



*ADVENT  
DEVOTIONAL  
2023*

## ADVENT

Each Advent we spend four weeks preparing to receive the light of Christ in our lives again. We remember the basic and beautiful gifts of Jesus:

Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

We need these gifts every moment of every day. This year we have invited members and staff to reflect on these four gifts to create this devotional booklet that will guide you through the Advent journey.

I pray that as we share in these reflections that your faith grows and that you feel closer to the people who opened their hearts to share.

With love,

Stephanie

### ***We Lift the Light of Hope***

We lift the light of hope, O God,  
Your presence burning bright.  
In praise we sing the gift You bring:  
Our hope complete in Christ.  
In praise we sing the gift You bring:  
Our hope complete in Christ.

We lift the light of peace, O God,  
The Lord of truth and right.  
In Your domain let justice reign  
And bring us peace in Christ.  
In Your domain let justice reign  
And bring us peace in Christ.

We lift the light of joy, O God.  
Your praise is our delight!  
Your blessings flow that all may know  
Unbounded joy in Christ.  
Your blessings flow that all may know  
Unbounded joy in Christ.

We lift the light of love, O God,  
Your candle in our night.  
You come to give and help us live  
The mighty love of Christ.  
You come to give and help us live  
The mighty love of Christ.

We lift the light of Christmas day  
And greet eternal life.  
Now hope and peace and joy and love  
Are born in Jesus Christ.  
Now hope and peace and joy and love  
Are born in Jesus Christ.



Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you will comfort me. Psalm 23:4

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During my childhood, aggressive snowstorms were normal in Pennsylvania. I can remember many years filled with blizzards and days without leaving the house. One year the snow came down so heavily that when my dad didn't walk through the door at his usual time of 3:30 pm we weren't overly concerned. We knew it would take longer than usual for him to drive home because of the weather.

In those pre-cell phone days, the only option was to wait until he walked through the door. However, hour after hour passed and the night sky was looming without a word from my dad. My mom called the police and our friends and family to see if anyone had heard anything from him or if he stopped to check in on someone along the way, but no one knew anything.

There are times when your mind can quickly move from rational thinking into catastrophic worst case scenario thinking. This fear comes from not being able to control the future. We know it well.

The Bible tells us in the familiar Psalm not to fear, even in the darkest valleys and the longest nights because in those moments and in every moment, God is our hope. God comforts us and God invites us to remember God's promises that he has a future for us.

That night we sat around imagining the worst, but hoping that my dad would eventually walk through the door, and he did. More than eight hours later, he wearily came through the front door, his mustache icy. My mom shrieked out in relief, her hope was met. My dad was not lost or hurt, but instead he stopped to help every person who was stuck or spinning by using his four wheel drive vehicle to serve those in need.

In these Advent days, hope is the light that shines in the darkness and hope is the thing we have to hold on to knowing that God is with us and God comforts us while we wait.

By Stephanie Templin Ashford

What comes to mind when you hear the word hope?

Isaiah 40:31 says, “But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

At times, when you look at the world around you it can be hard to have hope. Newsfeeds are overwhelmed with ongoing disappointments causing one to question why hope even matters. Hope is more than wishful thinking. Every day there are choices to make that have a direct impact on your life. You control your day, and it's in your power to decide how you'll act and react to different situations. Hope helps us keep going, even when a storm surfaces with tough situations. It takes a deep desire to want to make a change. Goals are made with a specific vision for the future and can act as the hope in any storm, helping to create the world we live in.

Upon asking myself why I look for hope, I am reminded that I am currently living the life I once hoped for. My journey thus far in life hasn't always been smooth. There's been many detours, wrong turns, and missed stops, but this provided me with opportunities to learn, grow, and strengthen my faith. To achieve something more and reassess my outlook for the future, I must focus on the good that surrounds me. God can lead each of us if we choose and Isaiah 40:31 is a constant reminder that when life feels unbearable, there is hope in the Lord.

Hope is one of life's greatest gifts and the willingness to focus on this gift can provide one with greater faith and HOPE for the future.

“You were created to do great things, now's your time to have hope and shine!”

By Tracey Jefferson

Romans 8:24-25 ~ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?

But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Hope is setting a goal and working towards it. One of the tools we use as therapists is called The Miracle Question. What if you were to wake up tomorrow and the problem you came to me for, was resolved. What would look different, how would you feel? In essence we are helping a client see a future that is different than today.

In my faith journey, I knew that there is more than what I have and love and believe in. I cannot see what Heaven is but have hope there is one. I cannot see the Father who is behind the miracles, but see the miracles He performs. Hope can carry people through devastation. Hope leads us to prayer and prayer is the connection we have to our God, to our community and to ourselves.

Prayer is a practice. Prayer is a pause in our day that allows us the time and space to share our gratitude and our hopes. It is a time we can reflect on our strengths and weaknesses. Praying encourages us to support others who are in need of hope. When we shift our mindset towards hope we feel a shift towards optimism. We can see light. We can feel the strength to move forward.

One of God's greatest gifts He gave to us is hope. Without hope, we are stagnant. But with hope we grow.

