening of that day, a sweet friend turned up at my front door holding gifts, saying "Congratulations! You did a big thing!" I stopped. Oh, I thought. Oh wow, I did!

My graduation date seems impossibly far off in the future, especially given all the work that still lies ahead of me. But it's breaking into my present in the form of milestones, like finishing coursework. My friend's invitation to joy broke me free of the ever-pressing cycle of deadlines for a moment, reminding me that the work itself is not the point, and grounding me again in the bigger picture of God's call.

That's the power of Advent joy: to capture a vision of the future and bring it into the present. The prophets do it over and over again - notice Zephaniah's words! Even though the liberation, the home-coming, redemption, and salvation the prophets describe lie in the future, they invite their communities to experience joy now. The future is so certain, the prophets seem to say, that we might as well get this party started.

Anticipatory joy can be a form of resistance and an agent of transformation. Think of Fannie Lou Hamer, a civil rights activist. In June of 1963, while returning from a voting education workshop, she was arrested alongside several other activists for sitting in the white section of the Greyhound bus. The police officers in Winona, Mississippi beat her severely and shunted her back in a cell with Euvestor Simpson, a fellow activist.

After her pain subsided somewhat, Hamer began quietly singing songs of freedom. Simpson learned that "Walk With Me, Lord" was one of Fannie Lou Hamer's favorites, but from that night on, it sounded different when she sang it. "I realized it was no longer a dirge-like song that was pleading and

begging Jesus to walk with her," said Simpson. "It had changed to an invitation for Him to come and join her on this journey and be her friend as she traveled through this life speaking her truth, demanding freedom, justice, and respect for all people because we are all God's children." Hamer's fierce and urgent joy anticipated a better future, and that vision gave her the strength to sing songs of freedom from a jail cell.¹

Joy can be wielded irresponsibly, too. Kate Bowler, author of *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*, captures how joy can rub shoulders with denial and victim-blaming as she writes about her diagnosis with stage IV cancer and subsequent treatment: "The hardest lessons come from the solutions people, who are already a little disappointed that I am not saving myself. There is always a nutritional supplement, Bible verse or mental process I have not adequately tried. 'Keep smiling! Your attitude determines your destiny!' said a stranger named Jane in an email, having heard my news somewhere, and I was immediately worn out by the tyranny of prescriptive joy."²

Sometimes the absence of joy is just as important to acknowledge as its presence. The joy that belongs to Advent does both: by naming a future that is desperately hoped for but not yet present, it calls us to honest grief in the present and fierce jubilation as we mark the milestones on the way to God's new creation. Victoria Larson of Barn Geese Worship

Weekly prompt for December 15-21: When has the knowledge of a promising future brought you joy in the present? Have you ever felt someone wield joy irresponsibly when you were in pain? How does the experience of joy prepare you to recognize Jesus' presence?

¹Euvester Simpson, "Reflections on Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer," Fannie Lou Hamer's America, accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.fanniellouhamersamerica.com/fannie-lou-hamer-resource-center/personal-testimonies>

² Kate Bowler, "What to Say When You Meet the Angel of Death at a Party," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/opinion/sunday/cancer-what-to-say.html> Accessed June 15, 2024.

Words of Wisdom

"I cannot dance, O Lord, unless Thou lead me.
If Thou wilt that I leap joyfully then must Thou
Thyself first dance and sing! Then will I leap for love...
There will I remain and circle evermore."

Mechtild of Magdeburg

"Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom:
Hallelu, hallelu, hallelujah!"

African American spiritual³

Prayer: God, if prescriptive joy has a season, I think December is it. Christmas is rushing closer, and the parties, the decorations, the songs on the radio, the softly twinkling lights in the early darkness, they all call and beckon: be joyful! Sometimes I'm ready to step into the cozy glow of it all. Other times it is too dim a delight to meet the deep longing I feel on these cold, clear nights, where crystalline stars sing eternity. God, untangle joy from this holiday cheer. Give me a vision of the future you hold, where the hungry are fed, and the exiles come home, and enemies are reconciled, and the earth is healed, and the sick are made whole, and there is no more war, and you are here to wipe every tear from our eyes. Amen.

