



COME  
*Emmanuel*



A D V E N T 2 0 1 6

# Advent

Volumes 1 & 2

Hope and Peace

2016

First Baptist Knoxville

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# Preface

This collection of devotions continues a growing tradition of creating then collecting devotions from young adults in our church. This Advent collection takes its place alongside two past collections of Lenten Devotions. These devotions grew out of a simple belief: that writing and reading about faith is essential. The devotions come in all shapes and sizes, written by people of all types and stripes. You will find some voices quite mature and reflective while others are young, just beginning to learn the strength of their own voice. By making space for this work, you are marking space for young believers to further hone their faith and witness.

Nothing in these devotions seeks to prescribe but rather only to describe, to describe what it means to be a young adult of faith living and working in this moment in time. While each devotional comes from a young adult, we offer them to the broader First Baptist community as a gift. We hope they serve as a source of encouragement and engagement for you as you begin your own wrestling with God's word to you during this season of Lent.

Here are some notes regarding this guide's structure and recommended use.

Advent takes place across four weeks. Each week, beginning on Sunday, you will find a detailed reflection introducing the theme for the week. The devotions that follow will invite you to reflect upon Scriptures that intersect the week's theme. You will find a Scripture, a reflection/meditation upon that Scripture, and then a prayer (written in italics) that you can either pray or use as a final piece of reflection.

These devotions come from a diverse group of young adults, but they represent only a fraction of our church's young adult population. In the coming months, we hope to bring even more voices to the table as we work together to hear God speak in and through one another.

Finally, let me say a word about this project's coordinator and editor. One of our young adults, Josh Durham, has been intimately involved in the devotional collections we have produced in recent years. With this collection, however, he has taken on a greater role – in envisioning, writing, and producing than ever before. The Sunday reflections you encounter are his, and the Scripture selections are of his design. Josh, thank you for your leadership, creativity, and hard work on this project!

Church Family, thank you for sharing this journey with us. We count it a privilege and honor to share it with you.

Scott Claybrook  
Minister with Young Adults

# Introduction

Like many Christians today, we in the Baptist tradition have largely lost a sense of the Church calendar. We do not celebrate fasts and feast days, and we do a poor job of turning our holidays into holy seasons. We only celebrate Easter on Easter. We may take notice of Good Friday if there is a really good sale. We may speak of the “Christmas Season,” but it’s not actually a season. We merely celebrate the pinnacle of the season--the good news of Christmas day--over and over again until the day it actually arrives. We like to skip ahead to the good part.

In the early Church, Christmas was a day unto itself within the larger season of Advent. The four weeks preceding Christmas become a long, intentional, methodical march toward Christ. These weeks are a preparation for, a building up to, the coming of the Christ Child. They are weeks not marked by the number of shopping days remaining or the people, parties, and events still to cross off our lists. Rather, Advent is, every day of it, a returning to the story of our God, our Savior, and ourselves.

We now approach the Season of Advent. In the Church calendar, it marks the “beginning” of the year. It is a period of preparation for the coming of God in human form. Advent means “coming” or “arrival.” How fitting that the beginning of our church year comes so close to the end of our calendar year. Perhaps it marks our grasping confusion of the way God works through time or God’s nature because God is circle rather than cycle. He is not beginning or end or transition in any form. He is Wholeness radiating in all directions of existence. How can we, as beings of beginnings and endings, comprehend the One who has no beginning or ending?

And yet, this is how God comes to us. He steps out of eternity and into time. The One who exists before all beginnings now enters our field of vision through human flesh. Though he does so only after sending Word of His coming: In the beginning the Word *already existed*. The Word gave life to everything that was created and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not understood it (John 1:1b, 4-5).

I love that this season of preparing for the coming of the Light occurs at the darkest time of the year. The world spins, the darkness slowly increases, and we are helpless to stop it. And so, we wait in the darkness for the One who is already among us. We wait in the darkness for He who is Light to reveal Himself to us. We wait, but we are not idle. In waiting, we hope; and in hoping, we have expectation; and in expectation, we prepare. A great guest is about to arrive, and we must “clean house.”

# Introduction

Traditionally, Advent has been a season of fasting and repentance that culminated in feasting and celebration. Somewhere along the way, however, we have turned it into a season of feasting that comes on the heels of another season of feasting. And who can blame us? Celebration is far more enjoyable than repentance and reflection. So why should we look back to the model of the early church? Why should we take time to pause, reflect, and repent and focus on our brokenness in the midst of a season of joy?

Because we find joy in the Light only after sitting in Darkness.

The story of God's redemptive work in Christ stretches back to the beginning, a story born in Genesis. Ever since division and pain entered creation following sin (Genesis 3:14-16), God has been about the work of reconciling creation to Himself.

This Advent season, may we have the courage sit first with the darkness that comes with reflection and repentance, and in that darkness find hope. For it is in our darkness that may catch the first glimpse of light. And in that light, we find Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

Josh Durham  
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who helped make this project possible.*

# About

This collection of devotions comes from Dwell, the young adult ministry at First Baptist Knoxville. The name Dwell is taken from Isaiah 58:12 where God speaks to His people about the sort of worship He desires. More than simply a right form of worship, God desires a right substance at the heart of our worship. We believe that God continues to speak and work in this world, a testament to His unending desire to renew and redeem all of creation – including us. This collection of devotions is an attempt to bear witness to God’s work in our lives as well as encourage others in their own journey of transformation.

First Baptist Knoxville is a vibrant downtown church located in the heart of Knoxville. We hold a deep commitment to seeing the kingdom of God come to the city of Knoxville and the cities of the world. We would love the chance to get to know your story as well as share our own.

For more information about First Baptist, please visit [fbcknox.org](http://fbcknox.org) or join us for worship on Sundays at 8:45 am or 11:00 am.

[www.fbcknox.org/dwell](http://www.fbcknox.org/dwell)



**DWELL**  
K N O X V I L L E

# Sunday, November 27, Day 1

## HOPE

### Luke 21:25-28, 34-36a

And there will be strange signs in the sun, moon, and stars. And here on earth the nations will be in turmoil, perplexed by the roaring seas and strange tides. People will be terrified at what they see coming upon the earth, for the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then everyone will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with power and great glory. So when all these things happen, stand and look up, for your salvation is near! Watch out! Don't let your hearts be dulled by carousing and drunkenness, and by the worries of this life. Don't let that day catch you unaware, like a trap. For that day will come upon everyone living on earth. Keep alert at all times.

This seems like an odd place to begin the first day in a season of waiting for the Christ Child, a season of Joy and wonder and hopeful expectation. It serves two purposes for us. The first is a reminder that all stories in the Bible are the same Story. The entire Word of God points to the reconciliation of humanity to God. Even the Christmas story is not a story written or read in isolation. The birth of Jesus is one instance in a story thousands of years long of the infinite God crossing paths with mortal men. Thus, as we await a celebration of the Messiah's first coming, we are reminded there will be a second coming which we are truly waiting for, Hoping for.