By Katie Lyons

Hope, in my mind, is tied closely to optimism. It seems to me that if you're a hopeful person your outlook on life is more optimistic. You can more easily dream, and dream in a big, bold way full of hope, enthusiasm, and possibility.

My kids have that kind of hope. What they ask me for and what they expect of me shows a kind of hope in me that I certainly don't have in myself. They believe that I can play a round of bingo while I'm in the middle of cooking dinner, or start planning their birthday party 4 months ahead of time, and their Christmas Lists are certainly full of hopeful asks and wishes. The most amazing thing to me is that I'm constantly unable to live up to their wild expectations for me. And yet, they never stop asking. They never stop putting their hope in me and what I'm capable of.

A child will so easily put all their hope in their parents, not out of a place of greed or a great misunderstanding of how space and time work. But rather their hope is in me. They are confident that I can provide, I can fix, I can do anything. Of course, I will fall short and let them down, I'm only human. But we have a heavenly parent who invites us to put our hope in him.

The Lord delights in those who fear him,  
who put their hope in his unfailing love.  
Psalm 147:11

An invitation to hope means that we are accepting what God is already willing to give to us, the gift of Hope. God wants nothing more than for us to find our hope in him. And then we do - God delights!

By Baily Heckman



We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel. (Luke 24:21)

Dreams deflated, heads hung down, scuffing their sandals as they slowly shuffled along the dusty road. The way back home on the road to Emmaus could have been a million miles long. It did not matter.

Hope came about in seeing and hearing about the prophet (as in one who speaks for God) teach, heal, feed and welcome those whom society had cast out. They knew Jesus. But the events of his death dashed all hope.

Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place (Luke 24:21). Their time table of hope had run out.

Even while they spoke of the women finding the tomb empty, they were unable to connect the dots to Jesus standing right in front of them.

Hope asks us to believe in something that we do not expect, or could not even imagine. And yet hope is also borne in the everyday.

When Jesus was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him... (Luke 24: 30).

In a simple meal and the last supper blessing, the dots had connected.

As we celebrate the coming of hope, perhaps we too can help connect the dots of life for people to see the face of Jesus; for those who need healing, food and welcome without fear. As we serve Jesus perhaps someone or many will experience the surprise and blessings of hope fulfilled, and we will see Jesus in our midst.

Live out the hope found in Jesus. Amen.

By Deborah Heffernan

**Romans 8:24-25** ~ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

One Christmas Eve I was alone. My life had gotten rather messy during a divorce from my first husband and I was despondent. My two children were with their father that evening and I was by myself. I went to Thompson for the Christmas Eve service and I came home to a strangely empty house. I sat alone and prayed. The thought came to me that it was Christmas and Christ was born again in the hearts of all of mankind. I felt God's presence within me and around me and felt hope that my life was a blessing. I was reassured that I had my faith and God's love around me and within me. It was stirring and comforting.

As I grow in my faith and am more aware of the presence of God I see Hope as my way of letting go of my agenda and knowing that God is within us and loves us in no matter what the circumstances. This reassurance helps me to be grateful for whatever is happening. It is through the struggles that we learn to trust God. Hope, gives the assurance of His presence in our lives.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as your trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” **Romans 15:13**

By Judy Cronise

Hope can be problematic. We're hardwired towards self-protection, but if hope goes unmet, the resulting disappointment can break through our defenses and hurt us deeply. Proverbs 3:12 says "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life." Yes, hope is risky, hope is dangerous, hope is heart-sickening at times, but when hope is realized, it brings life. And hope is at the very heart of what it means to follow Jesus.

With Jesus we hope for the end of wars, for justice and equity for all, for the dignity of all human beings to be honored, and for the basic needs of everyone to be met. We hope for a world where there is no more sickness and no more death, and where God will wipe away all tears from our eyes. Christian hope calls us to live in such a way as to make that world a reality.

Jesus saw the risk of hoping for a better future. He knew that planting the seed of hope in his world would earn him a torturous death. And it did. This hoped-for world of his, this new kingdom of God, it was worth sacrificing his life for. Our privilege as followers of Jesus is to water the seed he planted and help it grow into a flourishing tree of life for all people everywhere.

Two thousand years ago, a remnant of people hoped that God would send a king to save them from political and cultural oppression. God came down in the person of Jesus and fulfilled their longings. Little did they know that Jesus would first free them from themselves. He would teach them, as he teaches us, that true freedom is found not only in hoping for the "peaceable kingdom," but also in laying down our lives to make it so.

May hope in Jesus' kingdom fill us this Advent season, and all year long.

By Bill Stauffer

## PEACE

I am afraid this time of year.  
It is so dark, and then so bright  
So happy, then suddenly sad  
The music is always so loud  
And the lights are always changing.

It gets inside my head and heart  
'Til they don't know what's happening  
Everyone tells me to be glad  
Everyone tells me I should sing,

I think I need to be alone  
I need to sit in a corner  
On the bare flat unmoving floor  
I need to stare at just one thing  
Not see, hear, think of anything else.

So I go into my corner,  
And I wait for the Lord to come:  
Small enough for me to carry  
Plain enough for me to look at  
Quiet enough for me to hear

The peace only he can give.