3 Hear Fannie Lou Hamer sing it here: <https://youtu.be/tnfcofde5vw?si=MpYcXIDqQLDWvWkH> Accessed June 15, 2024

Monday, December 16
Joy in the Lord (Philippians 4:4-5)

I am one of those people who feel joy the minute I hear my first Christmas song on the radio each year. Something about them puts me in the holiday mood immediately. Some of my friends and family do not share that sentiment at all. Crawling under the covers November 1st and not coming back out until December 26th would be their ideal way to spend the holiday season. Keeping those feelings in mind, I try to temper my joy with understanding when I am with them.

In the book of Philippians, Paul wrote that we should rejoice in the Lord always. However, it can be hard to always rejoice when there is an unfortunate medical diagnosis, an unexpected financial situation, or a middle of the night phone call from a friend or family member.

At times when I have been in the middle of a crisis, I have been unable to find joy during that time. It is only after time has passed and I have come out the other side that I am able to go back and see that there were some joyful moments with the Lord's perfect timing.

In this season of Advent and Christmas let's remember to take Paul's request to rejoice always in the lights and sounds of the season.

M.J. Fanning

Tuesday, December 17
Joy in the Midst of Trials (James 1:2-4)

God give us many gifts in our lives. He gives us the gift of ups and downs, like a roller coaster. We are all going to receive some of these gifts. To be able to navigate the trials safely and correctly, we should call on God for His guidance and delivery. Then we have a big choice – listen or ignore. If we decide to listen and do what God says, there is great joy for Him and for us. If we ignore Him, we are lost!

We have all faced trials; they are a part of life. Only by calling on God and with Him solving the problem will we mature and grow in our faith. The joy we get from overcoming the problem will carry us through until the next time. A roller coaster has more ups and downs than just one. As we ride, there is joy, some fear - we need to just hang on! WE are safe with God as our leader, father, problem-solver. Our main job is to call and ask Him for help. He has the joy of taking care of each of us.

The joy that comes from success is powerful! Nehemiah 8:10 says, "The joy of the Lord is my strength." Strength and growing in God's love and wisdom and guidance brings us joy.

We have all faced problems and when they are over and done, we feel peace. Only through His help, guidance and love were we able to overcome the current problem. Quite sure that in this lifetime we will face many more of these "gifts", large and small. Walking hand-in-hand with God will get us through them and the joy will follow. These "gifts" will draw us closer to our Lord and we will grow stronger in our faith. Like the sun come out after the rain, so does our joy come to us after trials are resolved. Enjoy the ride and stay strong.



-Julian of Norwich

Joyce Short

Wednesday, December 18

God's Joy (Luke 15:1-7)

Perhaps this passage should be called, "THAT'S NOT FAIR!" The beginning of this passage introduces the most scrupulous adherents to Jewish law. Naturally, they thought of themselves as having earned elevated status with God and their Jewish brothers and sisters. So, when they observed Jesus (the noted Rabbi) giving special attention to those of obviously questionable character, they were livid.

The scribes and Pharisees were convinced they should have Jesus' attention, that Jesus should have made them the focus of his rabbinical concern. They were not receiving the deference to which they had become accustomed. So, they complained. Jesus responded, once again, with a story.

The point of the story was to communicate the value of every single person to God - especially those who are "lost" and need to be "found." Since the scribes and Pharisee didn't regard themselves as in need of Jesus' "Good News," those who needed Jesus most were the ones regarded as sinners.

What's more, Jesus announced that the salvation of just one of these "lost sheep" resulted in joyful celebration that encompassed all of heaven. That much joy in heaven must be a remarkable event. Our need of Jesus' forgiveness and healing of our souls is truly miraculous. It is accomplished only because Jesus voluntarily stepped out of eternity to bring the presence of God to dwell among us.

How could anything be more joyful than being found by the only one who could lead us "home"!

