



A collective reflection on Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love

Advent: Echoes of Hope is a heartfelt and captivating devotional created through the collaborative efforts of a diverse community of Heartlanders. With this unique devotional, we aim to inspire reflection on the impact of Jesus' birth on our ordinary everyday lives.

Echoes explores four key themes associated with Advent, including hope, peace, joy, and love. Each day's reflection delves into the richness of these themes, examining their relevance and significance in everyday life. The devotional guides readers toward a deeper understanding of the season's spiritual significance through scripture readings, vivid storytelling, and thoughtful meditations.

Thank you to The Journey team of writers for drawing us into the discovery of Jesus this season and giving us a pathway to practice following him well. Working with you and amplifying your gifts is an honor and a privilege.

May these reflections deepen your spiritual journey, friends.

Sincerely,
The Journey Team

Thank you to our team of writers for drawing us into the discovery of Jesus this season and giving us a pathway to practice following him well. Working with you and amplifying your gifts is an honor and a privilege.

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What Is Advent?

The word "Advent" means "coming" or "arrival," emphasizing the anticipation and preparation for the arrival of Jesus.

The season of Advent is divided into four weeks, leading up to the celebration of Christmas, which commemorates the birth of Jesus. It is often marked as a time of reflection and joyful expectation.

Each week leading up to Jesus' arrival focuses on various themes, often represented by the lighting of Advent candles. The four candles typically symbolize hope, peace, joy, and love. An additional candle is lit each week, signifying the progressive anticipation and readiness for Christ's coming.

Advent serves as a period of spiritual reflection, communal gathering, and preparation for the true meaning of Christmas. It prompts believers to examine their hearts, repent of their sins, and align their lives with the teachings of Jesus. It is a time of renewing faith, hope, and love and fostering a sense of unity and community among believers as we seek to place Jesus first in our everyday.

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December 1, 2024
Hope and Expectation
By Shelly Huston

Isaiah 7:14, Psalm 130:5

God keeps his promises; he is faithful to his people to come among them. In Isaiah 7:14, we see an ancient prophecy and promise of God spoken: Immanuel, "God is with us."

His presence was given during a time of great battle. The same Spirit of God inspires our reflection of hope across all of time. In the days of Isaiah, during the days Jesus walked the earth, and in our lives today, God is with us.

I know he keeps his promises because I have received them. He is faithful to his people. I have heard your stories to confirm that. He still comes among us; we have felt his presence. God is with us.

My heart was full of hope. While we stood in a place of waiting, God was with us. My family and I were full of hope as we waited for the judge to make the most significant decision of our lives. It seemed like I'd been in a place of waiting my entire life. Every time I thought I might be with child, my heart secretly yearned for the miracle of life. And yet, my whole being waited for the Lord, and in his word, I quietly held on to hope.

I remember the day I humbly said to God, "If you ever know anyone in trouble or in need of help, think of us." We wanted to share our lives with a child who would experience unconditional love. Through birth, marriage, adoption, or all three, I held on to hope as my whole being waited for the Lord.

Years later, the call came, the invitation of a lifetime. Would we consider becoming parents by adopting an unborn baby? What a remarkable God we have; he is faithful to his promises! On that day, the judge came from his chambers and blessed us with a seal of adoption. It was an adventure we took together, learning to trust that God was with us in the storm and in the calm. He rescued us all in one fell swoop.

I'm so thankful we trusted him in the waiting. I am grateful for each time we held our breath in hopeful, eager anticipation. As we begin this season of Advent, what are you hoping for in God's presence?

Prayer for Today

We offer our hearts to you, God. Renew us with a fresh sense of hope and expectation. We seek you. We trust you. We put our hope in you. We long for a fresh awareness of you moving in our lives today. We commit to doing what you've called us to do. We trust you in the waiting and stand grounded in your love.

December 2, 2024

Hope in the Midst

By Anonymous

Isaiah 40:30-31

Hope necessarily means waiting. I hate waiting. Sometimes, while waiting, I try distracting myself or finding something “useful to do” to soften the drag (like checking my email for the Journey of the week!). This practice may soothe the “wait pangs,” but it ultimately distracts from the object of my hope. Whether it’s waiting my turn at the DMV or in the Space Mountain line at Disneyland, I will lose focus on what I’m hoping to do when I get to the front. I think our hearts are built to hope. When you notice the urge to distract yourself, pay attention to what your hope says about your situation. In my own life, I have hoped for people to defeat the urge to take their own lives, to survive a grim diagnosis, as well as to defeat their demons of alcoholism, psychosis, and other extreme problems.

Before this chapter of Isaiah, the Hebrew people lost their national independence (to Assyria) and their freedom (captives at Babylon). Many of their best warriors (think fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers) were likely killed in the related battles. When reading the phrase “young men” in the Scripture here, these may be the boys (and girls) who lost their parents to captivity or death. Imagine how this trauma profoundly threatened their ability to remain connected and secure with each other. They were refugees in a foreign land. Not only was this a huge disappointment in their political situation, but imagine how devastating it was for their families.

While reading the book of Isaiah from start to finish, you might notice a pretty stark change in tone in Chapter 40. Isaiah is bringing a message of hope and encouragement to the Hebrew people. I know sometimes I am waiting....waiting....and waiting for something encouraging, but then I go to bed feeling disappointment. This message from Isaiah resuscitates my hope!

Hope is powerful. Hope in the Lord is MORE powerful. This 2024 Advent season, I believe many of us are nervous with worries of political divisiveness, family conflict, and uncertainty about our own finances or careers, etc. Let the guidance of this passage wash over you and whatever you are hoping for. See if you can access hope not for an outcome but for God’s comfort, nearness, and relief in the way he can provide. Take a minute to ask God to increase your hope. Slow down (maybe you are reading this while in line!) and note the areas that God may hope to renew in you now. Notice where your hope is going, and let him renew it now.

Prayer for Toay

Jesus, thank you for being the ultimate hope. Help us form deeper hope in you. Help us know how to be believers in your power. Help us see the people in our lives who need us to bring them your comfort as ambassadors of your hope, even in our own fatigue, confusion, and disappointment. We cannot comfort others without allowing your comfort into our consciousness. Please renew our hearts with your hope today.

December 3, 2024

When the Time Is Just Right

By Craig Cheney

Galatians 4:4-5

Homemade Christmas delicacies and favorite family recipes are part of what makes this season so delightful and distinctive. My family had a few holiday candies that we were excited to anticipate eating and sharing in creating. Fluffy white divinity, semi-hard creamy caramels, and melt-in-your-mouth chocolate fudge were three I remember so well. In making each of these scrumptious items, I learned about "when the time is just right." The special cooking thermometer was a vital tool for these creations. I'm told the exact temperature to reach and hold before taking the next step to stir, add ingredients, take off the heat, or pour into the pan. The cooking thermometer told us "when the time is just right," and the process was ready for the next steps toward tasty completion.