-- The Disability and Faith Forum Poetry



*When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Matthew 2:16*

I've read the Christmas story hundreds of times and each part of it brings me wonder and joy. The angels, the manger, the star.... They all fascinate me again and again. This year, when I began to think about peace, I decided to read past where we usually end the story on Christmas Eve to the part where the Magi go home a different way, having been warned in a dream. The story gives an exit plan for the magi and for the Holy Family, but it describes a horrific massacre of many young children.

This year, as war rages on and the news is marred with headlines of horrible atrocities involving babies and children. It is a harsh reminder to me that the peace of Christ is so often not the ruler of our hearts or our world.

When I was in my twenties and there was an even different war in the Middle East, our church challenged us to commit to a simple meal every Friday at lunch of nothing but bread and water. Friday lunch was a common time for dining out and it gave us the invitation to live differently, even in the company of others, and to allow for our meal to remind us to pray for peace. The basic food helped us to remember that so many go without basic necessities, especially in times of war.

As the biblical story continues, God does make a safe passage for the Holy Family and when Herod dies, peace is restored in the land. This gives me hope even in these challenging days, that God will eventually restore peace in our world, and in the meantime. I am invited to hold the prayers of the innocent close to my heart in times of war.

May the prince of peace rule in your heart and in the world.

By Stephanie Templin Ashford

**Luke 2: 12-13**

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests."*

I was born in 1958 and, since that time, I am not aware of our world living in peace at any time in the past 65 years. And reading the headlines these days, I often feel discouraged at the ability of humanity to acknowledge that doing the same thing repeatedly, like killing each other for whatever reason, is the very definition of insanity and the insane behavior must stop.

I believe wholeheartedly that God's favor rests on everyone on earth because the God of my understanding is extraordinarily compassionate and inclusive. As we move into a season of Advent, waiting for the miracle that is the birth of Jesus, I still have hope that peace in our world is possible. Not because I am an unrealistic optimist, but because Jesus, in his ministry, has given us the formula for creating peace.

**Mark 12: 29-31**

*"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.'"*

The three simple steps to peace begin with LOVE. Of course, I say to myself, I need to love God and my neighbors, but I do not focus on the other step of the equation. I need to love myself first because I cannot give away what I do not have.

It begins with me reaching out to the Divine for guidance, accepting and loving myself as I am, flaws, gifts, all of me, while being willing to change as I am able. How do I do this? I spend time in prayer and meditation, I gather with my 12 Step community, I walk in nature daily marveling at our natural world, I belong to a Small Group where I study the Bible to grow and share in Christian faith and I participate in the life of this church. All of these actions, begun with love, bring peace to my heart. And then I can begin to share that peace with others.

The Chinese philosopher Laozi wrote these words:

If there is to be peace in the world,  
There must be peace in the nations.  
If there is to be peace in the nations,  
There must be peace in the cities.  
If there is to be peace in the cities,  
There must be peace between neighbors.  
If there is to be peace between neighbors,  
There must be peace in the home.  
If there is to be peace in the home,  
There must be peace in the heart.

Love came as a baby on Christmas so long ago, reminding us all that love is the most powerful energy in the world. We are all born with the awesome love in our hearts, just as the baby Jesus. May we turn that love into peace and share it with each other this Christmas season.

By Melissa Mantz



## Struggling with an Invitation to Peace

**Philippians 4:7** *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (NSRV)*

Many of you know that our family has had many losses over the past 3+ years. My father-in-law, my husband's identical twin, my mother-in-law, and most recently, my own mother. Mix that in with these odd Covid years and it's been a struggle. I'm not special, I know everyone suffers and many have struggles far beyond mine. But. I like to be in control. One of the hardest parts of my personal faith journey has been (and continues to be) to let go, even when I know that peace that surpasses all understanding will follow if I just put my faith in the Lord.

My invitation to peace has taken time for me to accept. Years. Inconsistent, wavering years.

My invitation to peace during this challenging chapter of my life has taken many forms:

- Family. My ever-patient spouse.
- Friends who text, bring meals, travel to sit with me.
- Therapy.
- Crying, lots of crying. Bawling in a parking lot for an hour – that's when I knew I needed the aforementioned therapy. Unstoppable tears during a church service.
- Learning when to say 'no' and when to say 'yes'.
- God 'winks' -- when you hear that word, song, or scripture that speaks to you in that moment.
- Writing this devotion.
- Even migraine headaches that force me to drop everything and rest for the day are a form of peace.

Even before the invitation to write something for this devotion arrived, I had been using "the peace that surpasses all understanding" as a sort of mantra to soothe my soul during rough moments. Each time I feel and breathe this verse, I let go of a little piece of control and replace it with a bit of peace. As the days and months go by, that peace is filling a little more of my heart. May it be so with you as well.

By Sue Schaub

No matter how busy our Decembers have been over the years, during Advent I've felt true peace the moment I sink into my seat in church on Sunday morning. When my girls were young, it was a relief to get everyone dressed and (almost) there on time to have an hour to focus on the coming birth of Jesus.

Peace felt like knowing you were right where you wanted to be.