In this season of Advent, while we, once again, prepare ourselves for Jesus' appearance among us, may we do so with the same kind of joy experienced in eternity. This joy is not only or response to the appearance of Jesus, but also the arrival of forgiveness and new life that can't survive without. That's the kind joy that erupts in the lives of those who wait for what Christ will accomplish at His coming.

Dr. Steven Pollard

Thursday, December 19
Joy in God's Nearness (Isaiah 12:1-6)

Isaiah 12 captures a beautiful moment in Israel's history—a song of praise for God's salvation and nearness at a time when the people had known exile, loss, and hardship. Below, you will find my own song of praise.

Linda Minga

O Lord, how I have come to know you and praise you!
And over the years, it has been my heart's desire
to praise you for the many blessings in my life.
You blessed me with a loving son, daughter-in-law, daughter, son-in-law,
and five beautiful grandchildren!
You have always provided for us, even when times were rough.
You have blessed me with the most caring, loving, giving
church family a person could have.
I praise you, O Lord, for my good mind, body, and soul.
At the times I wanted to give up, you helped me keep my chin up.
O Lord, I praise you for my strength,
sometimes I don't have any left at the end of the day,
but you, my God, my Savior, help me through each day,
sometimes baby steps, but somehow I make it.
I'm sure that I have angered you;
believe me, O Lord, it was not my intention.
You always forgave me for whatever I said or did.
I have always trusted you, my Lord,
for without the foundation of trust, I have nothing -
I would just be an empty shell...
a shell without any light in my life,
a shell without any soul or any feelings,
a shell that couldn't think, that couldn't have joy,
couldn't love or be loved
a shell without comfort,
a shell that couldn't share happiness, laughter, tears, life.
Fear – no, not me, Lord! I have never been afraid of you
for it is your glorious love that has shadowed me my whole entire life.
I will never give up on you, my Savior! You are my salvation!
One fine day, we will rejoice together! Amen!

Friday, December 20
Joy in Jesus' Promises (John 16:19-23)

The dictionary describes joy as a very glad feeling, happiness, delight.

The Bible tells of singing and dancing with joy. But joy can also be a quiet peace in you.

Jesus has promised us joy after grief and pain. This is so true for me, having experienced both.

Joy can be found with giving - just a smile, kind word of encouragement or a prayer for someone or just a thank you to God.

I find joy with each new day. Sunshine or clouds, a day given to each of us to enjoy the beauty of nature, work, play, or rest. All are free.

Joy is within me as I share my God-given talent of sewing with others, preparing a meal each week for the family, sitting around the table, catching up, laughing, and showing the younger children what a family is all about.

I am sure the Israelites felt joy as the waters parted for them or getting fresh water from a rock, as well as food from heaven. This time of year, we think about the joy of the shepherds with the message of a baby born, or the wise men as they presented gifts to Jesus. Later in Jesus' life, imagine the joy his disciples felt when they realized Jesus had been resurrected.

Just keep your heart anchored to Jesus and joy will be with you always.

Nancy Burgess

Saturday, December 21

Joy Restored (Psalm 30)

You may have seen that my license plate is a reference to verse 5 of this psalm. I ordered the plate after the University of Virginia men's basketball team won the national championship in 2019. Ric and I watched the final game in Charlottesville, surrounded by others who were overjoyed with the outcome. That joy was magnified by what had happened just the year before – UVa was the number one seed in the NCAA tournament, and the team – and its fans – had high expectations. In the first round, playing a much lower seeded team, the Cavaliers lost and became the first one seed team to ever lose to a sixteen seed. You could see the devastation in the faces of the players and coaches. It was heartbreaking! After the game, Coach Tony Bennett quoted this psalm, saying: "Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning. We will have some tough nights, because you're so close you could taste it, but absolutely joy will come in the morning for what these guys have established for Virginia basketball."

The greatest joys in life often come after hard times – or perhaps we simply learn to appreciate the gifts of life more in those hard times. Advent is a season of expectation and hope but also of waiting and longing. Psalm 30 reminds us that sorrow and difficulties are real, but they are never final. With God, there is always the promise of joy on the horizon.