At first glance it is not a Hope-full passage. Instead, it refers to wars, turmoil, and roaring seas. But we, the People of the Promise, have Hope. In the original language, Hope is equal to Waiting and Waiting to Anticipating. The second reason for beginning the Advent season with this passage is to stir us into Preparation and Watchfulness. We can be hopeful and even eager, because we will not let that day be caught unaware. We will remain alert at all times.

I've spent a great deal of time preparing for this Advent devotional: thinking about it, reading for it, reading about it, selecting scripture, second guessing what I think about what I've read and how I've chosen to knit the information together. All of this with an eye on completing the task, so much work now in the hope that it will be done well later or just that it will be done! I've almost got it right. I've been present in the process, actively waiting for the advent of the Christ Child the way we are meant to be. Almost.



# Sunday, November 27, Day 1

Advent is a season of preparation. I've done that part. I have even "hoped" that it will go well. I know that it will if God is in it. But many Christian traditions use the word "Wait" instead of "Hope" as their watchword for the first week. Advent is not only a season to prepare for and celebrate the inevitable coming of the Messiah, it is a chance to celebrate the Waiting. The temptation is to celebrate the "Christmas Season" before Christmas is even here. The Church, however, invites us to spend four weeks celebrating the period of Waiting!

I have had a wonderful opportunity to use my time in preparing for the Season of Preparation as a time to grow and encounter the Living God. Yet, I fear I have missed much of it. I fear I have turned what could have been an act of worship into an act of work, something to check off my Christmas list. I'm still not sure I know how to celebrate waiting.

I return to this passage and find turmoil, confusion, strange tides, terror. How are we to deal with this? The scripture says, "Stand and look up, for your salvation is near!" (Luke 22:28) We're supposed to behave as if we've been expecting it, as if we're unafraid, as if watching the world being torn apart is the same as watching an act of creation. To our way of thinking, it is an odd way to celebrate a birth. But in birth there is pain and blood and turmoil and tears. And to think, the infinite, Holy God went through it for us. In birth there is pain, but there is also Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

*Heavenly Father, awaken me! Clear my mind and heart of the clutter, distractions, and nonsense I've collected. Bring me into your presence and hold me there. The Darkness increases, but it only makes the Light to shine more brightly. Transform me into a Light that invites others to await your coming. In Jesus name, Amen.*

# Monday, November 28, Day 2

## Isaiah 42:1-8

As a follower of Christ, my hope has been found in Jesus, of this I am sure. However, in the days before Christ, there was no Savior who had already come, just one who had been promised. In those days, faith has built on what was to come, just as modern faith is based on what has been and what will come again.

Given the benefit of the New Testament, it is easy to pinpoint how to live in a Christ-like manner, because we have examples and parables. However, in Isaiah 42, it is God himself who tells us of the coming Christ's characteristics:

*Behold, My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry out nor raise His voice, Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth. He will not fail nor be discouraged, Till He has established justice in the earth; And the coastlands shall wait for His law.*

Isaiah 42:1-4

All these traits were found in Jesus, and all these prophecies fulfilled.

We find hope, strength, and love in a perfect Savior; one who only displayed patience when faced with temptation, disloyalty, or death. All followers of Christ have been called to serve in a similar way. Seek the smoldering candle, and rekindle it, do not quench it. In the face of persecution, do not quit or be discouraged. Instead, redirect all the broken, hostile, and lost towards Jesus, the hope that was held on to in the days before Christ and the hope we cling to today.

*Dear God, I thank You for Your hope. Jesus is coming back, and You have left us a guide on how to live like Him and grow closer to You. I pray I would have the patience, reliance, and hope found in the Old Testament. I ask for You guidance in living the life You have left for us; to be patient in, that we wouldn't be discouraged from our faith, and that we would help those questioning their faith to find you. I pray Your will be done. In Jesus' name we ask all things, Amen.*

# Tuesday, November 29, Day 3

## Psalm 130

The kind of waiting we see the psalmist demonstrate in this psalm is very different from the kind of waiting most of us are accustomed to. When we think of waiting for the Lord in the context of our own lives, we think of periods of uncertainty, times when we were waiting for God's answer. Often, those periods of waiting are marked with frustration and bitterness. In times of uncertainty, we find ourselves feeling entitled to an answer, entitled to a path; and waiting for God's answer or hoping for God's path can bring out our ugliest insecurities. We find it hard forcing our whole being to wait. Our heart lunges forward, while our head waits for a plan. Or our head begins scheming, while our heart waits for God.

However, here we see that the psalmist waiting with his whole being. He is desperate to wait, putting his full hope in the Lord.

So, why the difference in the psalmist's way of waiting and our waiting? Maybe we're too quick to forget the disparity between the way we and the Psalmist approach the situation. Maybe we too easily look past our own brokenness and make excuses for our sin. We're so excited to welcome the Christ Child that we forget why He had to come. But to fully see the brightness of His light, we must first see our own darkness without Him. To hope with our entire being, we must understand how desperately we need restoration.

So in this season of hoping for what's to come, embrace a different kind of waiting. Recognize your need for redemption, and cry out to God. Hope with your whole being. Hope for not only the celebration of Christ's birth but also His return.

*Dear God, help me to wait for You with my whole being. Whether it is throughout this Advent season, during periods of uncertainty in my life, or waiting for your ultimate return, teach me to put my full hope in you. Lord, may I never forget how desperately I need you. Thank you that you are a God of restoration and redemption. In Your Name, Amen.*

# Wednesday, November 30, Day 4

## Isaiah 6:11-13 and 7:10-14

Seeds are fascinating little creations. They already contain the food they need to grow, and they are covered with a protective coating to guard the process of maturation. Of course, seeds need to be planted in good soil, and they need water and light. Most importantly, they need time to take root and grow.

Planting a seed, particularly of a mighty tree like an oak, is merely the beginning of a very long process – one that, to completion, lasts longer than a human life. Growth is a process of steady longevity. God's faithfulness is also identified by its longevity.

In chapter 6, Isaiah delivers some very distressing news to Judah; the promised destruction hardly seems a source of hope during Advent. Yet somehow, it is. Amid sin, suffering, and devastation, a holy seed remains. A seed that is strong, guarded and cultivated by the most faithful gardener, and that will not fail to do what it was made to do because it is tended by that gardener.

God promised many years before Isaiah that he would save His people— including us today—from their sins (Genesis 3:15). Even before time began, this was his plan. Talk about longevity! His holiness and His desire to be in a covenant relationship with His people required a salvation ONLY He could give. He revealed this plan prophetically in the Old Testament and in full clarity through Jesus.

Jesus' birth, which Isaiah foretells, is one step in God's never-ending faithfulness to us, because it is a turning point in God's master plan. This First Coming of the Lord was a crucial step in the redemption story. His Second Coming will complete the circle.