It's easy to feel peaceful when things are going well. When the house is clean, the bills are paid, the chores are done and your work has been completed. When you make it to church.

But if these are the only ways to feel peace, then it sounds like something we have to work for. And that's not the peace of Jesus.

Lately, I've been waking up in the middle of the night and having trouble falling back to sleep. My mind becomes overwhelmed with stressful scenarios, real and imagined. This is a common human experience. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that "at three o'clock in the morning, a forgotten package has the same tragic importance as a death sentence."

These days our choice of personal and universal worries in the middle of the night seem nearly endless. Why these concerns feel so much more stressful at this early morning hour is explained by the natural spike in our cortisol levels between 2 and 3 am which cause our heart rate and blood pressure to increase. This makes it harder to fall back to sleep.

What I've come to believe is that these moments are exactly what the peace offered by Jesus is for.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! For I have overcome the world." John 16:33

We have these worries, problems, and shortcomings because we are human. They're part of life in this world. But Jesus came into this world to bring us peace. And that peace is not just for Sunday mornings, no matter how grateful (or triumphant) we feel to make it to church.

It's for those moments of darkness in our lives when we aren't sure we can make it to daylight. When we worry we have done everything wrong. When we feel lost. When we are filled with fear, anxiety, or regret.

Jesus told us we would have troubles, but he also said that through him we would still have peace.

When we meditate on peace this Advent season let us remember that it is freely offered, not earned, and it is knowing that through Jesus our sins are forgiven and that when our life on earth is over, the ultimate peace we will find is with God in heaven, and it will be for eternity.

By Jen Haubrich

A few weeks ago we were driving in the car when my oldest daughter took it upon herself to use our commute as an opportunity to teach her younger brother about opposites. In her best teacher voice, she would say, "What's the opposite of down?" And he would yell, "Up!" In and out, open and closed, hot and cold. On and on the game went until we made it where we were going.

I know peace can feel far away, particularly in these days. But what exactly is the absence of peace? What's the opposite of peace? Is it chaos? Is it war? Is it anxiety? Is it turmoil? I think the answer is, yes, the opposite of peace is all of those things and more.

In Isaiah 11 the prophet tells about the coming Messiah and he sets the scene of what the Prince of Peace's kingdom will look like. Wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, babies and snakes, and all manner of other natural enemies will live side by side without threat or violence. He ends by saying that this will be the case because "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord." (Isaiah 11:9)

Peace is knowledge of the Lord. It's a confidence that God is bigger than our worries or circumstances. It's the assurance that God holds us in the protection of the almighty. It's the certainty that Christ, the Prince of Peace, invites us into his peace even in the midst of storms.

By Bailey Heckman

“True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

To me, Advent peace has always been synonymous with stillness, with soft sounds and sweet dreams. It is the product of wonder and silent amazement. A tiny baby, whose birth was trumpeted by angels but witnessed by farm animals, warming the air. It is the feeling we get when we light candles and sing “Silent Night” a cappella at the end of our Christmas Eve services each year.

Yet, this kind of peace is only the innocent form of something more powerful, more hard-fought, more sacrificial. Jesus was born in peaceful anonymity, but died in brutal ignominy, was raised in radiant glory, all to bring peace in absolute totality. Advent peace is just the seedling of kingdom peace, and kingdom peace is not still. It is the active, prevailing presence of justice. Justice is the dismantling of unequal and inequitable systems, replacing them with sustainable, equitable solutions that serve the world for generations to come. Justice creates the peaceable kingdom of God.

This justice isn’t just theological, or social, or political - it is also personal. In fact, it begins deep within us. Most of us deal with unjust systems of internal self-measurement. These are often planted in us early in life, but as we grow in awareness, we find them in action. The grown up Jesus has some things to say about internal injustice, about how we treat and measure ourselves. He says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Bringing justice to our world begins with being just with ourselves, with finding rest for our souls. When we judge ourselves justly, when we see ourselves as loved by God, we can then turn and offer that love, that justice, that *peace* to others. And what is restful in us will give us the strength needed to build a just world, where all lie down and “sleep in heavenly peace.”

May our Advent peace be sweet, still, and full of rest.

By Bill Stauffer

***How do we become influencers to change the world?***

Mark 1:17: *“Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”*  
Oxford Annotated Bible (Latest print: “of all people”)

While Mark is the second book of the New Testament, it was the first Gospel to be written (circa 60-75 CE). Paul’s 13 letters were the first items written in the New Testament (48-64 CE). Certainly, Jesus is using these words to encourage the Disciples to decide to change everything they were and had done.... and they did it. Paul’s story is the same. BAMM! Right there, right that moment.

“Follow me” also appears in Matthew 16:24, and Luke 9:23 and 18:22, occurring in different times of Christ’s life. While appearing in different contexts they convey the same message, “replicate me”. But nuance in these contexts is to give pictures of how you can “Follow me”.

In Luke 9:23 Jesus says to his disciples, after he listened to the answers to his question: “Who do the people say that I am?” by saying “let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” In Luke 18:22, Jesus answers a ruler, who is a doer of all the 10 Commandments, and who inquired about his eternal life by saying, “One thing you still lack. Sell all have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me.” The ruler declined to do so. And in Matthew 24 after Jesus rebukes Peter for saying Jesus cannot die, turned to disciples and said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” The rebuke to Peter was “Get behind me Satan.”