Joy isn't dependent on our circumstances but on God's faithfulness. Even as we walk through uncertainty and grief, the Savior whose coming we await during Advent promises that joy will come. We will mourn and grief, but God is waiting with us in our sorrow, to "dress us up in joy" and turn our mourning into dancing (vs. 11). Thanks be to God that when we face seasons that feel like endless night, God will give us strength to trust that morning – and joy – are on the way.

Rev. Melissa Scott

Sunday, December 22

Love (Luke 1:46-55)

Love is ridiculously big, too large a thing to sum up with one scripture passage, one devotional reflection, or one definition. We use the word love to describe a feeling, but the feeling is applied in infinite ways: how we feel about a child or a parent, a spouse or a pet, a favorite food or a moving piece of music, a film or a friend. Love is much more than a feeling, though; it requires something of us, a pure and all-encompassing devotion if it's true. Love is all the actions that accompany the feeling. In fact, each theme we've explored this Advent season might rightly be understood as different dimensions of love when put to work.

In this week's reading, the Magnificat bursts forth from Mary in an act of love. It is pure praise, gratitude, and devotion for all that God has done for her and her people throughout human history. Mary knows the stories of her faith, passed down to her through many generations. Because she knows them so well, she can read all the actions of God as love: mercy and liberation, feeding and nurturing, lifting up and humbling. For Mary, they echo with love, love, love. God has accomplished all this and more out of great love for humanity at large and for Mary specifically. It is a love that is both broad and deep. It is love that acts. It is certainly all-encompassing.

Mary seeks to return love for love, and at the angel's announcement, she declares, "Here am I!" (Luke 1:38) She is the servant of God, and therefore, the servant of Love. She will carry, birth, feed, comfort, and nurture the child who is love incarnate.

That is the wildest bit of all: God's immense love, which we can't fully describe, understand, or even imagine the boundaries and contours of, is summarized in one little package: a baby. Love incarnate is unfathomable, but it can be held in our arms. Love can be nursed and comforted, kissed and changed, bathed and swaddled. What a preposterous and beautiful gift! The entirety of divine love, held in our arms. And we are now so very close!

As Christmas draws near, pay attention to the places where love is incarnate now. We know that once Jesus entered the world, he never left us. He is present not only in the Holy Child, but in every child. He is with us in the least and lowly, like his mother Mary. He is with all people who are in need. Though we wait for him still, he is with us even now. Tend to those places where love resides, today and in the Christmas days to come, and you will tend to Jesus.

Emily Trubey-Weller of Barn Geese Worship

Weekly Prompt: Where have you encountered love embodied in another person? As love inspired Mary's song, what music, art, or poetry does this experience bring to mind for you? Create something or reflect on someone else's creation.

Words of Wisdom

"Love is born! Come share in the wonder.
Love is God now asleep in the hay.
See the glow in the eyes of His mother.
What is the name her heart is saying?
Love! Love! Love is the name she whispers.
Love! Love! Jesus, Immanuel."

-Ken Bible, "Love Has Come!"

"Because of his boundless love, Jesus became what we are that he might make us to be what he is." -Irenaeus

Prayer: God of love, let my soul magnify you. Transform each moment of this day into a reminder of your mercies. Silence the tyrants in my mind and in the world: voices of shame and fear, forces of violence and abuse. I want to hear your voice. I want to speak with your love.

You have filled up those who are hungry for bread and for justice. Fill them again. You have remembered the forgotten. Remember them again. You have remembered your promises to come among us and love us up close. Arrive again.

God of love, let my soul magnify you. Amen.

Monday, December 23
God Is Love (1 John 4:7-12)

Here we are – just a couple of days prior to celebrating THE birth of LOVE – Jesus Christ. As the referenced scripture asserts, this is a passage about the real lesson of tough love. As one source so stated – “If we don’t love like God, God has not birthed us.” WOW! Put in other words, this scripture describes God’s insistence on Love.