Don't you wish you had a cooking thermometer that would tell you right when God was going to act, to show his power, to end your waiting, to restore, renew, reconcile your situation, and satisfy your hope in him? As a child I remember how hard it was to wait for the right time to take the next step toward finishing and eating that holiday delight. I hoped it would happen now, sooner, quicker, with less waiting and less delay. I had to learn that it would only happen "when the time is just right."

God's masterful plans and provisions are revealed "when the time is just right." As expressed in Galatians 4:4-5, "...God sent His Son (Jesus), born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship/full family status." When? "...when the set time had fully come." Our hope is what keeps God - his faithfulness and promise-keeping character - in the center of our waiting for what we need or desire from him until "the time is just right." Our hope is in you, God.

Prayer for Today

God, strengthen my hope in you. Remind me of all the ways you have faithfully acted to intervene, provide, protect, or restore when your set time for me had fully come. Thank you for your great faithfulness toward me. Help me trust you in hope for your right timing in the situations, needs, relationships, and desires I have in this season of my life. In faith, my hope is in you, my God. My hope is in your name...Father, Son and Spirit.

December 4, 2024
A Hope for All of Us
By Lisa Zulke

Colossians 1:27

If you're anything like me, your mind and spirit ebb and flow with the rise and fall of hope. Hope for a good day, a new opportunity, a restored relationship.

When my hope ebbs, receding far from where I find myself, I head outside to the forest. A walk among the trees unravels the twisting thoughts in my mind and clears my sight. I begin to breathe deeply. I begin to notice my surroundings. As my eyes and ears tune in to what is happening in that present moment, my spirit senses Jesus' presence with me, too.

When I tune in to Jesus in me, his Spirit with me, my concerns rise above my situation and needs, expanding to encompass the lives of those intersecting my path. I cease my worrying. My mind stops writing stories that aren't really there. I often begin to pray.

I pray that hope comes for a friend to find their faith and for a family member to experience the hope of Jesus. I pray for a dear one to be healed, for a heart to be softened. The incredible promise in this verse is for literally everyone - for you and me, for our dearest people, and for the hardest ones we try to avoid. This hope for the Gentiles means that ALL of us have access to the riches and glory of Christ in us.

As my gaze this autumn has fallen on the many-colored leaves, the downed branches, the young saplings, and the mighty oaks soaring to the sky, I am reminded that we are all connected. This ecosystem we move in has the potential to help us all thrive.

With the power of Jesus in me, the Holy Spirit, I can be a hope bringer to ALL who cross my path. With that assurance, I can't NOT share hope.

What does Jesus in me mean in my everyday coming and going? What does being a hope-bringer look like in your life?

Prayer for Today

Jesus, thank you for the gift of your Spirit with us. May your message of redemption, hope, and glory take deep root in my soul. May I be so filled in my time with you that your hope and strength radiate from me to those around me. Give me the eyes, ears and heart to be a hope bringer to ALL people.

December 5, 2024

Building Trust through Hope

By Molly Fisher

Romans 15:13 (TPT)

Hope is the driver for my faith and walk with Jesus. I love the version of Romans 15:13 that calls God, “the fountain of hope.” What a fantastic word picture of constantly flowing, ever available hope to fill us with joy and peace as we trust in a God that is always available.

Trust does not come naturally to me because I am a bit of a control freak. I have way too much confidence in myself and my abilities, and I come face to face with my control issues all the time because life makes it clear that I control very little. I struggle to come up with an example because it’s a part of almost every day. God is patient and good though. Whenever I have to recognize that something is out of my control and turn it over to God in prayer, he shows up. This builds up both my trust and my hope. When situations and people are difficult and I am sucked into frustration, anger, or grief, what pulls me out is hope.

Hope develops trust, and trust develops hope; joy and peace are often comforting by-products. Our circumstances change all the time. Comfort won’t last, but neither will hardship or sorrow with an eye toward hope in the future.

I’m better at this today than I used to be. I trust God more from experience, and I generally have more peace about what I don’t control. One of these days, I hope that turning to God is my first reaction all the time. Until then, I can look back over the years and see the fingerprints of God on so many moments of my life. Those moments give me hope for the future - not guarantees that everything will go according to (my) plan, but trust because of the echoes of hope from the past. Hope is powerful!

Prayer for Today

God, help me tap into you as a fountain of hope. May I be someone that trusts in the power of the Holy Spirit and allows your peace and joy to fill me up to overflowing. Help me give to you my hurts, my frustrations, and the things that overwhelm me that often accompany this time of year. Instead, let my soul remember the fulfillment of your promises this Advent season - and make them my own. Help me surround myself with you “until I radiate hope!”

December 6, 2024

A Source of Hope

By Laura Gulley

Psalm 62:5-6

With Christmas just around the corner, I've been reflecting a lot on what it means to truly have hope. This season, we're surrounded by so much that's temporary - gifts that fade, decorations that come down, even the festive cheer that seems to leave when the new year starts. Sometimes it feels like my hope is fragile, tied to fleeting moments and things that don't last. But as I read Psalm 62:5-6 this Christmas, I'm reminded that there's a deeper, more lasting hope I can hold onto - one that doesn't depend on how the season unfolds or what I get or don't get.

"Find rest, O my soul, in God alone," the psalmist says. Christmas can feel like a season of constant motion - shopping, wrapping, cooking - and it's easy to get caught up in the hustle. But this verse is calling me to pause and remember that my true hope doesn't come from the things I can check off a list. It comes from God alone. The hope of Christmas - the hope that was born in a manger - isn't fleeting. It's anchored in the unchanging love and faithfulness of God.

"He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken." This year, I've realized more than ever how much I need that steady foundation. The world might feel uncertain, and life's challenges don't take a break for the holidays, but God's promises don't change. Amid all the seasonal distractions, I need this truth more than ever: God's hope is constant.

As I celebrate this Christmas, I'm reminded that the greatest gift I can receive isn't something wrapped in paper; it's the unchanging hope that God has already given in the birth of Jesus. I want to remember that my soul can rest in this hope in all the holiday chaos. The hope of Christ is not only for this season but for every season of life, no matter what changes around me.

Prayer for Today

God, thank you for your unwavering, steadfast, love. Thank you for being our rock in a world that is always changing. Thank you for your unchanging promises. Help me to pause even in the midst of chaos and remember that my strength, my peace, and my hope don't come from worldly things, but rather come from you.

December 7, 2024

Supernatural Hope

By Jeanine Frost

Luke 1:26-38

God sent his angel Gabriel to Mary, saying, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled by his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

Let's be honest. If an angel came to me on behalf of God, I would be troubled! I would also be fearful that what is coming next might be punishment. If God had found favor in me, that would be a nice way of saying, "I have pity on you my sweet child."