Today we sit between the "Already" of Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection and the "Not Yet" of His glorious return; and honestly, it is an uncomfortable place to be sometimes. However, as I consider the faithfulness of God that allowed the stump of Israel to be a holy seed used for His glory, that delivered prophecy through the mouth of Isaiah, that has already fulfilled many of those prophecies, and that I see in my life, I know God is in this for the long haul. He is trustworthy and loves beyond measure. His purposes will be accomplished; and for me, the Hope this brings is almost uncontainable. Is it for you?

*Faithful God, you are amazing. Your faithfulness in fulfilling your promises overwhelms me. You have proven over and over the depth and longevity of your love for me. This Advent, grant me a deeper sense of Hope grounded in your steadfast faithfulness, and let me share that Hope with those who need it. Amen.*

# Thursday, December 1, Day 5

## Isaiah 11:1-5, 10

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse.” (Isaiah 11:1)

Have you ever seen a tree growing from a crack in a rock, where it seems like nothing should be growing? That tree started as a small, tender seedling and pushed its way through the hardness to grow. Where conditions seemed hopeless and barren, life pushed through.

Daily, we can turn on the news or click on the top headlines and find ourselves surrounded by stories of pain and despair. In this world, we can find ourselves surrounded by brokenness and sorrow. In comparison to the time of the passage, this was probably where the Israelites found themselves; in a place of loss and hopelessness that weighed heavily on their hearts. I have been there and perhaps you are in a place right now where things seem to be hopeless, barren, and broken. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve come to the realization that “the struggle is real” no matter what our backgrounds.

However, if you are in that place of despair, there is a message of Peace and comfort in Isaiah 11: the Lord reigns. Against the odds and in conditions that were not ideal, the plant broke through the rock and flourished. God is waiting for us to come to Him not only in this Advent season but on a daily basis. Sometimes words are so easy to type but so difficult to apply in my daily life. How often does something happen where I rush to tell a friend, family member, or even a coworker? I see a problem and immediately rush to find a solution. We must learn how to walk in the Spirit and seek God’s will, which can only happen if we are sensitive to the Spirit’s working.

Is there a hard place where there is a seed you need to grow in your life?

Today and every day, how can you be sensitive to the Spirit? Has God planted a seed?

Isaiah 11: 10 says, “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.” May you find your strength as a branch of Jesse to continue the kingdom of God.

*Dear Heavenly Father, give me peace, wisdom, and knowledge of you. Put to rest my anxieties and let my words and thoughts be yours. Use them to spread your love. Multiply my time so I can give it to you and further your name. In Jesus name, Amen.*

# Friday, December 2, Day 6

## Micah 7:7-9, 19-20

I am all for saving energy, money, and the environment . . . except when it comes to twinkle lights. I cannot make the switch to LED. I've tried. It's hopeless. I love how the glow from incandescent lights fills the room. They are magical. Even the word incandescent sounds more inspiring than light-emitting diode. In this season when night is long, my incandescent twinkle lights remind me that there is something more powerful than darkness.

Of course, Israel didn't have twinkle lights, but they had stars. In fact, their story began with stars. God took a discouraged Abraham outside and gave him hope for his family using the stars. He showed him those millions upon millions of lights in the darkness and said, "So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:5).

What if God wasn't just speaking of numbers here? What if He intentionally chose to use the stars to say something more about Israel? What if He meant for Abraham to understand that He would use his descendants to bring light to the darkness?

There was so much darkness. There were so many times when Israel failed and fell. But there were also so many times when they repented and rose. God was always there to bring them back to Himself. He always brought them back to the light. And then came the "great light" (Isaiah 9:2) that could not be overcome by the darkness (John 1:5). And over that spot: a star to outshine stars!

God used stars to give Abraham hope for a nation. He used a star to show a nation its Hope had come. Because of that Hope, no matter how dark our night or how far our fall, we can always be brought back to the light.

*Father, thank you for Your light in our lives. Help us to follow Your light so we, too, can shine like stars.*



# Saturday December 3, Day 7

## 2 Peter 3:2-4, 8-9, 13-14

As a Christian living in a secular world, faith is often tested in increments of time. If you ask for guidance or seek blessings in prayer, it can be frustrating to feel like you have made no progress or received no help.

No matter how faithfully or frequently we turn to God, it is easy to forget that He does not work within our time scale. God does not have a meeting at 3:00, nor does He have plans next Thursday, for "... with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand as one day." (2 Peter 3:8, NKJV)

The Lord's promise – that He will return – is the center point of life for followers of Christ. Despite over 2000 years, that faith is what carries us forward; to serve a living God, no matter how difficult. Those 2000 years? But as two days to The Lord.

However, no matter how unoptimistic, setback, or helpless you feel, there is hope, which is found in anticipation of the Lord.

"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but all come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9, NKJV)

God is working fervently in both your life and the lives of all others, and all of God's promises are to be fulfilled in accordance with His will, but only on His time, not man's.

In the meantime, we must tread this world, not only as a servant to the Kingdom, but as a representative of Christ. The Lord will try, temper, and test our faithfulness until that day comes, but it is up to the followers of Christ to live as He lived, until he returns one glorious day.

"Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless." (2 Peter 3:14, NKJV)

*God, no matter how tried or tired we become, I pray that our hope would be cemented in Jesus and not in this world. That we would find the patience to carry out Your will, which takes place on a scale far bigger than any one man. That our faith in You will always be enough, no matter how tempting the world is. That we would serve You for the rest of our days, may it be one day or a thousand years. In the name of your holy, perfect, loving son Jesus Christ, Amen.*

# Sunday, December 4, Day 8

## PEACE

### Luke 1:67-70, 76-80

*And [John's father] Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),*

*And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the path of peace."*

Luke 1:67-70, 76-79

The two common watchwords for the second week of Advent are Prepare and Peace. But what if we had to just choose one? As if it were even a question. Peace! Of course, Peace. Peace on Earth, Prince of Peace, "guide our feet into the path of peace." Peace is the obvious choice, the easy choice.

That's the problem, though. We sometimes think peace just happens. You will see in the scripture selections to come that the word peace appears every time but note that preparation is always involved. It may not be obvious, but it's there. On the one hand, it makes sense John the Baptist is associated with this week because his job was to "prepare the way" for the LORD. On the other hand, John is still something of an odd choice considering he lived in the wilderness, scavenged for food, wore coarse clothing, was harassed and slandered by religious leaders, and eventually was imprisoned and beheaded. That choice is odd unless you consider the nature of Peace. Shalom means "to be complete, fulfilled." It is akin to Joy, unconditional happiness.

I once heard a story about peace. A nobleman asked an artist to paint a picture of Peace. After some time, the artist presented him with a painting of a landscape. It was a majestic mountain rising above a glassy lake. Without a ripple in the water, the mountain and trees and brilliant sunrise were almost perfectly reflected in the calm waters. The nobleman appreciated its artistry, but it wasn't the picture he wanted.