As opposed to the concept of “not knowing God if we do not love”, let’s quickly turn to what has been demonstrated in the past two+ years on this corner of Colonial Avenue – a space that was the home for Colonial Avenue Baptist Church and then home to both CABC and Calvary Baptist Church and is now home to one united church, Radiance Community Church. As I see it, this could not have taken place without what we know as L O V E. This - through the meshing of Worship, the meshing of Sunday Schools, the meshing of the Adult Choirs, and for sure the meshing of Mission and Fellowship opportunities. And now as I write, our new church is in the midst of a “New Member Class” during the Bible Study time on Sundays. Love is the theme – Love is supreme.

The last two verses of our scripture (verses 11-12) best sum up the message of L O V E. For if we love as God so loved us, then God will forever be perfected in and through us. It’s a “no brainer”!

Joe Durrer, Jr.



Tuesday, December 24, Christmas Eve God's gift to us (Isaiah 9:2-7)

It is here at last: the Christmas season is upon us. This is the time toward which Advent has been leading us all along! Throughout this Advent season, we have been opening the gifts God has given us: hope, peace, joy, and love. Each one is beautiful. Each one is indeed a gift. But there's a risk, especially in our can-do culture, to receive each gift as an obligation. I must get these right, or else God will be disappointed, or Christ will judge me, or the Holy Spirit will give me up as a lost cause, whisper our inner editors, who really love to get things right but very seldom get satisfaction. But in this season, scripture reminds us that it is not what we do that matters in the end. It is what God has done for us.

Attend to the familiar words from Isaiah 9. The people to whom Isaiah originally addressed these words were exiles, people from Jerusalem whose city had been razed. Their conquerors sent them away to Babylon and made them settle there. For more than a generation—for seventy years—these people lived as strangers in a strange land, longing to go home, never knowing if it would be possible. The gifts we have explored this season, especially justice, peace, and hope, must have seemed very far off or only accessible in small ways.

While most of our lives differ considerably from those of Isaiah's original audience, perhaps we can still resonate with the feeling of exile. Perhaps you know the experience of losing the life you were living—to a diagnosis, to the death of a loved one, to a disappointment, to a desertion. Perhaps you are acquainted with the exiles' sense that normalcy has been taken away, maybe forever. Perhaps you are familiar with the feeling that the gifts of Advent are out of your grasp. To all such people, Isaiah brings a prophecy. He describes the end of a war, a day when the rod of the oppressor will be broken, when the soldiers' worn-out boots and bloody uniforms will be burned, because from that day, they're useful only as fuel for the fire. Isaiah's prophecy is one wherein the gifts of Advent come unbidden: peace, joy, and justice emerge as the only possible reaction to what this day would bring.

And how would the day arrive? Would it come through a surge in military strength? Through a decisive political victory, rooted in a grassroots campaign? Would it be an act of God, even, maybe a disaster that hit the powerful but spared the exiles? Would it be through our inner editors' ultimate triumph, an internal striving that finally, finally gets it right? Isaiah tells the people that the day of peace will arrive as... wait for it... a baby. (Those of you who are wondering how you will succeed in getting all your young children to wear pants on Christmas morning may understand the ridiculousness of this prophecy.)

According to the song of Isaiah, victory doesn't come through military might or political strategy. The darkness is broken by the creation of life, not its destruction. It is defeated through the birth of a child, one who can't even hold up his own head, who can do nothing for himself and yet does everything for us.

This is the ultimate gift, the gift of Christmas: Jesus has come. God is among us, Emmanuel. You do not need to be perfect to deserve this or to make it happen. It has happened already. It is for you. This priceless, selfless love of God is already yours.

Victoria Larson of Barn Geese Worship

Wednesday, December 25
Love Is Here (Luke 2:1-7)

First Coming
Madeleine L'Engle, from *The Ordering of Love*

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace
He came when the Heavens were unsteady
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. He did not wait

till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
He came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!



Christmas continues now, for 12 days – from December 25-January 5.
On January 6, we celebrate Epiphany, remembering the magi's journey to Jesus. As you move through these days, continue to think about the gifts of hope, peace, love, and joy, and most especially, the gift of Jesus.
Consider how you might share those gifts with the world!



The Work of Christmas

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

Howard Thurman