Let me explain how I experience the supernatural. For as long as I can remember, and before I was following Jesus, I would get these ideas. They originated in my mind and landed in my gut (somewhat like cement). They could come from a dream that woke me up in the middle of the night, a nudge, or a creative swirl.

I would then have conversations (in my mind) with the people involved or even create scenarios and consider all the twists and turns that might happen on this journey. As a believer, this is still true. But I know now the supernatural is the Holy Spirit speaking to me.

Many years ago, I was awakened in the middle of the night. I was asked to reconcile with a family member. The circumstances were impossible! The logistics were a nightmare, my worst nightmare! I played out all the scenarios, conversations, outcomes, and logistics for the following weeks. I couldn't sleep, anxiety was at its worst, and other relationships seemed to be falling apart. When I asked for time off from work, I was denied and was instead let go.

In the midst of hardship, with shaky knees, I remained confident that this nudge was from God through his Spirit, and I proceeded to walk it out. It was not easy, but Jesus was in it. Mary's response strengthened me then, as it does today. *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."*

Is there a current nudge, dream, or thought in your life? Can you share it with a believer, maybe someone further along on their faith journey than you are?

Prayer for Today

God, I pray that we will be obedient to your word, awakened to your presence, and bold in following through on what you ask of us. You never ask us because you think we are qualified, competent, or experienced. You ask us because you are.

December 8, 2024

The Peace of Jesus

By Stephanie Morrill

Colossians 3:15

If you were to ask me when I feel peace in my life, I would talk to you about evenings when my three kids don't have three different activities they need to be taken to. Or when my puppy lies at my feet while I work instead of sneaking off on a seek-and-destroy mission. Or about times when I make a plan, and everything happens exactly as I expect. When I use these measuring sticks, however, I hardly ever experience peace because I've made peace about myself, my feelings, and my circumstances.

Colossians 3:15 begins, "And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts." The peace that comes from Christ. Not the peace that comes from a chill puppy or a clear calendar. This isn't the flimsy kind of peace that depends on circumstances. Rather, this peace is always available - not from something I did, but because of who Jesus is.

But our participation matters. Notice the verse says, "And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts." Let the peace in, meaning we get a choice. Yet so often, I choose the opposite. That sounds a little silly when I write it down - why would I not choose the peace of Jesus?

Recently, I was in conflict with someone who had (unintentionally) hurt me. I clung to my anger with this person. Whenever I knew I was going to be around them, I lay awake at night and stressed about spending time together. I often left our times together with more anger and hurt feelings. Until one day, I realized I didn't have to hold onto those feelings like they were a prize. Yes, I might frequently experience hurt or anger around them; some relationships are complicated like that. But I didn't have to cuddle those feelings close. I could feel them and then express my feelings and frustrations to God. In doing so, I could make room for the peace of Christ. Not because the situation had changed but because the peace of belonging to him is more significant than any circumstance I find myself in.

Prayer for Today

God, thank you that the peace you offer us is so much greater than the peace we create on our own. Help us to let go of the stress, anxiety, and fear that we often clutch close; instead, let us invite your peace to rule in our hearts.

December 9, 2024

God Is Closer Than You Think

By Brad Herndon

Matthew 1:23, Isaiah 7:14

When Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth, he uses this ancient Hebrew word that is rich with meaning—Immanuel. The word takes us back to a promise God made 700 years before through the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Immanuel literally means "the with-us God." He is not just the God who is above us. He is not just the God who thinks about us. He is the with-us God.

That's the whole message and power of Christmas—that no matter who you are, no matter where you are, no matter what you face, God is closer than you think.

If there's a danger at Christmas, it's that the message and power of Christmas has lost its effect on us. We grow too familiar with it, and we forget how scandalous a claim it is that God stepped over the threshold of time and space to come into his own creation and live within it. The author of human history wrote himself into our story. The painter stepped into his own painting. As CS Lewis wrote, "Once in our world, a manger had something in it that was bigger than our whole world."

The gift of Immanuel doesn't just mean that God is with us; it means that God is with **you**.

As you read the story of Joseph and Mary, try to wonder what this was like for them. They were just a couple of young kids on their way to be married when their plans were interrupted, and the only explanation they could give people was that it happened through the power of God's Holy Spirit. Think of the accusations and the gossip they endured. Think of their loneliness and rejection. Then a census was called that forced them to travel away from their home to a crowded town where young Mary would experience her first labor in the most difficult of circumstances.

How did they make it through all this? It was only by knowing the promise of Immanuel. They knew that the God who was with Adam and Eve in the garden, the God who was with the Israelites in the desert, Moses on the mountain, and Daniel in the lion's den—that God was with them, too.

And that God is with you, friends. This means there is no struggle, no situation, no season in your life that God is not with you. Whatever you may be facing this Christmas, hear this: If God could travel from the majesty of heaven to a mere manger, then there is no life that is too messy or messed up or mundane for him to show up in. God is with you.

Prayer for Today

God, thank you for coming near all those years ago, and for being a "with-us" God in every moment of every day. When we face seemingly impossible circumstances, help us sense your presence. Help us learn to trust that you've got us, and to turn toward you at the heights, and in the depths of our mess.

December 10, 2024

Peace for the Lowly

By Allison Antrim

Luke 1:46-55

When the teacher called me up, I walked to the front of my 8th grade drama class. I adjusted the blanket draped over my head and smoothed the front of my bathrobe. Then, I launched into my monologue. I pretended to be shocked and amazed at a sudden visit from an angel. I pondered aloud to my audience what this might mean. Then I quoted as much of Luke 1:46-55 as I could remember, breaking character halfway through when the blanket slipped off my head, and I had to put it back on. Thus ended my first and only public performance as Mary, mother of Jesus.

I don't remember the specifics of the monologue assignment, but I do remember that we could choose what character we wanted to be. I chose Mary with purpose. At the time, I was about the same age as she likely was when Gabriel appeared to her, and I was moved by her song recorded in Luke 1. Though she was a poor young woman, her world was rocked by an outrageous and challenging prophecy. Her response to the angel's message was filled with her knowledge of and love for God. Her words touched me so much (they still do) that I wanted others to experience her trust in God and peace in his plan.

Mary's song focuses on praising God in the present for what he has done in the past. She starts with herself, saying, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name" (v. 46-49). Then Mary looks back at Israel's history, how God helped the humble and hungry instead of the proud and rich. Mary is at peace and full of praise despite the earth-shattering news she has just received about how she will carry, give birth to, and raise the Messiah. We who follow Jesus have access to that same peace, even in our most profound need. He has been faithful in the past, and he will be faithful in the future.

Prayer for Today

Dear Lord, thank you for Mary and her love for you. Thank you for how her song reminds us to remember the ways you have provided for us in the past, especially when we've been poor and needy, so that we can have peace in the present. Let this echo of peace and praise follow us this Advent season as we celebrate your arrival.

