

ADVENT READING PLAN

Nov 26 - Dec 25

REDISCOVER *Christmas*

GOOD NEWS IN TROUBLING TIMES



REDISCOVERING

Hope

IN OUR
UNCERTAINTIES

REDISCOVERING

Peace

IN OUR
STRUGGLES

REDISCOVERING

Joy

IN OUR
DISCOURAGEMENTS

REDISCOVERING

Love

IN OUR
DIFFERENCES



ReDiscover Christmas: Good News in Troubling Times Advent Reading Plan

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Contents

Nov 26 - Dec 25

INTRODUCTION: Good News in Troubling Times	4
 ADVENT WEEK 1: Rediscovering Hope in Our Uncertainties	 7
1. Hope Sees Beyond	9
2. Hope to Carry On	10
3. Hope Conquers Fear	11
4. When Hope Seems Gone	12
5. Hope Sustains Us	13
6. Hope Overflows	14
7. Hope for Our Inheritance	15
 ADVENT WEEK 2: Rediscovering Peace in Our Struggles	 16
8. Unstoppable Peace	18
9. The Peace of Wholeness	19
10. Peace Reigns	20
11. Peace Transcends	21
12. The Pause of Peace	22
13. Planting Peace	23
14. The Invitation to Peace	24
 ADVENT WEEK 3: Rediscovering Joy in Our Discouragement	 25
15. Joy Finds a Way	27
16. Joy Comes in the Morning	28
17. Celebrate Joy	29
18. Choose Joy	30
19. Feeding Joy	31
20. United in Joy	32
21. Joy Restored	33

ADVENT WEEK 4: Rediscovering Love in Our Differences	34
22. Love Honors Others	36
23. Love Defeats Fear	37
24. Unfailing Love	38
25. Love for One Another	39
26. Love Your Enemies	40
27. Love Responds	41
28. Love Blows Our Minds	42

ADVENT CHRISTMAS EVE AND CHRISTMAS DAY:

Finding Christ in Our World	43
29. Christmas Eve: An Expectant Pause	46
30. Christmas Day: The Best News	47

Introduction:

GOOD NEWS IN TROUBLING TIMES

We've made it! We've made it to Advent and the Christmas season! And wow, can we certainly use some Christmas! It's been a year like no other, to put it mildly. Global pandemic, economic recession, mass unemployment, political division, cultural upheaval, racial reckoning, record wildfires, extra powerful hurricanes, devastating floods. Did I miss anything? Maybe whatever personal struggles you are facing are a result of those wide-scale events or completely unrelated. In whatever form they've come for you, the realities of life have been heavy and humbling. We have been aware of the darkness around us.

It's the ideal setting for some light.

It's just the kind of backdrop for a Savior to come.

It's the perfect time to rediscover Christmas.

Because no matter how troubling the times, and no matter how heavy our hearts, there is good news. The greatest news!

As the angels proclaimed it on the night of Jesus's birth long ago:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:10-14)

This is the news of the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. This is the news that drives away fear and fills us with joy and holds us in peace. It's news of the reality we are invited to step into and experience.

And Advent is the time of our journey into this rediscovery of hope, peace, joy, love, and of Christ himself.

Wherever you are this year on your level of anxiety, uncertainty, or pain—

Wherever you are on your own spiritual journey—

Wherever you are in the midst of holiday stress or pressure—

Let me invite you into this journey of Advent.

HOW TO CELEBRATE ADVENT

Advent is a season that is officially observed in many churches. The four weeks before Christmas are set aside as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of Jesus's birth. The term advent is a version of the Latin word that means "coming." But Advent is not just an extension of Christmas; it is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming. It is a season to explore and experience several key traits embodied in the arrival of Christ: hope, peace, joy, and love.

While the core concept of Advent remains the same, some traditions and practices vary. This reading plan is based on common practices, and we invite you to adapt it to match the traditions of your own church. One of the main traditions of Advent is the weekly lighting of the candles on an Advent wreath. A circular evergreen wreath represents God's unending love for us. And the lighting of five candles throughout the season represents Jesus's coming to a world lost in darkness. Isaiah 9:2 says, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." This can be both a meaningful and fun tradition for kids of all ages, and it can be easily adapted to fit individual, group, or family needs.

This reading plan contains devotions for each of the four weeks before Christmas. Based around the weekly themes of hope, peace, joy, and love, there are seven devotions for each theme. There is also a devotion for Christmas Eve and one for Christmas Day. These emphasize the rediscovery of Christmas in the practice and experience of each trait, and they lead us in reminders of good news in our troubles and uncertainties. Practical questions help to spur us toward ways to apply hope, peace, joy, and love in our own lives.