These conversations were intimate --- and emotional. Yet, it still does not clarify how just doing good deeds would make fishermen give up livelihoods. We have not dug deep enough.

Let’s start with what the words would mean in the original Greek:

“The Greek word translated as “follow” means “behind in space” and “after” in time --  
“Me” is first-person possessive singular pronoun, and...The Greek word translated  
as “and” is used as the conjunction “and” but also is to add emphasis.”

Space and time open a deeper relationship to “Follow me.” It’s continuous in space and time in a manner that will change what we do, and more importantly change how we see the world. It leaves room to reflect on outcomes and explore emotions like the name Immanuel, which is a noun and carries a story because it means “God with us.” “Follow me,” a verb, is a story of connection of action, insight, and growth.

Here's a trivial example that may resonate with you: when I was 4 or 5 my mom introduced me to chores. As I aged, she added more chores, and I mastered them, and it taught a lesson on how to accomplish a task. It made me think that "follow me" requires reflection, conversations and being with other people to share our experiences.

(PS. It was not without mother-son conversations of "don't you see." It was helpful for marriage. But mostly it defined who I was and who I wanted to be.)

Advent and Christmas are "follow me" experiences on a grand scale that has become an incubator of faith, hope, love. When human beings do something that brings them joy, we tend to want to do it again, which leads to understanding that doing and seeing what we are is a healthy way to grow our faith.

### ***How do we become influencers to change the world?***

Every time we are to do something, see the world through Jesus' eyes; and understanding that what we do has impact on what gets done and what happens around us.

Working with the truth makes you already an influencer. When you follow influences that are "behind in space" and "after" in time, no matter who you are you will see a better outcome.

Here's something you might enjoy playing around with. Put your actions in a Snoopy Cartoon.

Charles Schulz was an amazing influencer, every Sunday morning changing the mood from whatever was on the front page of the Inquirer to a smile. What thoughts does the following cartoon create for you and how did your emotions change?



By Bob Tomlinson





Proverbs 17:22 ~ A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

One of our favorite pastimes is making a trek to New York over the Christmas holiday. We have enjoyed the Rockettes, seen Broadway shows, and ice skated in Bryant Park. One time we found a very budget friendly hotel just a block from Times Square and while we there a huge snowstorm quickly moved in and blanketed the city so completely that all of the streets were completely shut down. There wasn't a single car moving in Manhattan! We woke up the next morning and looked outside and the street had at least six inches of snow. We pulled on our snow gear and ran outside and made snowmen in the street in New York! It was an unbelievable once in a lifetime experience.

This is Advent Joy. It's the kind of joy that slows you down enough to laugh and play and marvel at how our God can do anything. Our God can stop traffic and blanket our busyness and give us space to do the unimaginable. Sometimes this joy feels unattainable. Life is often too busy or filled with too much pain or clouded by grief and joy feels far off, but when God breaks through and hands you the chance for joy, I hope you'll seize the opportunity and maybe even dance in the streets.

By Stephanie Templin Ashford

*And that gift of joy can never be taken away from you, no matter what happens (Romans 8:38-39). The greatest gift we have this Advent season is not the presents under the tree, but the presence of God in our lives.*

The third week of advent celebrates the joy of Christ coming to earth. Advent Joy is different than what most people think of as joy. It is not the same as happiness, which is an emotion that comes and goes. Happiness is what we feel when our favorite team wins a big game, or we get a promotion at work, or we spend an evening out with friends. Joy is a choice that is ever lasting. Joy is what we feel even through difficult times. In the past, this was a foreign concept to me. How are we supposed to feel joyful when we are mourning the death of a loved one, or have lost a job, or have been given a terminal diagnosis? It's impossible, right? This is how I felt until I witnessed, first hand, what it really means to be joyful. November of 2020, my mother was diagnosed with ALS. I was devastated by this news and concerned with how this would affect her both physically and mentally. My mother's faith was such an important part of her life, and I worried she would question what she had always believed in so deeply. This never happened. Through every stage of my mother's illness, she remained joyful. It astounded me. How can someone who lost so much, the ability to walk, talk, eat and even breath without assistance, feel joy? When I questioned her about this, her answer was simple, "I am joyful because I have been blessed with an incredible family and wonderful friends and, when it gets really bad, I know that God is always with me." These words had a profound impact on me and helped to deepen my own faith. God gave his life for us. He gives us a Joy that we cannot find without Him. It is a gift that we choose to accept no matter what our situation.

On the days when I am overcome with grief from the loss of my mother, I ponder her words. I think of what she said and feel joy and gratitude to God for the blessing of my mother. The blessing of her kind heart, generous nature and joyful spirit. I will always mourn the loss of my mother, but I will also celebrate and rejoice in her life!

*Dear Lord,*

*During this Advent season, help us to remember that the birth of Jesus has the power to bring us great Joy. We open our hearts to you and choose to be joyful in your presence. Amen.*

By Tricia Murphy

Joy, what's in it for you?

But the Angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people".