December 11 Peace Bringers

By Ryan Heckman

Isaiah 61:1-2, 58:6, Luke 4:18-19

In high school, I had the rare opportunity to join a vertical caving team. Trips to explore and sometimes to help preserve caves, mainly in New Mexico, were the culmination of years of training, preparation, and teamwork. A caving team usually consists of four to six members to balance minimal impact with enough people to care for each other safely should something go wrong. Traveling to remote locations, rappelling deep underground, and encountering profound darkness and silence are part of the wonder of these adventures. They can also lead to feeling isolated and anxious. Allowing your mind to wander through everything that could go wrong is a good way to prepare when done in advance. When down in the cave, it's a good way to "thought spiral" towards anxiety and hopelessness.

When you are by yourself in a secluded chamber of a cave and lost in anxiety or literally stuck in a tight space, it is not your training that calms your fears or pulls you out. The echoes of your team coming from around the corner bring you back to a place of peace. They are the people you have relied on in the past to help you navigate tight spaces, and the sounds of their voices and movements bring you back to focus on the moment at hand.

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he read a passage from the prophet Isaiah to a gathering and ascribed it to himself. Each task in the passage that he came to do, he also calls us to do - tasks that restore wholeness and bring peace to others.

As I think about Jesus bringing peace into the world, I can't help but think about the people in my life who have brought peace to me, especially in the darkness. It's a coworker that has my back and tells me I made the right call. It's my wife encouraging me to be bold and step out in faith on a major life decision. It's my friend asking if he can pray for me when I didn't know I really needed it. And it's the Holy Spirit (when I listen) saying to not get worked up over that driver in rush hour traffic.

Prayer for Today

Thank you, God, for sending your Son into the world to bring us peace. Thank you for the people in my life who have followed his example and brought peace to me. Thank you for inviting me into your ministry of bringing peace to others. Help me look for those opportunities, listen when your spirit calls me to action, and respond in ways that honor you.

December 12, 2024

Peace on Earth

By DJ Toelle

Luke 2:1-7

As we enter the Advent season, we often hear the phrase "Peace on Earth," yet many of us find this time anything but peaceful. The hustle and bustle of holiday preparations, coupled with the demands of daily life, can leave us feeling overwhelmed. It's almost ironic that, in a time meant to celebrate tranquility and joy, many of us feel busier than ever.

Reflecting on Luke 2:1-7, we are reminded of Mary's journey - a journey that was far from serene. Imagine the uncertainty she faced: an unexpected pregnancy, societal judgment, and a daunting journey mandated by political decree. Her journey was anything but peaceful, much like our own lives can be during this season. Yet, within the narrative of Luke, amidst the chaos of travel and no place to sleep, there is a profound moment of peace - the birth of Jesus.

This stark contrast invites us to consider peace not as the absence of trouble but as something deeper. It suggests that peace can be found in the most unexpected places and moments, often when we pause to recognize it amidst life's chaos. Reread Luke 2:1-5 and then 2:6-7; there is a subtle shift from the tense and busy to a moment of stillness and awe. It's as if the world holds its breath to welcome the Prince of Peace.

So, where are you this Christmas season? Are you at peace? It's okay if your answer is no. Acknowledging our lack of peace can be the first step toward finding it. Scripture reminds us that peace is not passive but active. In the midst of our busiest moments, we can choose to seek peace, much like Mary did in her own journey.

Let us take inspiration from this Advent story, understanding that Jesus embodies peace as an active pursuit. May we find moments to pause, reflect, and embrace the peace that is offered to us, even when it feels elusive. This season, may we make peace a verb, an ongoing pursuit, allowing it to transform our hearts and lives.

Prayer for Today

God, I am bad at peace, yet you are the Prince of Peace. Every encounter with you teaches me more. Help me seek you, find you, and rest in you. For in you, I find the pieces of myself you long for me to find. In the midst of business, I pray for peace, for our world, for our nation, for our city, for my family, and for myself.

December 13, 2024

Learn from Me

By Laura Buchman

Matthew 11:28-30

Christmas holds some of my best childhood memories. I can still smell the hot cocoa boiling on the stove and the fresh baked cookies that my grandmother had ready upon our arrival. I remember the anticipation of Christmas Eve and its magical, carefree season. I loved the manger scenes on a snowy day and the candlelight services where we honored the birth of our Savior.

As a parent, I now enjoy helping create these magical memories with my boys. When they were little, everything was new and exciting. Last Christmas, however, I learned to experience Jesus's love, peace, and saving power in a different way. One of my boys was struggling. Badly. The winter break was long and emotional. I felt drained every day and questioned every decision I made as the support I was offering didn't seem to be doing a thing. Events that had once been the season's highlights felt stressful and exhausting. Instead of feeling the season's joy, I wanted it to end.

The thing is, God didn't rescue me from this season of struggle and pain despite my earnest pleas. I prayed for answers and changes, and God softly whispered to me, "Come to me, all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus came to carry the heavy burden for us. We aren't promised answers or circumstantial changes, but we are promised rest. As I shifted my focus from looking for solutions to finding rest in God, he gave me the strength and peace I needed to be with what was. I found that sometimes being present is all we can do and all that we need to do.

I pray that you will experience the rest that comes from Jesus in this Christmas season. May we let go of our burdens and entrust them to the one who is faithful to carry them all.

Prayer for Today

God, thank you for Jesus and the amazing gift of peace that he offers us. Thank you that you are in control and that you care deeply about every heavy burden we carry. Help us trust you with our pain and struggle, and help us experience the supernatural peace you offer in return. Help us experience the presence of Jesus in this Christmas season, sensing your love and peace above all else.

December 14, 2024
The Antidote to Fear

By Debbie Smith

Isaiah 9:6-7, John 14:27

When I read the biblical accounts of God and his followers, sometimes it can be challenging to put myself in the shoes (or sandals) of ancient peoples with nomadic or agrarian lifestyles so different from my own. Unlike Jacob, I can't fathom using a rock as a pillow. I love the metaphor of beating swords into plowshares, but I have no idea what a plowshare actually is. Sometimes I get hung up by the details when I try to connect with these stories of people whose ways are so unlike my ways.

However, when I look past customs and culture, I see we aren't so different regarding feelings, needs, hopes, and fears. God frequently exhorted his people not to fear since surely they were afraid sometimes, just as surely as I, too, am afraid sometimes. It seems the opposite of fear, maybe even the antidote, is hope. Abraham hoped for a son; Joseph held on to hope for rescue from captivity; Moses led through the wilderness toward the hope of the Promised Land; and the Jews hoped and prayed for a Messiah to rescue them from the rule of Rome.

Although we now live in the thrill of hope of the new covenant, with the revelation that our wonderful counselor is ushering in a new kingdom of everlasting peace, we still wait for the establishment of that kingdom. We continue to be beset by the troubles of this world, and fear can creep in even as we cling to hope.