He consulted a second artist who brought him a painting depicting a doe and her fawn in a meadow; the two of them standing in the bright, new spring grass surrounded by vibrant wildflowers and bathed in soft morning light. Again, he appreciated the painting's beauty and the artists' skill but rejected it.

# Sunday, December 4, Day 8

He approached a third artist who brought him a painting of a crashing waterfall, the sky cloaked in heavy clouds, winds twisting the trees on the banks of the river. And on one of those trees, on a limb hanging out over the churning water, was a nest. Within the nest was a bird shielding her sleeping chick from the waterfall's spray and the winds. This one he kept.

Peace is not quiet. The first two paintings depicted stillness and calmness but not Peace, not Shalom. Like John the Baptist, we are called to find and proclaim Peace in the Wilderness, in times of adversity and opposition. We are called to "prepare the way." John prepared by rejecting the comforts and societal norms of his contemporaries. Are we to do any less?

We "prepare" for Christmas by filling our yards with decorations, our schedules with parties, our bank statements with purchases, and our mouths with tree-shaped cookies. What if we instead filled our hearts and lives with the fullness of God's love and Presence?

Without Preparation, there is no Peace. It is difficult for us to keep a season of inward reflection, confession, and repentance it once was. Who has time for that when there are only X number of shopping days left? I think I'm ready for less "Christmas" and more Advent. I think the world is ready for the Church to be ready for Advent. The thing we prepare for every year is not Shalom; it is a frantic rush to fill the void with meaningless nothings.

If we were to "prepare the way" as we probably should, the economy would surely collapse. So, maybe we start small with one less gift per family member or one less party or one less Biggest Sale of the Year! And maybe we could let someone know why "one less." Maybe we tell them, "I am preparing the way for Him to guide our feet into the path of Shalom."

It is not easy to say no to work so you can spend more time with family, or to say no to family so you can spend more time with the Church, or (dare I suggest) say no to the Church so you can spend more time with Christ. Yet, who gives completeness? Who shelters you? Where do you find your rest, your Peace, your Shalom?

Are you Prepared? Are you Watchful? Will you be caught unaware? So many times, people say, "Before you know it, Christmas will be here." Yes, it will. And do you feel at Peace about it?

*Father, as we sing Peace on Earth, our hearts and lives are filled with chaos. Forgive us when we seek fulfillment anywhere other than a relationship with you. Let our preparations for "Christmas" not hinder our preparations for the coming of Christ. Expose those corners of our lives that are not prepared, not peaceful, not given over to you. In your name, we pray.  
Amen.*

# Monday, December 5, Day 9

## Isaiah 40:1-11

Do you feel that Peace and Preparation are sometimes mutually exclusive? Where is there peace in preparation? Isn't preparation inherently busy and stressful? I know that for Music Ministers across the country, November and December are "GO TIME!" No time to take a day off or go on vacation. No time to have deep life-giving conversations. No time to think or reflect. We have programs to plan, concerts to conduct, rehearsals to prepare—all while determining how to do the same musical favorites in fresh, new and creative ways! Maybe you prepare for office parties and holiday shopping, or decorate your house like the Pottery Barn catalogue on a Dollar General budget. Travel plans and end-of-year projects and deadlines can steal our joy and certainly our peace from our clutches, even when we swore last year that this year would be different.

Isaiah has a word for us. Read chapter 40:1-11 right now. Go on, we'll wait right here!

Welcome back. What words or phrases brought you peace?

Write them here --->

Nothing? Read it again.

I love the image of the valleys rising and the mountains being made low—an image of hindrances and hardships being erased by God. Then God makes the grass (us) wither, and for what? Perhaps God is giving us a cosmic perspective of our lives. Like ants, we work and toil and strive daily; and for what? Perhaps today's passage is an invitation to step back and get some perspective. Are there things to which you can say no in order to make a mountain low? Can you do one less thing today that might make a valley rise up, and make your road smoother? God will be glorified, not in your exhaustion this week, but in your presence. Your right relationship with God and with those around you will reveal the glory of the Lord.

*Lord, God of all creation, swoop me up in Your arms like a lamb. Cradle me in Your strong arms, and show me Your peace and Your glory. Make me an unanxious presence to those around me that your PEACE may be manifest through me. Amen.*

# Tuesday, December 6, Day 10

## Romans 12:1, 14-18, 21

*“I beseech to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Romans 12:1, ESV)*

Advent is a time of peace and a time of preparation. The peace that we enjoy during this season, in the knowledge that Jesus Christ has come, can only truly be realized by opening up our hearts to God.

In our house, one of our most cherished growing traditions is gathering around an Advent house each evening to open that day's door and read the verse inside. The children love the anticipation of opening a new door every evening. It's almost as exciting as punching buttons on an elevator!

It's a special time each evening for us because it allows our family to bond over God's word and reminds us of the events leading to Jesus' birth. It's an opportunity to have great conversations with the kids. Over those 24 days, the ten minutes or so before bed each night truly does help us prepare our hearts to celebrate the Peace that is Jesus Christ.

We're getting ready for the coming of Jesus, the one who overcomes evil with good and teaches us to live in peace with those around us. Take time in the days to come to make room for peace in your life, your family's life and in the life of the community you belong to. We all have the ability, opportunity, and even the responsibility to bring the Peace of God into the world.

*God, in the midst of this Advent season, we give you thanks for the opportunity to worship as a church and as families. Please give us the wisdom to speak to our little ones with wisdom and clarity, and please help us to prepare our hearts to celebrate Jesus' birth. Amen.*

# Wednesday, December 7, Day 11

## Psalm 34:1-5, 11-14

I am an avid fan of worship music, so upon reading the first few verses of this Psalm, the only thing I could think of were the lyrics of various songs, including “Ever Be” by Bethel Music, “Came to My Rescue” by Hillsong United, and “Never Gonna Stop Singing” by Jesus Culture. When I sing songs like these, I am overcome with a joy and peace that I feel at no other time. Unfortunately, our day-to-day life in this distracting world is filled with so many noisy stressors that we often lose sight of that peace. Therefore, I propose a radical idea: in times of toil and uncertainty: just stop and sing. Sing of the Lord’s provision. Sing of His ever-helping hands.

Since the dawn of creation, the world has never experienced a more peaceful time than when Adam and Eve walked side-by-side with God in the garden. God’s peace was a constant. Every breath and step taken was an act of worship of the Father, an act of peaceful wholeness, or shalom, as a certain Young Adult Pastor I know frequently references. Since that moment of rebellion, we as God’s children have been seeking the peace and wholeness with Him that was lost.

So, knowing this, what do we do when we wish to seek peace in our lives? The psalmist David presents a surprisingly simple way that we can know and even spread God’s peace:

1. Give praise for God’s infinite glory.
2. Give thanks for the work He’s already done in your life.
3. Give away what is evil in your life.

So, even if you find this season of Advent to be one of cold desolation and seeming hopelessness, take a few moments to give glory to His name. Maybe, just maybe, you will then be able to finally find that peace you’ve been looking for all along. And maybe then that peace can prepare your heart for a deeper encounter with Him.