Luke2:10

As I began thinking about this topic called joy, I came to a good news/bad news realization about this divine emotion. The bad news is how disheartening it is to know how common it is that we often forget this truth about the source of true Joy in our own lives. I know I'm guilty of this sometimes.

And despite these daily struggles we all face, as we all enter into this "season of joy", with all its "to-do lists", obligations, and added commitments, and all of the other stuff we sometimes believe is important but at the end of the day, really isn't, we all forge ahead together into another season of Advent/Christmas with usually two thrusts.

One is with great excitement and anticipation (usually reserved for those who are under the age of 7) but also for a few select adults, but for some of you it may be a real sense of dread, not to mention a whole spectrum of other human emotions both good and bad, but all linked to the bustling month of December.

Sounds a little cynical and somber right? But here's the GOOD NEWS !!! The real Joy of the season (if you let it), can bring a healthy measure of peace, contentment, and most importantly real Joy to your lives as it does mine.

I think we all can agree that joy, at its core, is a unique and important divine emotion of the human experience. It is often sought for, but seldom fully attained, and yet its one of the key components of the fruits of the spirit.

Some would argue Joy and Happiness are two feathers of the same bird. I would argue that's really not the case at all. Happiness is a wonderful feeling that comes and goes in a myriad of circumstances and situations. It can show up as easily as watching your favorite football team dominate a hated rival. Perhaps it's seeing a son/daughter clean their room or walk across a stage to receive a well-earned diploma. It could even be experienced at your oldest daughter's beautiful countryside wedding in Spain. These examples of happiness are meaningful and wonderful, and yet that feeling of happiness is fleeting.

“Joy” on the other hand, as the noted theologian Henri Nouwen puts it, “does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.”

If we can just learn to “let go and let God” as the saying goes, trusting that things will ultimately work out the way they're supposed to, without trying to control the outcome, then we can truly begin to enjoy those moments that come into our lives more fully.

What I know is this, Joy arrived 2000 years ago to teenage parents, in a stable, in a remote Judean town. That miraculous infant, our Immanuel, would go on to live a life like no other life before or since. The impossible now becomes possible. That’s good news we can all embrace this advent season. Truly a gift worth sharing. May you all experience a joyful Christmas this year —

By Jeff Berry

James 1:2-3

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

Dragonflies have been around for over 300 million years and are said to symbolize our ability to overcome times of hardship. For myself dragonflies bring me joy allowing me to take time to reconnect with my strength, courage, and happiness. But what is joy? That question isn't a simple one. The word joy is one of the most prominent themes of the bible. The exact number of times joy is mentioned varies. While some Bible scholars suggest that it appears 430 times, others imply that it shows up 224. James 1:2-3 states, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” Some may say joy is complex, and others will say it is all about the experiences.

The word “Joy” provides me with the reminder to take time to reconnect with my own strength, courage, and happiness. Joy has been a significant part of my life literally and figuratively. Every day I try to look for joy in all I do, but it's easy to become engrossed with my daily life. Dragonflies begin their life under water and after this lengthy process they emerge, but then they only live around six months. Despite what some may feel is a short life, a dragonfly perseveres and manages to fly millions of miles as an adult living a life well-lived. For me, dragonflies are a symbol of growth, change, and development. Each of these provide me the ability to be present by living in the moment, embracing times of change, and accepting the challenges in my life reminding me to have joy. A JOYful woman once said, “Nothing is ever so bad that something good doesn't come out of it.” Just like the dragonfly, my faith encourages me to embrace every challenge, live life to the fullest, and have JOY each day God has given me.

By Tracey Jefferson

The season of Advent is a journey of anticipation, waiting, and preparing for the celebration of Christ's birth. These days that tends to mean elaborate advent calendars full of chocolate, Lego, socks, books, and even a new cheese to try for each of the 25 days leading up to Christmas. Advent means Christmas parties and white elephant exchanges. Advent means trimming trees, sending cards, baking cookies, wrapping presents, visiting family, sitting on Santa's lap, hanging lights on the house, and so much shopping.

That long list of to-dos during Advent doesn't leave a whole lot of room for anticipation, waiting, and preparing for the celebration of Christ's birth. The business of the season doesn't leave a lot of room for true joy. The Bible tells us that joy is not just a fleeting emotion but a profound state of being deeply rooted in our relationship with God. The psalmist declares, "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Psalm 16:11).

To be in the presence of God there is fullness of joy. And I think that requires us to pause, to slow down, to be truly present to receive joy. God's invitation to us this season is to experience joy. Not fleeting happiness, but deep rich joy. Joy is something that glows like a flame inside of us. We can feed it fuel and it can burn bright or we can be inattentive to it and let it shrink down to a pilot light, but it's always there.

In the midst of the hustle and bustle of this season, let's take a moment to quiet our hearts and fan the flame of joy within us which is a gift from God. May this Advent be a time of deep reflection, joyful anticipation, and a rekindling of the joy that comes from knowing our Savior, Jesus Christ.