When Jesus promised to leave us with a peace that is unlike the peace of this world, I'm reminded he also told us that we should expect to have troubles in this world. Like those who came before us, we can let hope arise even amid doubt and fear. Why? Because we know Jesus came not merely to topple Roman rule but to defeat darkness, death, and sin forever.

Prayer for Today

Dear Jesus, the world sometimes tells us, "Don't get your hopes up." But you tell us the opposite - DO get your hopes up! Please establish, anchor, and hold us in this hope. Help us fix our eyes on you, secure in the knowledge that a day is coming when every tear will be dried. The former things continue to pass away as your plan for us unfolds, leading us to those green pastures where one day we will live together forever as one family, united in your name.

December 15, 2024

Gratitude + Joy

By Anna McCracken

Psalm 100:1-2, 4

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name” (Psalm 100:1-2, 4 NIV).

Gratitude journals. If I’m being honest, a wave of anxiety comes over me as I hear those words. Maybe it’s because of my many failed attempts at “list 1,000 things you’re thankful for” challenges, or maybe it’s a quiet shame that inevitably sneaks in as I look at a list of incredible blessings in my life and still feel less than grateful. Shouldn’t a song of praise always be on my lips? After all God has brought me through, the kindness he has shown me, where is my joy? I think of David’s words in Psalm 42: “Why, my soul, are you so downcast? Why so disturbed within me?”

As we move through the Advent season, I imagine I’m not the only one experiencing this struggle. And I can’t help but wonder if the psalmist was familiar with these feelings himself. Psalm 100 calls for us to “shout FOR joy” and “give thanks to him,” an exhortation for when we are feeling joyful, yes, but perhaps even more so when we aren’t.

Many of us picture “entering his gates with thanksgiving” as a vibrant Sunday worship experience. But for me, it often looks way less exciting and a lot more somber - often simply sitting at my piano while my kids nap. Sometimes, I don’t have words to sing, so I play, hoping for his presence, desiring to be grateful even when my heart feels anything but. Yet, every time, God meets me there. Gradually, gratitude flows as I let the Prince of Peace soothe my heart. When I make space to remember who he is - the true, trustworthy, and only lasting source of joy - my heart can’t help but respond in praise.

Prayer for Today

Lord, whether we come into your presence today overflowing with joy or bringing a sacrifice of praise, remind each of our hearts where true joy is found. Help us make space for your Spirit to renew our joy this Advent season. Let us sing a new song as we remember the greatest gift of all, your Son, Jesus. For him, let our hearts sing with gratitude and joy.

December 16, 2024

Expectant Joy

By Brooke Hodnefield

Luke 1:26-38, John 19:25-27 (CSB)

I'm sure your day often starts as it always does, each day beginning the same. For me, the sound of our coffee machine is my alarm. It sounds like an airplane is landing in our home, but the smell of coffee draws me from bed to the blue chair in the corner of our kitchen. I like to start my day here, reading and reflecting with God.

We expect our days to go a certain way...maybe according to what your calendar tells you. Until it doesn't. Mary had a day such as this...a normal day. Until it wasn't. An angel visited Mary and spoke words that elicited both fear and confusion. A child to be born to an unwed virgin? Not only that, but he is to be Son of the Most High, Jesus. Mary's day took a turn in a completely unexpected way.

While you may not have had angels descend upon you recently, you've likely had your day start one way and then come to a screeching halt. I am often amazed (sometimes overwhelmed) by the number of zigs and zags in my day. Some good, some not so much. But what I love about Mary's response is that it demonstrates a simple yet deep faith.

"For nothing will be impossible with God." "See, I am the Lord's servant," said Mary. "May it happen to me as you have said."

Later in John, we see that this promise is fulfilled, as Jesus directly speaks to his mother who is kneeling near the cross. We know that the Lord's ways often feel unclear; there may be zigs and zags that are unexpected. But what we declare with great joy is that he is Emmanuel, God with us.

Prayer for Today

Father God, my days are often filled with the unexpected, the unplanned, and many distractions that take me away from you and the best version of myself. Thank you for being with me as I navigate this day. I celebrate your presence in my life and thank you for being near. While people and life may confuse and disappoint me, you are Emmanuel, God with us, God with me. You get me, you know me, and "it will happen to me as you have said." I believe in you and have great joy because I can trust you with my whole heart.

December 17, 2024

Experiencing God

By Marnie K. Vasquez

Isaiah 12:2-6, James 1:2-4

As I turned to the last entry of my life's chapter, I read...

I understand stress well. I've battled it my whole life. Through counselors, prayer, and Bible plans, I've persevered. Today, I can detect stress early and know how to adjust and overcome it.

This last event was different. The familiar stress signs I experienced made me think, "Here we go again; I know what to do." But nothing worked.

As the event outcome approached, my stress rose. I paced, locked myself in my room, and buried myself in bed. I woke up during the night, recognizing I wasn't ready to face what Jesus had in store. I needed more time, so I went back to sleep.

The next morning, I woke early, still not ready. Eventually, I got up, and thought, "Okay, let's rip this bandaid off and see what Jesus has waiting."

I whispered to my husband, "It happened. What we hoped for happened." He silently raised his fist in celebration, and we started our morning in disbelief, joy, and hope for the future.

Throughout that day and the days following, I was on cloud nine. If a mountaintop were nearby, I would've shouted, "Look at what God did! He did this; there's no other explanation!"

My family said, "Mom, seriously, why were you so stressed? We would've been okay no matter the outcome." I quickly realized how monumental this event was to me and blurted out, "I'm not sure if this was stress. My faith would have been absolutely shaken if the outcome had been different."

And as I reflect on this, I know two things to be the truth:

- 1) My faith was tested and refined. This event was about my faith, which is my identity. Who I am is interwoven with Christ, and my life is built on him. I realized that as the world attempts to bring him down, I feel it now, too. That's significant.
- 2) I felt Christ move - today, in this modern world! Witnessing this firsthand was incredible. This was a big, undeniable event. Christ is among us working today! I now understand the adrenaline and excitement of those in the Bible who experienced God firsthand. Incredible.

Prayer for Today

Dear Jesus, thank you for your constant love and work in our lives. Open our eyes to see and feel your greatness around us. Help strengthen our endurance and find joy amid life. As we move through Advent, help us grow closer to you.

December 18, 2024
Joy and Quiet Nudges
By Michelle Pemberton

Luke 2:8-20

On a cold winter evening, I got a call from my neighbors asking for help. A mama sheep was distressed; she needed help bringing her babies into the world. This mama did not look like the white fluffy sheep in kids' books. She was dark brown, smelly, and dirty. Gail and Tom coached me; before you know it, I was helping deliver her three babies and cleaned and warmed them up. Seeing these cute little lambs with such long legs enter this world was amazing. I learned that night that being a shepherd is physical, dirty, and demanding work.