*Father, we give you all the glory that our hearts can pour out. We thank you for Your powerful presence, and we thank you for all the transforming work you have already done in our lives. May we find peace in You that transcends all earthly toil. Amen.*



# Thursday, December 8, Day 12

## Isaiah 9:2-7

Think of a time in your life when you felt separated from God. Maybe you were drowning in schoolwork and tests, or maybe you and your spouse were going through some rough times. Whatever it was, did you ever sit back and think, “What am I missing right now? Why does my life feel like it’s filled with insurmountable obstacles?” Well, the answer is because our eyes tend to focus on our troubles in the now and not the solution in the future. That solution comes from God.

When we focus too much on the troubles that come our way, we lose sight of why God allows them to happen to us. When we begin to view these troubles as blessings from God, then we will understand God’s sovereignty and find the peace that comes with that understanding. In this passage, we see the prophet Isaiah foretelling joy and peace over the land of Judah. It says right away in verse 2, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shone.” Isaiah advises the reader to be happy, to be ready, and to prepare our hearts because the King is coming! We have seen the light! In the same way, we should be rejoicing. The Gospel is alive, and with that reality comes tremendous joy and peace! Seek it out!

*Dear Heavenly Father, let us focus on keeping our eyes on the truth that is your word. Let us not wander into darkness searching for earthly fulfillment; instead, let us seek you and the love and joy that surrounds you when we realize that you fill our hearts and bring joy, even in the darkest times. In your name. Amen.*

# Friday, December 9, Day 13

## 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3, 8-11, 23

Throughout the New Testament, the birth of Christ is intimately tied to the return of Christ. Here in 1 Thessalonians, likely the oldest New Testament work, Paul strives to encourage the local believers as the first generation of Christ-followers begin to pass away. The people had expected the work begun with Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection would be completed during their life time. When this does not happen, these early believers naturally begin to despair, but Paul offers hope:

*But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

1 Thessalonians 5:8-10

Rather than living lives in darkness – the darkness of shame, fear, or despair – the people of Christ live in the light. Here in Advent we take both Hope and Peace from the gift of Christ's coming. It is a Peace born in his birth all these years before, and it is a Peace made new through the Hope of his return. So “encourage one another and build up each other,” for our world wrestles with darkness. But there is Peace and Hope, for “The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it” (John 1:4-5).

May we prepare during this time of waiting, for in Christ's birth we find a light that cannot be extinguished. Thanks be to God!

*God, may you meet us where you find us. Whether in a season of darkness or one of light, come and prepare our hearts for your love, light, and hope. May we receive it gratefully and spread it joyfully. Amen.*

# Saturday, December 10, Day 14

## Hebrews 12:1-3, 12-14

Our passage today reminds me of a story told about golfer Gary Player, who years ago hit a ball 280 yards straight as a bullet off the practice tee. A man in the gallery reportedly said, “Man, I’d give anything to be able to hit a golf ball like you.” Player, it is said, responded by walking over to the guy and explaining, “No you wouldn’t. You wouldn’t be willing to do what it takes. You have to rise early in the morning and hit 500 balls until your hands bleed. Then you stop, tape your hands, and hit 500 more balls. The next morning you’re out there again with hands so raw you can barely hold your club, but you do it all over again. If you do that through enough years of pain, then you can hit a ball like that.”

So it is with us all too often, at least it is with me. I’d do anything for there to be peace—anything that is but be a real peacemaker. I’d do anything to run the race God has set out for me—anything but truly cast off everything that hinders. So I am like the man in the gallery, but looking instead at Jesus, who cared enough about the joy set before Him to go all the way, scorning the shame of the cross to be the pioneer and perfecter of faith. So, let us take the advice of the author of Hebrews and consider not only Him but also the whole great cloud of witnesses so that we might make every effort to live in Peace with everyone and to be holy. Peace will come, but only if we are prepared to make Peace.

*God, for the great cloud of witnesses and the ultimate witness of your faithfulness in Jesus, we give you thanks. May we be faithful, not only to talk a good talk, but to live lives worthy of those people of faith who came before us, not least of whom was Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the same. In whose name we pray, Amen.*

# Sunday, December 11, Day 15

## JOY

### Luke 1:28-55

*The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

*"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.*

*And Mary said: "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.*

*He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and His descendants forever, even as He said to our fathers."*

*Luke 1:28-33, 38, 46-49, 54-55*

I remember when the song "From a Distance" became a big deal. Although I was very young, I sensed that songs about God didn't really belong in pop culture and was glad that this one was doing so well; however, something wasn't quite right. It took me a while, but I eventually concluded that the god in the song wasn't my God or at least was a poor representation. The problem is that God—my God, the God— is not at a distance. He is here and now. Emmanuel. God WITH us.

The third week of Advent is associated with Joy or Rejoicing and with Mary. The candle's color changes from purple (Repentance) to pink (Joy) to show that even in a season of fasting and penitence there is Joy and Light. If there was ever a human who understood the concept of God with us it was Mary; and if there was ever a person who had an excuse to be scared out of her mind, it was Mary. She could have been disowned. She could have become an outcast. She could have been stoned. She could have said no. Instead, she responds with a song about how great God had been to her and how faithful He is to His people.

# Sunday, December 11, Day 15

She knew that God was not a silent, distant observer. She could have been paralyzed with fear but instead chose to focus on the hand of God at work. She didn't simply invite Jesus into her heart; she invited him into her being, her entire self, her whole existence. She allowed God to upend her world in the most dramatic way imaginable and thanked Him for it!

Some call Mary "Theotokos" (God-bearer). She symbolizes fallible human flesh entering into relationship and reconciliation with God and, thus, bringing God into the world. Now it is our turn to be God-bearers, to have our worlds upended. And we do so Joyfully marching into the Darkness, bearing the Light.

*Dear Heavenly Father, it is hard for me to be Joyful when things are not going as I planned. It is hard to remember that you are with me—always. Give me a servant's heart that glorifies you and is mindful of your faithfulness. Thank you for your many blessings past and yet to come. Holy is your name, Amen.*

# Monday, December 12, Day 16

## Jeremiah 31:1-3, 15-17

The city of Chicago waited 108 years for the win that came November 2nd. Right around midnight, the wait was finally over. Over the span of those 108 years, fans who went through cycles of disbelief, frustration, and heartbreak finally found joy.

November 3rd was filled with stories of the game, but more so than the game, thousands of stories have been stories about families that have waited a lifetime (multiple lifetimes) for this day. America's past time, passed down from generation to generation, had one of its biggest stages and everyone wanted to witness history.

While Chicago experienced tremendous joy, a celebration with over five million people will pale in comparison to the celebration when we return to the Lord.