By Bailey Heckman

It's like a skit from SNL. Shepherds out in the fields, doing the overnight shift watching their sheep. An angel appears, scaring them half to death, blinding them with light, telling them some super good news that will bring joy to everyone. Just when they get used to the angel's presence, a whole bunch more heavenly types appear, scaring them all the way to death this time, all praising God. When they finish – *bloop!* – back to heaven they go, leaving the shepherds with silent, “Little Rascals” surprised expressions. After a beat of stillness, they run around, bumping into each other, processing out loud what just happened. Finally, someone shouts, “Let's go see!” They go see.

They reach the baby Jesus all wrapped up, lying in a manger, just like the angel said. Then they go and tell everyone, knocking on doors, waking up families, sharing with the loudest enthusiasm possible what they heard and saw. It was Keystone Kops meets The Three Stooges. But it doesn't matter, because everyone who hears is full of joy, just like the shepherds. It is comical, it is breathless, it is joyful.

Joy at what they had heard and seen fueled their enthusiasm. They “spread the word” the gospel writer says. They told other people because of joy. Without even a hint of shame, I ask myself, am I full of joy at the goodness of Jesus? Do I invite people into the life of Thompson Church out of the overflow of my grateful, joyful heart? Have I considered the fullness of the “good news that will cause great joy for all the people?”

What do we believe about the kingdom of God, about this joy that is for everyone, about a baby who grows up to be a man who lays down his life for his friends, for us? Does the prospect of a world that is filled with compassion and love animate us to the point of childlike wonder and joy? What do we believe?

During Advent and Christmas, may we be like Mary, the mother of Jesus, and treasure up these things and ponder them in our hearts. And may we overflow with joy when we do.

By Bill Stauffer

So many of our Christmas memories are bound up in exciting moments of frantically ripped wrapping paper and exclamations of exuberant joy. The child who revels in the exact gift they longed for or the beloved accepts the ring as the special holiday surprise. Joy is marketed to us as exciting and intoxicating and I admit that I have been guilty of trying to manufacture this emotion by buying bigger or better gifts, but the joy that God gives us in this season is not quick or sugary, instead it is a feeling of satisfaction that lasts.

Joy is the gift we receive in Jesus that reminds us that God will be with us through all seasons. Joy is, indeed, the excitement of a child, but it is also the contentment with a homemade gift when there simply isn't enough money and joy is the happiness of having the family together that is worth more than any item that can be purchased. Over time we are able to gaze back upon Christmases past and to hold the goodness of our present and say, This is Joy.

Thank you, Lord.

By Stephanie Templin Ashford





Questions about Jesus' identity were discussed for centuries after his ascension. Scholars, theologians, pastors, and philosophers wrote letters, held debates, and gathered at well-to-do council meetings all to figure out who was right about Jesus. Was he a prophet? A fraud? Was he fully human? Fully divine? Was he a sort of puppet of God? Was Jesus created by God or was Jesus one with God? These debates continue today as Christians from different backgrounds and denominations try to find the answers to these big questions.

We get caught up in wanting to find the right answer, to get an A on the test, to receive the gold star. But the one thing we need to know about the birth of Jesus that night so long ago in Bethlehem is that love itself was born into the world.

There's this beautiful poem written by Christina Rossetti, an English writer born in 1830's London. Her simple words have echoed through the centuries that followed as artists discover and rediscover her simple but powerful words and set them to the music of the time.

Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, Love Divine,  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,  
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,  
Worship we our Jesus,  
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,  
Love be yours and love be mine,  
Love to God and all men,  
Love for plea and gift and sign.

That's who Jesus is - love. Jesus is God's love wrapped up in flesh who came to live among us. Love was born in a manger. Love preached the gospel to us. Love embraced the sinner, welcomed the outcast, and healed the sick. Love died for us. Love overcomes death for us. Love provided us with a path forward in faith. Love lives within us. Love never fails.

By Bailey Heckman

For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:10

Each Christmas in our home we wake up and instead of running to the tree, we gather around a birthday cake with one candle and we sing Happy Birthday to Jesus. We've done it for years. It's a little hokey and I'm pretty sure that Jesus didn't have a birthday cake or trick candles (yup, the light keeps coming back!). As we are eating our birthday cake, we pass around the Bible and read the words of Jesus birth in the gospel of Luke. The kids love having cake first thing and the ritual helps us to start our celebration focused on the true meaning of the day.

Maybe this sounds extreme or Uber-religious to you, but to me it is about prioritizing what we love most. We all struggle with the commercialization of Christmas. We all give extravagantly. We eat too much, buy too much and splurge and spoil. And quite frankly, it's often fun. But I want our family, for generations to come, to know what comes first and to know what we love most.

On Christmas, the gift we were given was Love in flesh, Love in person, Love that would do anything for each and every one of us, even die.

I pray that you find creative ways to tell the story of Love this day; a story that will live on for generations to come.

Merry Christmas!!!

By Stephanie Templin Ashford

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19

Growing up, I never really felt like I could personally connect with this line in the Bible. As long as I could remember, this was the verse that ended the passage my Mom would read with joy every Christmas Eve at the first service. She used to say that she could visualize Mary holding baby Jesus, taking in the immense moment of our Savior, her precious baby boy, being born into the world.