The Israelites classified shepherds as an unclean profession with low social and economic status. I love that God sent an angel to lowly shepherds to tell them that the Savior of the world was being born and said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will bring great joy for all the people." The angel invited the shepherds to go and meet the baby Messiah. I loved how the shepherds responded to this invitation with joy.

They jumped into action, saying, "Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about it. They hurried to the village." This wasn't a simple invitation to respond to because they had to get all the sheep moving, which isn't an easy task. When they found Mary, Joseph, and the baby, Jesus, they were so excited and from this day forward, they told everyone about it, "glorifying and praising God for everything they had seen and heard." They pursued this invitation to joy. Their joy inspired and amazed others, including Mary!

Oh, how I would love it if an angel came to me and invited me to joy all day, every day, but that is not how it works for me. Instead, the Holy Spirit invites me to joy through quiet nudges. Here are some joy invitations I have heard and seen:

- A family member pops into my mind, and I am grateful for their presence in my life. I am nudged to text them to tell them what they mean to me.
- When the house is quiet in the evening, I am nudged to sit by the tree and write to God about my thoughts and feelings about the day.
- As I rush through Target, a child makes eye contact with me. The nudge is to smile and connect with her and her mom.

Prayer

God, we thank you for sending us your son, Jesus. Thank you for being a God who is speaking all of the time. In the busyness of this season, help us hear and see your joy invitations around us all the time. Help us be like the shepherds and listen to and act on these invitations/nudges to joy! Then, remind us to share with others the joy we have experienced! Amen.

December 19, 2024

Finding Joy in the Midst of Disappointment

By Marci Gibbens

Matthew 2:1-12

I am a flexibly inflexible person: a person who finds joy in planning but not so much joy in implementing because it is in the execution of those plans that everything can go awry.

As a teacher, I must be flexible every hour of the day. I can never predict exactly how my students will act or react to what I say or do. To combat this inevitable unpredictability, I plan for a variety of outcomes. However, I have found that often, the most rewarding days are the days when my plans fail. When my students and I venture outside a specified discussion or activity, we find ourselves exploring topics directly relevant to their lives outside of school; consequently, their engagement in their learning increases.

The wise men expected to find Jesus, the King of the Jews, in an earthly palace, but they were shocked to discover that the young boy whose significance was marked by a glorious star was living in a lowly carpenter's house in Bethlehem. Recognizing that he was the eternal King, the wise men adjusted their expectations, worshiped him, and gave him valuable gifts. They experienced true joy in the form of praising Jesus, the Son of God.

Life is full of dashed dreams and hopeless disappointment. Whether it is in our professional or personal lives, Christians are not immune from suffering. In fact, in James 1:2-3, we are encouraged to "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."

God works through our disappointments and doubts, helping us adjust our levels of contentment and find joy in sharing his good work in our lives with others. In the last 20 years, chronic pain has forced me to alter my leisure and occupational activities considerably. As each new pain and syndrome appeared, I was angry at God for allowing such physical hardships to enter my life. But now I see that he was shaping my inflexibility into flexibility and showing me how to empathize with others who also suffer from pain.

Prayer

God, we are so thankful that your plan for our lives is perfect. Help us to recognize that true joy can be found in praising you—our Lord, Savior, and Jesus Christ—in all circumstances, even the most challenging ones (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Strengthen us as we support others through their hardships and point them to you. Amen.

December 20, 2024
The Wait is Over

By Aiden Turner

Luke 1:39-45, 56

As a little boy, I was so eager for the holidays to come. I loved the snow! We had two whole weeks off school, and the season was so magical and full of joy. As I grew up, that joy faded; the magic seemed to disappear. Then one December, I lost a family member I had really looked up to. So, for years since then, I have let the holidays come and go and haven't experienced the joy of the season brings.

I read this passage in Luke, and it's making me shift my thoughts about why I celebrate the Advent season. Reflecting on myself, I notice that the child-like joy they discuss in this passage is not the same joy I currently experience.

This year, a goal of mine is to find the true reason to celebrate. To remember that Advent is about God giving humanity a Savior and celebrating that the wait is over. Instead of taking joy in the things of this world - gifts, parties, food - I can take joy in knowing that God had me and you in mind when delivering us the only gift we truly need, Jesus. Knowing that Jesus is in our midst, we can experience a joy like that in Luke 1:41: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped inside her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit."

I am that child leaping when I see Jesus with me.

Prayer

God, thank you for the gift of joy. Lord, as we go through this season of Advent, I pray that you will revitalize our joy. Help us not just go through the motions of the holidays. I ask you to help us remember the true reason for Advent. As the Holy Spirit fills us, we create a ripple effect. Lord, thank you for keeping me in your heart when delivering your one and only Son. Jesus, thank you for your sacrifice. With every bone of my body, I will praise you. Thank you.

December 21, 2024
Presence is Joy

By Sarah Hahs

Luke 1:46-56, Exodus 15:21, 1 Samuel 2:1-10

"There is a place in you...that is the eternal place within you. The more we visit there, the more we are touched and fused with the limitless kindness and affection of the divine...If we can inhabit that reflex of divine presence, then compassion will flow naturally from us." -John O'Donohue

John O'Donohue, the Irish poet and philosopher, was asked about prayer. In his response, he talks about the importance of recognizing the presence of God; in doing so, we will experience joy. He emphasizes that joy is a deep, abiding presence rather than just fleeting happiness.

All the passages we read today are songs lifted to God, thanking him for his presence - an overflow of joy so deep that you are left with no other response than to sing to the heavens. I'm not saying those moments happen every day. But I have had moments where the overflow of joy was so great that the moment went from feeling ordinary to feeling sacred.

I think Christmas time offers us many opportunities to experience that sacred-making joy due to its traditions, twinkling lights, and childlike wonder. But it also grants us the opportunity to remember God's presence and the gift that Jesus' presence to this world means for us. He is joy personified. He is the embodiment of God's deep and abiding presence with us.

There is an overwhelming joy that comes from those moments when you recognize "divine presence." It's Christmas day for me, but it's not in the presents and melee. It is the moment in the afternoon when everyone is lying next to one another, watching a movie and laughing together - no cell phones, interruptions, just presence. That joy is reflected in the faces of my family, illuminated by the faint glow of candles as we sing "Silent Night" at our Christmas service. God is there in those moments; a divine presence gives me a sense of deep, overwhelming joy.

Prayer

Father God, thank you for your deep and abiding presence in our lives. I pray that we get the chance to experience the overwhelming joy that your presence brings. Thank you for the ordinary moments that are made sacred just by our recognition of your being in them with us. Thank you for your Son, Jesus, and for sending him so that we may experience divine presence with you. Continue to give us your presence daily so that we may experience overwhelming joy as we continue to seek you in this season. Amen.