In addition, each weekly section contains an introduction page with a song to sing, verses to memorize, a question to ponder, and a verse to focus on throughout the week. We encourage you to use these sections as a guide for a weekly lighting of your own Advent wreath. Whether you do this alone, as a family, with friends, as a small group, in person, or virtually, the tradition of the lighting of the candles will add to the richness of your Advent experience. And singing the songs can make the experience especially fun and meaningful if you have kids.

In a season often marked by frenzied busyness, Advent is an opportunity to set aside time to prepare our hearts. The tradition and the devotions in this book are designed to help us place our focus on a far greater story than our own—the story of God’s redeeming love for our world. The story of His presence with us always.

So no matter what the department stores try to tell you, Christmas has not yet arrived. There is value as well as excitement in patient and expectant waiting. May this be a season of wonder for you. May it be a rediscovery of Christmas. And may the Holy Spirit lead you on a journey of peace, joy, and love—and ultimately to a deep encounter with Jesus.

Advent Week 1

REDISCOVERING HOPE IN OUR UNCERTAINTIES

The first Sunday of Advent signifies the hope people felt in their hearts for the promised Messiah to lead them out of dark and hard times. We all have one of those days, weeks, or years. As we begin this season of Advent, we will spend the next seven days rediscovering the hope in our hearts that Jesus continues to bring to our world. In addition to the daily devotions, take time this week to light the first candle in your Advent wreath. (See Introduction for instructions.) Remember all that is fulfilled in Jesus, express your desires for this season, and place your hope in the light of the world, who was born a baby in Bethlehem and who is coming again.



But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him 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 Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

—Luke 1:29-33

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 conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’).”

—Matthew 1:21-23



What do you hope for this season?



For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

—Jeremiah 29:11



“Oh Little Town of Bethlehem”

Nov 26

HOPE SEES BEYOND

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.
—Romans 8:24-26

Have you ever seen the movie *A Christmas Story*? You know, the one with Ralphie and his friend who gets his tongue stuck to a frozen flagpole? The 1983 holiday classic centers around Ralphie's longing for a Red Ryder BB gun. He has built it up as the be-all, end-all of his nine-year-old existence, and there is nothing he wants more. For most of the movie, other people, including a department store Santa, pour cold water on his dream, but he continues to keep hope alive. When Christmas morning comes, it seems Ralphie's hope is crushed when all the presents are opened and there is no Red Ryder. Spoiler alert: Of course, there is one more hidden gift, and Ralphie's greatest wish comes true.

At that point, Ralphie doesn't need hope anymore. He can't hope anymore. His hope is fulfilled. As Paul writes, "Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?" Paul is talking about the completion of God's work within and around us, the fulfilled restoration of our bodies and souls and all of creation. Paul explains that this is reality already, made possible because Jesus has come, and lived, and died, and risen. Now, with help from His Spirit, we wait patiently to see His work fulfilled. This was the promise God gave at the beginning and continued through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the history of the Jewish people. Our hope is fulfilled in Jesus.

What is your deepest hope this Christmas? What step can you take to experience the strength of God's Spirit to renew hope and realize His work all around us?

Nov 27

HOPE TO CARRY ON

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

The pictures show him sharply dressed in a navy blue blazer, decorated with military medals, behind the walker that he uses to get around. That walker didn't stop Captain Sir Tom Moore. Neither did his 100 years of age. Captain Tom, as he became famously known, walked 100 laps around his backyard and became a viral sensation who raised \$40 million for the British health care system in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. It started as a challenge from his son-in-law and went viral when posted to a fundraising website. Captain Tom's sense of steady perseverance inspired Great Britain during a time it needed hope. "The first step was the hardest," Captain Tom told reporters after. "After that, I got into the swing of it and kept on going."

Isn't that always true? The first step is always the hardest. But hope gives us the push to get going. Captain Tom began walking with the hope that he might be able to help someone. Hope spurs us to take that first step in a difficult time. Hope enables us to keep walking, one more step at a time. And hope sustains us with the vision that there is a better ending. Isaiah reminds us that our strength is renewed when we put our hope in the Lord. The hope that Christ has brought into the world allows our spirit to soar like an eagle. It fuels us to keep walking, one step at a time.

Where is hope leading you? What is the next step God is leading you to take this Christmas season?