But last Christmas Eve, that scripture came to life for me. As I sat up on the stage in Fellowship Hall with Allan and JJ preparing to embody the Holy family, everything changed. I will admit, my thoughts were at first focused on hoping I wouldn't trip on the costume made by my Mom many years ago for a friend with much longer legs. I hoped fervently that JJ would happily enjoy the experience. But as scripture was read and children progressively joined us up on stage, I felt this deep connection to Mary gazing in wonder at that first Christmas night. It was almost like I was seeing a vibrant quilt with each square showing a Christmas memory that has shaped my story and my faith. I saw the year it started to gently snow the moment the candlelight service ended, wishing all a Merry Christmas. I saw a Christmas pageant in which it got so hot in the sanctuary that the four-year-old sheep started stripping off their costumes one by one, causing great laughter from the congregation. I saw the Gatto and Salt families sitting down to dinner between services with my now brothers in law "playing discussing" who was going to get the choice piece of Carol Salt's potato casserole (if you know you know.) I saw my Mom leading the children each year to truly experience the Christmas story in a way that they would hold onto for a lifetime. I saw my son, happily cooing in Allan's arms, hope in the continued relationship that God extends to each of us. And in the center of the quilt, I saw the promise of God's love, giving his Son in the form of a baby to take away my sins...to take away all of our sins.

As we continue in this advent season, it can be so easy to focus on the busyness of tasks and to-do lists. I invite you to take this time to really sit in God's love, maybe enveloping yourself in your own Christmas quilt. Just as Mary took in the moment of all that happened that night, we can pause and treasure this love so deep and wide.

By Jaimie Salt

What confluence of stars  
Brought guidance to three kings?

What miracle of birth  
Gave Mary's future king?

How did these wisemen know  
That one transcendent child  
Would divide our time  
Between before and after?

Their path to Bethlehem  
Gave temporary wealth  
To Joseph's travelled family  
Who then escaped to Egypt, and  
Herod knew the danger  
The Christ would be for him,  
But he was too late and  
Killed those who were not him.

So thirty three years later  
The proof would be presented  
That Christ was born and  
Then would be ascended.

We now know that man  
Who left the twelve behind and  
Through the miracle of love  
He speaks as one Divine.

Inspired by the TMPC Tuesday Morning Men's Group

Advent is that time when we reflect and prepare for Jesus, who came as a tiny baby. But every year I wonder, how we are supposed to deal with our feelings of fear and anxiety as we live in a world that feels so unsure and tenuous, while simultaneously believing that God, in the form of a tiny baby, has the power to overcome the darkness? It just doesn't feel like a safe and dependable thing to place our trust in! And yet, we do. We trust that light really does overcome darkness. That love really does conquer hate. That the beauty of this amazing world, created and loved by our God, outweighs all of the ugly and evil things that we see. I want to believe this.

When our first child was headed to college, I kept wondering how I would let her go. How would I trust that she would be safe and make friends and be accepted. The day we were driving her to college my Mom texted me, "I love you. Be brave." I have held onto those words throughout so many moments since then. I hear God whisper them in my ear when I'm lying awake in the dark, filled with fear and worry. I think that Christmas reminds us of this very thing. When Jesus came, he says in so many words, "I love you. Be brave."

Advent reminds us that we are never left to handle these dark moments alone. That we are never expected to change the world all by ourselves. That evil does not win the day! And I know that because I trust in a God who is merciful and loving, even as he is also mysterious and hard to grasp. I love Advent. I love the waiting, watching, and wanting of Christ. I love the way it reminds us of just how much God is willing to do for us, how much he is willing to understand us, and how much he loves us. We need this reminder. William Willimon says this:

*Into our troubled world, into our dark and disordered lives, a Savior has come. Because we, in our sin, could not hope to come to God, God in Christ has come to us, embracing us, redeeming us, claiming us as his own. The advent of Christ is God's invading of our world.*

During Advent we take time to prepare for this invading of our hearts, our lives, our world, by the one who loved us enough to not only invade, but stay. To whisper in our ear, "I love you. Be brave."

Peace and love,

Rev. Dawn Alpaugh

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

Paul and I met on a blind date and I will never forget the moment when I walked into Yokohama's Japanese restaurant and saw his big smile looking at me across the room. He was wearing a navy blue button down and jeans and in that moment, time stopped. There was no place else I'd rather be. The evening continued in the same manner with endless conversation and laughter. Though it was the very start of our journey; the time of butterflies and romance, it was the beginning of love and love is when there is no place else you'd rather be.

Love sits next to the person after surgery, love stays up all night through the stomach virus, love cheers too loud at the home run and love stares at the newborn in awe all night long.

From the heavenly throne, God gazes on us with that same love, looking longingly at us, cheering when we succeed, and staying close when we are hurt. When God sent Jesus to be with us, it was because God wanted us to see and feel in human flesh what love feels like and what love looks like. It's often said that having a child is like having your heart walk around outside your body, but when you understand the love of God, it is the experience of finally having love fully and completely inside of your body.

In those early days of my relationship, there was no place I'd rather be than with Paul, but in every day, there is no place God would rather be than with you. It's just what love does.

By Stephanie Templin Ashford