December 22, 2024

Gift-giving Love

By Craig Cheney

John 10:10, Mark 10:45, 2 Corinthians 9:15

"Love...better than I ever dreamed of."

"Love" in almost every language includes some form of gift-giving. Those gifts may be tangible, colorful, and costly, or they may be simple and plain. They may be intangible, like time, thoughtful listening, a shared experience, or recognition. Regardless, the giving of a gift communicates some form or measure of love the gift-giver has for the gift recipient.

Does it surprise you that God's love for you is expressed in his gift-giving to you? In fact, the Bible is full of stories of God's love experienced by people through his gifts to them. We, as people, long to be loved and to love. We seek it, mark it, act on it, and develop it; gift-giving is one of the reinforcing love actions we take.

Jesus' birth, a gift from God to every human being, is the ultimate standard of loving gift-giving. Our celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas and all the associated gift-giving is a constant pointer to the supreme lover of people and gift-giver himself. None of us, with the best of our love-expressing gift-giving, could have possibly imagined a more selfless, sacrificial, profound, or magnanimous gift than the birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This love gift, Jesus, touches every aspect of our human experience, range of needs, and deepest desires. As these Scriptures express, *"I came so that they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed possible"* (John 10:10, Message). *"For even the Son of Man (Jesus) did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45).

Gift-giving in this season is sourced in the very love of God for you, as demonstrated in Jesus. And God's kind of love is better than you ever dreamed possible. As you get to know him and know him better, his gift of love to you will grow increasingly amazing, intimate, and awe-inspiring. God really loves you! *"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift"* (2 Corinthians 9:15).

Prayer

Thank you, God, for your extravagant gift of Jesus. The distractions, expectations, and activities of this season can rob me of my enjoyment of you. Restore my heart with a daily filling of your love. Jesus, as the greatest gift in my life, help me know, feel, and be shaped by your presence and love. Thank you, Jesus, for loving me so fully...so much better than I could have ever dreamed possible. Amen.

December 23, 2024

Mess and Majesty

By Dan Jacobsen

Luke 2:4-7

So much about Christmas is a paradox: quality time with my family requires I work hard to host the celebration. The busiest time of year is also supposed to be the most peaceful. In my fight against consumerism, I also want to give my kids an appropriate amount of gifts to represent God's lavish love for us in Jesus. If I'm honest, the push and pull of the worldly and the holy feel out of place.

Then my thoughts go to Mary and her experience that first Christmas night. God promised her a son, but he never mentioned the census that would force her to travel so far. This child's nature was divine, but his nursery was a dungeon. And even Mary's company that night isn't quite what we would describe as the ideal visitors. Instead of family, she is cheered on by shepherds who had just gotten off their shift, and they probably smelled like it, too.

Not much in that first Noel was noble. And that's precisely why the birth of Jesus brings me such joy and hope. He came for the uncouth, unworthy, and unclean! The restoring and redeeming Savior of the world came to the lowest place on earth so that nobody would feel forgotten or overlooked. What a miracle that God would forfeit the comforts of his royalty and accept the clothing of the ordinary so that we all might know he is a King for each one of us.

Prayer

God, may the sacrifice you made never cease to cause me wonder. That you gave up so much to enter our world in the way you did causes our hearts to stand in awe of your grace. Find in me the places of ignorance and ignobility, and reign above all that I am. May the whole of my mess and the whole of your majesty meet in the profound power of your love. Amen.

December 24, 2024
Good News to Share

By Dan Jacobsen

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas is often an opportunity for us to measure our maturity. Immature children perceive Christmas to be all about what they get. As we grow and our perspectives change, the maturing person recognizes it's better to give than receive, so we perceive Christmas to be all about what we give. But there's yet another layer to all this. The most mature among us recognize Christmas as a message of good news we get to share.

The good news of Jesus's birth is shared three times in the Nativity story. The first is when the angels burst onto the scene and terrified the poor shepherds. But when they heard the news and received it, they went and found the child because good news **always** moves people! And when they found the child, they became the second group to share the message they'd heard - that a child born today was the Savior of the World!

The third retelling isn't as apparent, but it's there if you know where to look for it. See, the shepherds' news made Mary's mind wander. For years, she wondered not just at what they said but how they said it. It was as if God had really blared the announcement across the evening sky. This stayed with her, deep in her spirit, until one day, she sat down with Luke, who had a pen and paper at hand. She told him what amazement came to her heart when the shepherds shared the good news of Jesus with the one who had brought Jesus into the world.

Hope comes to each of us as we receive the good news. Sometimes, it takes but a second for us to share it, and other times it takes years. But the good news is a wellspring of hope for all who know that born this day, in the city of David, is a Savior, Christ the Lord!

Prayer

God, what news! Your promises stand. and your Word is true. Thank you for the ways in which good news has rippled through the world, finding each of our hearts at just the right moment to wake us up to new life. In this season may our lives join the chain of messengers who bring good news to those around us. Amen.

December 25, 2024

The God Who Chose to Walk with Us

By Molly Fisher

John 3:16 (TPT)

John 3:16 (TPT): "For here is the way God loved the world - He gave His only, unique Son as a gift. So now everyone who believes in Him will never perish but experience everlasting life."

God proved He loved the world by giving his Son.

Once in a while, I read or hear something that really sticks with me. A few years ago, I read a devotional that now comes to mind every Christmas season: that even though there was no room at the inn, God came anyway. God's coming was not dependent on anyone being ready; clearly, few were. The inn was where Mary and Joseph hoped to be, but there was no room. God came anyway! Even when circumstances did not seem ideal, God became one of us - human - and walked the earth with us. "...they will call Him Immanuel, which means God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

If your life, heart, and mind represent the inn, is there room for Jesus? How exhausted are you today after all the busyness of preparing for Christmas? Is there a space for Jesus to enter? Can we find our way back to the stable in the dark and enter into the humility, simplicity, and wonder of how God came to us? Can we allow ourselves to discover where God is?

Because God came anyway, today - Christmas - and always, he can be born into our lives moment by moment, breath by breath. He came, he is here, and we can find him when we seek him.

This day, Christmas Day is because God loves us - because God loves you! It takes stepping out of the busyness and chaos and into the quiet to find Him, but he is there! All that is required of us is to seek God, his love, his peace, his strength. Cast your fears and anxiety on Jesus, and quit carrying them around. Christmas reminds us just how far Jesus will go to meet us where we are.

Prayer

God, thank you for loving us so much that you sent your Son. Jesus, thank you for coming! May this day be a reminder of the intensity of your love for me. Help me make time to find you in the simplicity of the stable, away from all the trappings of things that are less important but end up being more consuming. Thank you that this day is a reminder that you are Immanuel - God with us. Amen.