Nov 28

HOPE CONQUERS FEAR

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

—1 Peter 1:3-4

It was the night before the Christmas Eve service when church organist Lewis Redner came up with the tune to “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Waking in the night, he felt like he had heard the whisper of an angel, and he wrote down the melody of the beloved carol we still sing nearly 150 years later.

The lyrics were a poem written by Phillips Brooks, minister at Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. Several years later, in 1865, Brooks had visited Bethlehem on horseback during a trip to the Holy Land. He saw shepherds tending their flocks in the countryside surrounding the small village and attended a Christmas Eve service in the Church of the Nativity. He remembered the moving experience several years later as he prepared for Christmas Eve worship. Brooks and Redner thought their combined composition would only be sung for that evening’s service, but, as we know, the song quickly spread and endured.

Among the song’s beautiful lyrics is this line: *The hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in thee tonight.* It’s a reminder that no matter how great the fear—even the fears of all history—the hope that Christ brings is greater. In Jesus, hope overcomes all our fears, and this hope is alive. Peter calls it a living hope. Because Christ has come to live and die and rise again, this hope of life conquers the fears of death. Because of Jesus, when fear and hope collide, hope wins.

How is fear darkening your life? How can you grab hold of this living hope in Jesus?

Nov 29

WHEN HOPE SEEMS GONE

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.
—Isaiah 43:1-2

When commercial fisherman John Aldridge went sprawling overboard 40 miles off the coast of New York in 2017, he knew his partner, Anthony Sosinski, sleeping belowdecks would never hear his cries for help. When the boat motored ahead on autopilot and disappeared over the crest of a wave, Aldridge knew he was alone. As he tread water in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean without a life vest, he knew this was the way he would die.

But then he discovered that he could create an air pocket in his fishing boots. They floated. It was a flicker of hope to literally cling to. Aldridge made it through the night. He eventually spotted a fishing buoy and was able to cling to it. Twelve hours after he had fallen into the sea, a Coast Guard helicopter pulled Aldridge to safety. Against all hope, the man overboard survived.

Sometimes we just need something, one thing, to cling to in the darkness and the depths. God's Word is filled with promises, such as Isaiah 43:1-2 above. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." In Jeremiah 29:11, we're told, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." God has given us hope we can cling to. No matter what we are facing, we can turn to the Bible and find His words come alive to renew hope within us.

What Bible verses are speaking to you today? What Scripture can you write down or memorize as a source of renewed hope?

Nov 30

HOPE SUSTAINS US

Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit [which] was given to us.

—Romans 5:5

He had been waiting. The old man was ready. Luke calls him righteous and devout. Simeon had been faithfully serving God for decades and watching for the fulfillment of His promise to send a Messiah. Each morning, he might have asked, “Is this the day?” Then came the day when he felt that nudge by God’s Spirit: *Go to the temple. Something exciting is about to happen. I have a surprise for you.*

When Simeon saw the young family across the temple courts, he knew. This was the moment he had been waiting for his whole life. He probably ran to them, taking the baby from the surprised parents, lifting him skyward, then cradling him in his arms. And Simeon worshiped. He told God he was fulfilled, content; he could now die a happy man. “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (Luke 2:30-32).

Simeon is the perfect example of the man described in Jeremiah 17:7: “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose hope is the LORD.” Simeon reminds us that hope does not disappoint. Why? Because, as Paul says, “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit [which] was given to us.” God’s never-ending love for us will always come through in God’s perfect timing. The hope of Christ will never fail us.

How would your hope compare to Simeon’s? How might you spread a sense of hope by some small expression fueled by God’s love?

Dec 1

HOPE OVERFLOWS

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

—Romans 15:13

There was someone else there that day when Mary and Joseph brought their infant son to the temple. Another who had been faithfully watching and waiting and believing it was only a matter of time before she saw the fulfillment of God's longstanding promise. Anna was a prophet, eighty-four years old. She had been married once, long ago, for seven years before her husband died. This would have given her a difficult life in ancient culture, making her dependent on others for a well-being that was probably then meager. None of that seemed to slow Anna down. She spent all her time in the temple, worshiping, fasting, and praying. Her service might have even been part of some official group or capacity.

Like Simeon, Anna was ready when Jesus arrived. Maybe she approached the young family at the same time as Simeon. Maybe later. Whatever the timing, her worshipful response was similar. But Luke tells us even more. Like Simeon, Anna was overjoyed to see this long-expected gift from God. She certainly must have felt fulfilled as well. But Anna wasn't done. Her hope overflowed, and she told everyone she could about what she had seen.