Our God though, in his fulfillment of a promise, sent a Joy that is unparalleled in history. Through the prophet Jeremiah, we are told that the Lord's Love is everlasting, that His kindness is unfailing, and that there will be Hope. These promises are fulfilled by the messiah, the Son of God in flesh who came in this season to Bethlehem to give us great Joy.

So go into this season, go into the world celebrating with great Joy that God is here, that the Messiah is coming and will come again!

*Lord, I thank you for the Joy you have provided us through your son, Jesus. Lord, I ask that you guide us to you in this season of life. Let us be filled with Love and compassion for all those around us. Let all who are seeking you hear these words you wrote through your prophet, and let us come to see lives being changed. In your name I pray, Amen!*



# Tuesday, December 13, Day 17

## Isaiah 25:1, 7-9

Reading over these verses, I am overwhelmed by the immense promises God makes to His people. God promises to abolish death - forever. He also promises He will wipe away His children's tears and that He will give us a new reason to sing. At first glance, these things captivated me as important, but as time passed, I became more and more enthralled with the underlying power that God reveals here.

One of the greatest mysteries to the human race is death. Even for believers, it can be a somewhat scary topic, simply because of the unknowns associated with it. I believe that God knows the emotions His children have regarding death. He knows of the fear and grief that it can cause in the human heart and He knows that death results from a fallen world. However, God redeems us from death to give us a new and greater hope.

My heart was overwhelmed by the knowledge that in His great power, God will abolish the pain and grief that death carries with it. What an amazing day that will be! How wonderful and powerful our Lord is that He can, and will, overcome what no other person or power can. Our Father will end death and see His people rejoice in their salvation. May we glorify His name both for what He has already done as well as for the things He has assured us He will do.

*Father, I praise you for the goodness that you continue to lavish upon your children. I thank you for the promises that you make to us, promises that provide us with a secure Hope for the future and that remind us of your perfect faithfulness. Father, I pray that your goodness and steadfastness will remain in our hearts and minds during this season of Advent. Amen.*

# Wednesday, December 14, Day 18

## John 3:25-30

Christmas is a time of joy. It is a time to laugh with family and a time to rejoice in the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. However, for many, like my family, Christmas is not just a time of happiness but also a painful reminder of those we have lost. When I was eight years old, my father lost his two-year battle with cancer on December 21st and was buried on Christmas Eve. Therefore, Christmas and the idea of happiness that accompanies it has been a struggle for my family ever since that day.

However, despite the sorrow that comes from death, I can rejoice at Christmas and know that because my Savior was born thousands of years ago, my father is now in heaven, and I will one day see him again.

I find so much comfort in today's scripture: "No one can receive a single thing unless it's given to him from Heaven" (John 3:27). Although I lost my earthly father all those years ago, God has given me the gift of a heavenly Father who is far more perfect than any father on Earth could ever be. John ends this passage by saying, "So this joy of mine is complete. He must increase, but I must decrease."

I have had many opportunities in life to be bitter about the passing of my father, but I have chosen instead to find joy in how God has used this trial to work on my heart and in my life.

*Lord, thank you for sending us the precious gift of your son. Thank you for the many ways you are working in my life despite the trials I face. I pray for those who are mourning this Christmas. I pray that you would give them Peace and comfort. Humble me this Christmas, Lord. Increase so that I may decrease. Amen.*

# Thursday, December 15, Day 19

## Zechariah 2:10-11, 13

In our busy lives' hustle and bustle, sometimes simply putting one foot in front of the other is difficult. My time in graduate school made this reality extremely clear. The papers, assignments, tests, and stress seemed to loom over me like an ever-present cloud. I wasn't always present and aware of things going on around me. I also wasn't aware of where God was during all of it. I became entangled in the idea of setting up a future for myself.

In this passage from Zechariah, the prophet is speaking to the Israelites who just returned to Jerusalem after 70 years of exile in Babylon. Upon arrival, they were called to rebuild the Temple that had been destroyed, but this came to a halt when the Israelites started to tend to their own struggles. They became entangled in the idea of setting up a future for themselves. Zechariah came along to act as a voice of Hope and Joy and to encourage them to rebuild the Temple. He also reminded them that because the Lord was coming to live among them, they must "shout and rejoice," rather than worry about their future.

At verse 13, the tone changes. The Israelites were called to be silent rather than shout and rejoice. I think this means that there is a time for singing and praising the Lord, but there is also an equally important time for prayer and silent meditation. Shouting and exclaiming Joy is only one form of praise. Coming before the Lord silently is another that allows for reflecting on how the Lord is moving in our lives and for offering praise.

Just like the Israelites, I've spent the majority of my time concerned with my own well-being and, thus, have failed to give thanks and Rejoice in how God was moving in my life. In such times, I've missed the Lord "springing into action" because I did not spend time being silent before the Lord.

*The third week of Advent represents Joy or Rejoicing. My hope is in the busy seasons of our lives, we may be intentional about silent reflection before the Lord. In our silence, may we see His work and find Him living among us, giving us no option but to be overflowing with Joy.  
Amen.*

# Friday, December 16, Day 20

## Philippians 4:4-7

These verses in Philippians are ones I read and recite often. I have written these words out in numerous places that I will see throughout my day. As I'm sure each of you will agree, life does not come without worry, anxiety, and difficulty. We have plans for ourselves and ideas about what our lives should look like, but achieving those plans is stressful enough on its own. So what happens when we suddenly find that our path has taken a sharp turn in a different direction? As someone who struggles with anxiety and loves for everything to go as I planned, it can seem like my entire world is crashing down around me when something unexpected arises.

When I read Mary's story, it's easy for me to imagine why she was initially afraid when the angel appeared with the news that she would give birth to the Son of God. A conversation with an angel is not what Mary had planned for in that moment. Once Mary hears God's plan for her, she does not question or refuse it; instead, she responds by saying, "I am the Lord's servant." Later she rejoices, knowing that the Lord is with her. She gives every fear and doubt to God and finds peace knowing that God has a plan for her.

Mary's story is a model for trusting the Lord and rejoicing in the knowledge that He is always near. While each of our worries and challenges may be different, God's call and response is always the same: Give everything to God and rejoice in His faithfulness with the promise that He will always guide you.

*Dear Lord, thank you for always being near, even when we are struggling to see you. It is easy for us to get wrapped up in our own expectations and think that we can handle life on our own. Help us to seek you in times of anxiety and in times of Joy. Help us remember that you have a greater plan for us. We Rejoice in your presence and your many blessings. In your name, we pray. Amen.*

# Saturday, December 17, Day 21

## Isaiah 25:1, 7-9

In this season, I find myself in a race. I have a million things to do and not enough time in the day to complete them. I'm tired and worn down and exhausted from running so hard. All this running around leads me to feel inadequate and like I'm failing in the eyes of the Lord. It's easy for us to be consumed by these lies.