December 26, 2024
Love Like Grandma Clara
By Kathryn Marr

1 John 4:19, 1 Thessalonians 1:8

As a little girl (before the days of call waiting), reaching my Grandma Clara on the phone was nearly impossible, especially around Christmas. She was always talking to someone - checking on the sick, asking about travels, and bringing joy to her friends and family.

She couldn't get out much, but she took it upon herself to love people however she could. She sent cards. She donated to people in need, even though she couldn't afford to. She stopped and prayed with everyone about even the smallest things. She was love. And she wasn't afraid to share where that love came from.

1 John 4:19 says, "We love because he first loved us."

One of the things that really stands out about this verse is the word "first." Jesus loved us first before we even came into existence. What an incredible idea to think about. He loved us first, despite all the ways he knew we would mess up, all the things he knew we'd do wrong. Jesus modeled how we should love others.

What does that kind of love look like? Well, let's reflect on what we know about God's love from the Bible. His love is patient; his love is kind; his love keeps no record of wrongs; his love is unconditional. Jesus loves sinners. He even loves those who would betray him. What a wonderful calling it is to be that kind of love! It's a love that speaks for itself, a love that spreads.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:8, Paul writes of the Thessalonian Christians, "The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia - your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it."

So, as we're wrapping up the holiday season and approaching the start of a new year, my goal is to love more like my Grandma Clara - in a way that's so clearly from Jesus that people can't help but notice and spread that love, too.

Prayer

God, we thank you for loving us first – unconditionally, selflessly, and patiently. Thank you for sending your Son as a perfect example of that love. As the Advent season comes to a close, help us be living examples of your love so that everyone we come in contact with knows exactly where it comes from. Amen.

December 27, 2024

Loving Others as Jesus Loved

By Marc Gibbens

John 15:9-17

About a year ago, my parents celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary, and it was a privilege to share in their joy with many friends and family. As they shared some memories of their life together, it was clear there had been a few grand displays of love between them over the years: a surprise trip to Hawaii, a few gifts of fancy jewelry, faithful attendance at a hospital bedside during a prolonged illness. However, what struck me most was how those grand displays were the exception, not the rule. Over the course of 50 years together, my parents' love had more regularly been shown through what David Foster Wallace calls "being able truly to care about [each other] and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty little unsexy ways every day."

I couldn't help but think of that kind of daily sacrificial love as I reflected on Jesus' words in John 15 when Jesus tells us that his "command is this: love each other as [He] has loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." This command can feel like it requires a grand gesture from us, perhaps some public, large-scale sacrifice of our life for another. And indeed, there are exceptional circumstances where such a sacrifice might be required. But for most of us, most of the time, I think the laying down of our lives for our friends is a much more mundane, much more daily kind of act. The kind where we love one another through the delivery of a meal, the generous taking on of some responsibility that is rightfully another's, or simply having the grace to forgive a friend or family member yet again.

Christmas Day can also feel like a day for grand gestures: the whole family gathered together, presents exchanged, and a special meal enjoyed. But again, Christmas stands out because it is so special and exceptional. As we move past Christmas and look ahead to the resumption of "normal time," let us keep in mind Jesus' call to love those around us sacrificially on a daily basis.

Prayer

Heavenly father, we thank you for the special season of Advent and for the opportunity to celebrate your arrival in our world. We are grateful for the redemption your arrival heralded for us. As we look forward to a new year and moving back toward a normal routine, we pray for your love to fill our hearts and enable us to love others as you have loved us. Give us a spirit that looks beyond our own needs and that looks to meet the needs of those around us. Amen.

December 28, 2024

Count the Ways

Anonymous

1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Colossians 3:14

Take a minute to count the ways you have attempted to show love to someone in the past 24 hours. A few decades ago, now famous author and pastor Gary Chapman wrote a book for couples looking for better understanding and communication called *The Five Love Languages*. The five languages are acts of service (doing the dishes, mowing the yard, helping paint a room), words of encouragement (positive, affirming, uplifting verbal messages written or spoken), quality time (not just time together, but time that is meaningful to the receiver), and gift-giving (look around your post-Christmas opening living room...enough said?).

The thinking goes: just learn the language and practice the top one(s) for your partner. This approach has helped many relationships. However, while this practical framework includes aspects of love, it is not complete. The use of the "language" paradigm emphasizes the five that matter most, but we are called to love in **all the ways** that matter. Just because acts of service or physical touch do not come naturally to me it does not mean I can neglect these practices. Giving gifts, while meaningful for many on Christmas or otherwise, does not replace the other days out of the year when your loved one craves your touch, positive words, or quality time.

As Jesus' followers, we are called to cultivate a practice of the various aspects of love. Famous American psychologist Roger Sternberg discussed his 3-factor theory of romantic love, which suggests key ingredients of love are commitment (decision and working to maintain the relationship), intimacy (feeling connected, bonded, and together), and passion (enthusiasm, excitement, and of course attraction). Without all three together, his suggestion is that you don't have love at its fullest.

Depending on the scholar you love most, there are many other excellent ideas on the necessary ingredients of love (for C.S. Lewis' take, read *The Four Loves*). If the Christmas bustle has depleted you, or you are not feeling love from God or your family or friends, perhaps it's time to meditate on what aspects of love you need. Consider what neighbors, friends, family, colleagues, and perhaps even random people may have done recently to show their love to you. Some of you may have very few of these examples (or none at all) coming to mind. Think further back to the last time you felt love from another.

Consider these passages today, which implore us to love. They implicitly remind us that Christ's love is everything, binding all other virtues together in such a way as to render them "nothing" without the centerpiece in place. During Christmas (if things are going average or better in your world), you may have felt love from family and friends. Did you take time to bask in the unifying love of Jesus? Basking in the love from our family and friends (presents, time together, etc) is one echo of his love.

If your Advent season was below average this year, consider that you have a Creator who loves you completely and fully every single day of the week. He loves regardless of the season, who you vote for, or what you are up to at 2 AM. He has decided to love us (and continues deciding). His love includes passion for our hearts, desire for intimacy with us, and commitment to us (and, of course, he looks for the same in return).

When we show up for one another with holistic love for God and for others, we are providing a reflection of the most precious emotional resource possible. If you feel no one has shown up for you recently, consider letting

someone know. Start with your heavenly Father, and see if he is nudging you to open up to someone else in your life. If you are feeling loved right now, consider those around you who could use a reminder of Christ's love for them.

Prayer

Father, thank you for loving us. Help us love each other more fully. When we feel proud of our love language skills of giving meaningful gifts, delivering positive words, committing to quality time for others, providing our physical or emotional presence, or serving others without expectation for return, please help us realize you have perfected these and all other demonstrations of love. Please continue to show us your heart. Help our hearts grow in commitment, passion, and intimacy for your heart. Help us expand our minds on what it means to love and be loved. We need your help for our actions and words to be soaked in your love. Help us see when we are acting in ways that contradict the fullness of your love. Amen.