Anna's hope is the kind described by Paul, when he prayed, "... that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Isn't that just like hope? It's the kind of hope we see in children on Christmas morning: expectant, unbridled, uncontainable, overflowing. And it's the same kind from the God of hope that sustains through the ages.

How is your hope-ometer these days? What hope have you given up on that God is calling to renew in you?

HOPE FOR OUR INHERITANCE

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.
—Ephesians 1:18

You’ve seen the movies or heard the stories. Maybe you’ve dreamed of it happening to you. A long lost relative who you never knew you had dies and unexpectedly leaves a fortune for you. Turns out it really does happen sometimes. Take the case of Zsolt and Geza Peladi. The brothers were living in a cave outside of Budapest, Hungary, in 2009 when they learned they would inherit \$7 billion from their long-lost grandmother. The Peladi brothers knew their mother had come from a wealthy family, but she had severed ties with her family and later abandoned her sons. Their grandmother had died with no other heirs, and her next surviving relatives were tracked down: Zsolt and Geza and their sister who lived in the United States. The brothers told reporters they hoped their newfound money would allow them to find love and a normal life.

It’s probably unlikely that you or I will inherit \$7 billion—but apparently not impossible. Regardless, we have the most incredible and satisfying inheritance of all: “the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,” as the apostle Paul describes it. In Ephesians 1, Paul recaps the power of the promise that God has fulfilled in Jesus. One day, we will receive the fulfillment of eternal life, complete restoration to wholeness and unity with God. In the meantime, God’s Spirit fills us with hope for the day when we will see this work complete. In Advent, we expectantly hope for the celebration of Christmas, and we look beyond with hope to Christ’s return and our invaluable spiritual inheritance.

What would you do if you knew you were about to inherit a billion dollars? How will you live knowing the power of Christ to defeat death is alive in you today?

Advent Week 2

REDISCOVERING PEACE IN OUR STRUGGLES

The second Sunday of Advent signifies peace and reminds us that Jesus came to bring peace and God's favor to humanity. We will spend the next seven days during this week of Advent concentrating on and rediscovering God's peace. In addition to the daily devotions, take time this week to light the second candle in your Advent wreath. In a world that seems to be filled with anxiety, conflict, and uncertainty more than peace, allow God to be your peace. Whatever circumstances you are facing, let the peace of Christ be your comfort, rest, and refuge.



For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. — Isaiah 9:6

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

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” — Luke 2:8-15



What does peace mean in our world? What does peace look like in your life?



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

—John 16:33



"Silent Night"

Dec 3

UNSTOPPABLE PEACE

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”
—Luke 2:14

It’s kind of a miracle that *A Charlie Brown Christmas* ever got made, much less aired on national television. We know it as a beloved Christmas tradition, but in 1965, the TV executives were sure it was going to flop. They thought it was too slow. The now iconic jazz music didn’t belong in a cartoon. The voices were too amateurish. Charlie Brown and his pals used too big a vocabulary. And Linus can’t quote the Bible on TV. Even Charles Schultz’s own creative team tried to talk the illustrator out of that scene, but Schultz would not be dissuaded. Because Coca-Cola had bankrolled the show and TV guides had already listed it, CBS execs had no choice but to reluctantly air it.

As you know, the show was a hit. Its triumph was Linus announcing to Charlie Brown “That’s what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown,” and proclaiming to the world the words of the angels from that first Christmas night:

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:10-14).

That message is the same for us today. It’s OK. You don’t have to be afraid. Christ has come. Peace is here. Let’s rest in that enduring promise throughout this Advent season.

What restores your sense of peace? How can you take a daily pause to refocus and let God’s peace wash over you?

Dec 4

THE PEACE OF WHOLENESS

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

—John 14:27

Don't you love those moments when everything seems right with the world? Maybe it's when your baby is sleeping in your arms. Maybe it's holding your spouse close after a long absence. Maybe it's when your children are home from college, together again. Maybe it's the whole family laughing together at Christmas. Or maybe it's after all the in-laws go home again.

In the Jewish culture, peace is much more than the absence of conflict. It's more like those brief moments of everything being right in your world. The Old Testament word is *shalom*, used still today as a greeting and a blessing. The concept of *shalom* is a concept of wholeness. It is an understanding that life is complex with many moving pieces, responsibilities, relationships, and more, but in *shalom* there is completeness, unity, safety—peace. Through the giving of the Law to Moses and God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants, there was God's *shalom*, restoration, relationship, and spiritual wholeness. And in the coming of the Messiah, the Prince of *Shalom* would realize this sense of ultimate peace.