This passage is an incredible reminder of the Hope, Peace, satisfaction, and Joy that we find in the Lord, even in the midst of our race. It challenges me to take a step back, to sit with the Lord in the midst of the chaos and the running, and to just be with Him. The Lord challenges us to be present and to remember who He is and the wonderful things that were planned long ago. This passage brings me comfort. The Lord is in control. He is bigger than my exhaustion or my fear or my indecision. He is faithful and worthy of my trust.

As I wrap up my time in college, I am learning more and more about what it means to truly trust the Lord. It's easy for me to think I'm trusting the Lord when I feel in control of my life, but I don't actually trust the Lord in these times; I just trust myself. However, in situations where I feel conflicted, unsure, and afraid, I am forced to trust in the Lord—to trust Him wholeheartedly with my finances, my provisions, my wellbeing, and my future. For me there is great fear in these times. Will the Lord really provide for me? Did He really plan things for me long ago? But this fear is not from the Lord. He has told us time and time again that He will provide. He will come through. He is trustworthy. He is who He says he is. Isaiah 25:9 says, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in Him, and He saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation." Let us be joyous!

He has been present in the midst of my running. I need only to stop long enough to realize His presence. He is present in our sorrow and in our joys; and in the end, he will wipe away all our tears, swallow up death forever, and remove our disgrace. Now that is something to be joyful about. We have so much to be joyous about for our Lord is faithful and worthy of our trust.

*Lord, you have given us so much to be Joyful about. Draw our eyes to you even in the midst of our busyness. You are so worthy of our trust, and we are so thankful for you. We love you, Lord.  
In your name, Amen.*

# Sunday, December 18, Day 22

## LOVE

### Matthew 1:18-24

*This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said. "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel"- which means "God with us."*

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.*

Matthew 1:18-24

The watchword for the fourth week is Love. It makes sense for this word to find us this week. After all, "God so loved the world...." On the surface, however, it makes less sense for us to focus upon Joseph. How could anyone love the coming Christ Child more than Mary? What do we find in Joseph that speaks to Love? He was about to divorce Mary, yet we associate him with love?

I think the timing of Jesus' conception during Mary and Joseph's engagement was very intentional, not just to ensure Mary's purity, but because it gave Joseph time to break off the engagement. He had every right to. In fact, it would have been the smart thing to do considering how much his reputation could have been damaged. He must have been crushed at Mary's apparent betrayal; however, instead of rushing to expose her to soothe his bruised ego or to protect himself, he decided to handle the situation as quietly as possible. I think this is a much greater act of love than we give him credit for, far greater even than proceeding with the marriage after being visited by the angel of the Lord.



# Sunday, December 18, Day 22

Joseph was not just Jesus' earthly father, but he is representative of the Heavenly Father. Joseph's first and greatest act of Love was one of restraint. The moment he learned Mary was pregnant (before the angel's visit), he could have taken any number of legally, socially acceptable steps to destroy her. The same is true of God; He has the right. Instead, Joseph considered; he even slept on it; and because he was a righteous man, he chose mercy over "justice." This is God. This is Love. This is Emmanuel.

*Father, teach us to Love as you have Loved. Give us hearts that desire mercy over justice. Let us extend to others the gift of grace You have given to us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# Monday, December 19, Day 23

## 1 John 4:7-12

We are HUGE dog people at our house. We may even lean towards the “crazy dog people” end of the spectrum. We frequent dog parks, pup-parades, and furry festivals. It isn’t uncommon for us to rearrange our schedules week to week to be sure that the dogs are adequately (okay, above adequately) cared for. We are cleaning slaves due to the dog hair and slobber that so quickly accumulates in our house. But oh, how all of this is worth the bright-eyed, tail wagging, non-stop-barking welcome we get when walking in the door each day. In today’s world, Love like this is rare. A dog will Love its owner despite his character flaws, no matter his appearance and without ceasing. Sometimes, I wonder if my dogs’ Love is more Christ-like than my own.

Often Love is thought of as a feeling; but in reality, Love is a choice and an action. God first demonstrated this Love-action by sending His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. 1 John 4:10 tells us, “This is Love: not that we Loved God, but that He Loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” God’s Love is not earned through actions or good deeds. Shouldn’t this be the type of Love we offer to others? We often extend Love only after we have benefitted or reaped great rewards; however, this is not how Christ commands us to Love. We are to Love others as Christ first Loved us. This Love may require a conscious choice or action and less of the feel-good emotion; but we are promised if we Love one another, God will live in us and make His Love complete in us. God’s selfless Love, if ever truly considered, is all the motivation we will ever need to be intentional about loving those that come and go in our lives.

*Dear God, help me to faithfully Love others as you have Loved me. Please guide my actions and words so that they reflect your Love in all that I do. Lastly, Father, I pray you make your Love complete in me as I Love the people you entrust to me. Amen.*

# Tuesday, December 20, Day 24

## Psalm 103:1-4, 7-14

These passages speak to many different aspects of our faith in the Lord and Savior. First, David is praising the Lord from his inner-most being. This scripture reminds me that God must be in everything I do and in all parts of my life. Then David speaks of the benefits we receive when we praise and Love God. These verses speak to so many of God's great qualities and how he treats us as his children: with Redemption, Grace, Compassion, Love, Mercy, and Forgiveness. The second passage ends, "He knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." I think this is a reminder to us that God treats us the way he wants us to treat others. God knows we were formed from dust, God knows what we need and how we need to treat others with Redemption, Grace, Compassion, Love, Mercy and Forgiveness.

During Advent we celebrate God coming to earth as Jesus. It is important to remember that, "He will not constantly accuse us," and "He does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve." Instead, "He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west." God has loved us and forgiven us in our weakness. In this season of Love we should remember that as Christians it is our responsibility to do the same for others.

*Heavenly Father, we are all weak; we are all dust. Even our greatest efforts fall short, yet you continually forgive us and show us unfailing Love. Let us praise your Holy name with our entire beings and never forget the good things you have done and will do for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# Wednesday, December 21, Day 25

## Hosea 1:2,10; 2:23; 3:1,5

“Love is a verb. Without action, it is merely a word.” This quote indicates that Love must be more than static emotion and that it can be shown in various ways. In these verses from Hosea, we see the action of Love demonstrated in three ways: obedience, faithfulness, and forgiveness. Hosea showed Love by obeying God when He told him to marry a woman who would be unfaithful to him. He may not have wanted to, but Hosea obeyed. God may ask you to do something that you consider difficult. If He does, how will you respond? Will you, like Hosea, obey God and trust there is a purpose in all that is requested of you?

Hosea showed his Love for Gomer by continuing to take her back despite her adultery. God showed His Love for the Israelites by continuing to Love them despite their worship of Baal. The comparison of Hosea’s relationship with Gomer to God’s relationship with the Israelites tells a story that we can relate to. Being faithful and loving to a habitually unfaithful spouse would be difficult. This makes the fact that God continues to Love and be faithful to us even though we find false gods for ourselves even more powerful. Especially during this Christmas season, it often becomes easy to focus on the newest toys, clothes, electronics, etc. that we want to buy. Our attention can easily turn to shopping, decorations, and parties. Although we are not intentionally worshiping these things, do they take our focus away from Christ during this season?

God shows Love through His forgiveness. As we approach Christmas, we can be comforted to know that God forgives us, just as Hosea forgave Gomer and as God forgave the Israelites. God Loves us no matter what. We can use the last few days before Christmas to focus on God and prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christ’s birth.

*Father, give us the desire to Love you and one another by being obedient, faithful, and forgiving. Help us to remember that we are your people and that you are our God. In your holy name, Amen.*

# Thursday, December 22, Day 26

## Isaiah 54:1, 4-10

In this passage, Isaiah describes the future blessings of God's people. The population of Jerusalem will grow, the shame of Egyptian bondage and Babylonian exile will be forgotten, and the nation of Israel will find Peace. God's unfailing Love for His people will not be shaken, and this new covenant of Peace will be as binding as the covenant with Noah. To a people coming out of exile, these words must have been long-awaited yet hard to believe. Isaiah encourages his listeners to cast aside doubt, to burst into song and shout for Joy, and to live lives of faith as they wait for these promises to come to fruition.

That call to live a life of faith and to shout for Joy is one we would all do well to heed. Just like the nation of Israel, each of us carries our own brand of shame and fear, things which sometimes try to rob us of our Joy and Peace. Yet the God of all the earth, our maker, promises to Love us despite our imperfections if we have faith in Him and His promises. God's promise of perfect Love came in the form of a newborn baby, yet the ultimate expression of God's Love will be in Christ's return. Just as the Israelites waited in anticipation of God's promises to be fulfilled, we too faithfully wait during this season in anticipation of Christ, celebrating his birth and trusting in his return.

*Dear Heavenly Father, help us to live lives of faith and to trust in your promise of perfect Love and Peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# Friday, December 23, Day 27

## John 1:4-5, 10-14; 1 John 3:1-3

I Love Christmas. The packages, decorations, lights, and music always bring a certain excitement to me. With all the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, remembering the reason for the season is important. It seems to me that the true reason for Christmas is too often overlooked.

We learn from a young age that Christmas is about the birth of our Lord Jesus; but beyond that, I feel Christmas is a celebration of God's Love for us. God Loved us so much that He sent a baby, His Son, to save us. Prior to His miraculous birth, we were in darkness and relatively clueless. In a lot of ways, the same is still true for many of us. The good news is that Jesus came into the darkness and was the light. Those who know Jesus, know God.

The trick is, you can't just know God. We have to strive daily to be Christ-like in everything we do. From forgiving the driver who cut us off in traffic to loving the people with whom we just don't agree is all part of living in a Christ-like way. It is incredibly hard to do this, especially during the holidays when we are stressed about hosting the best Christmas party or having the best Christmas decorations in the neighborhood on top of our normal day-to-day stress. Luckily, if we mess up, we can ask for forgiveness and try to do better the next day.

As we move through the Christmas season, let us remember to be Christ-like in everything we do.

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the many blessings you have given us and loving us unconditionally. We ask that you help us to be Christ-like every day and to honor you in everything we do. Help us to remember that everything we do is a reflection of who we are as Christians. In your name, we pray. Amen.*

# Saturday, December 24, Day 28

## Isaiah 42:1-4; 43:19; 44:1-3

To be completely honest, I am not sure why this selection of Scripture was chosen. Probably because it lands on Christmas Eve, makes a vague prophetic reference to Christ and says, “Something new is happening! Right now!” The word Love does not appear in the text. However, the concept is there—you just have to look for it. When you find it, it will not look like the angelically glowing face of a mother smiling down at her perfect, cooing newborn. It looks a lot more like someone who owes you nothing offering you everything. This version of Love is agape, God-Love. It is not a whimsical or passionate Love that springs up out of nowhere and burns out just as quickly. Instead, it is patient, longsuffering, dutiful. It is an act of will. The God of all creation chooses to Love us.

It’s important to realize that God is the one speaking in this selection, and He starts off by saying, “My servant, whom I strengthen. He will bring justice....” I don’t know about you, but that’s enough to make me a little nervous. Almost immediately, however, we see that God’s servant does not come in brute force. He does not come to crush or extinguish. Instead, this servant is merciful, reflecting the mercy Joseph showed to Mary.

When I first read this selection, I think I mainly found God’s Love in meeting our needs by “pour[ing] out water...,” but I see something else now. In 43:19, in the middle of two larger passages, God is “about to do something new.” In fact, it has “already begun!” This play with future and past reminds me of a passage in John: “In the beginning the Word already existed” (John 1:1). It reminds me God has a plan that has been thousands of years in the making. It is a plan that has always only been in my favor.

God replaces something old with “something new” through Christ but does not stop there. Notice in the first section how God says of His servant that He will “put [His] Spirit upon him.” After the “new thing” God uses the same language: “Do not be afraid... O dear Israel, My chosen one... And I will pour out My Spirit on your descendants.”

It’s Christmas Eve, and there is about to be a birth. It is Christ. It is us. We are born through Christ into the spiritual family of Israel and adopted into God’s Kingdom. We are a part of the “something new.” Until Christ returns, we must bring justice to the world. We must not falter, lose heart, or be afraid because the God that already Loved us before we existed will pour out His Spirit and blessings upon us.

*Heavenly Father, we know we are not equal to the task of bringing your Justice and Love to Earth, but you have chosen us anyway. You are the Lord who made us and helps us. Pour out your Spirit and blessings on your children. Strengthen our efforts to bring your God-Love to the world—human as we are, weak as we may be. In Jesus’ name and for your glory, we pray.*

*Amen.*



# Sunday, December 25, Day 29

## Philippians 2:5-11 ESV

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

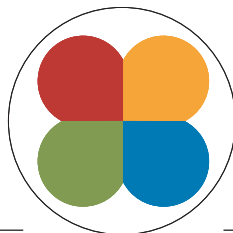
By now the contents of the Christmas stockings have probably been spilled on the floor and the wrapping ripped from every package. The once beautiful Christmas tree now looks a bit bruised by the Christmas morning rush. I recognize that for others Christmas morning is met with quiet rather than a buzz of activity. But in both situations the great gift of the day is not one lying beneath a tree or wrapped in bows and bobbles. Today, we come to celebrate that once-in-eternity gift shown in the birth of Jesus – Emanuel – God with us.

Some who read this devotional will gather later this morning for a time of intimate, informal worship as a church family. Others will remain at home. But the call to celebrate the birth of the Christ child is the same. Today, we celebrate that the chasm between heaven and earth has been bridged and the divide between God and humanity forever changed because God came and became like us so that we might see God face to face. Christmas morning invites us to begin the journey from the manger to the cross and an empty tomb where our hope and salvation bursts to life. The promise of “good news of great Joy that will be for all people” has come. Merry Christmas! God is with us! Thanks be to God!

Tom Ogburn



# Notes



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