So you can be sure the disciples remembered and clung to Jesus's words in the days after His death and resurrection. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." This was His *shalom* that would calm their hearts and overcome their fears, even when the world reeled around them. Jesus knew the hard times and even horrific days that lay ahead for His disciples, but He wanted them to know His Spirit would sustain them with peace. He knew the work of complete restoration He was accomplishing. It's the same work He is working in us. Jesus is making us whole. His peace can calm our hearts and overcome our fears.

What is making you afraid? How can you speak words of peace, shalom, today?

Dec 5

PEACE REIGNS

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
—Isaiah 9:6

A young priest named Joseph Mohr took the long way home one winter night in 1816, less than a year after the ravages of the Napoleonic Wars. As Mohr looked out across the scene, he was struck with a profound sense of peace. Snow blanketed the small village in the Alps. Candlelight glowed from cottage windows. Smoke trailed skyward from cozy hearths within. Overhead, countless stars twinkled with radiance. When he got home, Mohr wrote the lyrics we now know as “Silent Night.”

Two years later, Mohr asked his friend and choir director Franz Gruber to write a melody for guitar. And on Christmas Eve 1818 in Oberndorf, Austria, the two performed “Stille Nacht Heilige Nacht” at the evening mass. The carol’s startling simplicity captivated listeners. Traveling folk singers began to spread the song, and eventually it crossed continents and languages. In 1914, soldiers during World War I, came out of their trenches and crossed the battle lines to sing “Silent Night” together in French, German, and English in a profound evening of peace.

We know that not all was peaceful on that first Christmas night. There was a frantic search for lodging after a grueling journey forced by a foreign government. There was the pain and exhaustion of labor and childbirth. There was terror at the angels first appearance. But there must also have been moments of profound silence as a new mother cradled her sleeping son and breathed in the newborn scent of his head. The shepherds must have felt it as they settled their flocks again in the fields, filled with wonder and gazing into the sparkling night sky. Sometimes it’s in the darkness and silence that we are most aware that the Prince of Peace rules.

When is the last time you listened to “Silent Night?” How can you set aside a few moments to step into the peace of this son who has been given, the Prince of Peace?

Dec 6

PEACE TRANSCENDS

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
—Philippians 4:6–7

“How can this be?” Mary asked the angel, according to Luke. It must roughly translate to, “Wait! What?! Conceive...give birth...Son of the Most High? How can I have a baby?! Everybody knows there’s only one way to have a baby!”

We don’t know exactly how or when Mary told Joseph. Apparently it didn’t go well. Joseph was crushed. The betrayal stung beyond words. How could Mary do this? He loved her. He didn’t want to hurt her, but he couldn’t take this pain of his own. He wouldn’t make a public scene, but he would break off the engagement, the equivalent of a divorce in the marriage process and customs of the day.

You know what happened. There were angels and messages directly from God, and both Mary and Joseph chose to believe them and trust. But you also know how people are. If Joseph had a hard time believing Mary’s story, just think about their neighbors and customers and townsfolk. Both Mary and Joseph must have been targeted with their scorn and judgment. It wouldn’t have been an easy nine months. It wouldn’t have been an easy journey to Bethlehem by foot or by donkey. It wouldn’t have been an easy parenting journey.

But Mary and Joseph continued to trust. They continued to stay faithful. The questions and uncertainty must have continued to come too. And they must have continued to remember God’s work they had witnessed. They must have thanked Him for all they had seen. They must have prayed and petitioned God, turning their focus on Him. We know the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guarded their hearts and minds even in their most difficult moments—just as He has promised it will do in ours.

What are you feeling anxious about? What is your prayer and request from God today?

Dec 7

THE PAUSE OF PEACE

And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm.

—Mark 4:37-39 (NKJV)

Have you ever experienced a hurricane? Have you ever passed through the eye of a hurricane? It's an eerie experience. There truly is a stillness right at the center of a circling hurricane. After the worst of the storm comes a stillness. The eye is surrounded by the eyewall, a ring of towering, ferocious thunderstorms that are the violent vortex of humid air that feeds the hurricane. But then the winds calm. The rains cease. It's a pause in the maelstrom. It's temporary. But it's kind of like those freeze frame moments in a movie when everything slows down to one brief moment of reality while life or chaos or catastrophe happen all around the character like a brief millisecond of clarity.

Jesus has the power to calm our storms. Even in the worst of the gales howling around us. The disciples experienced it physically in that storm at sea with Jesus. We can experience it spiritually. "Peace, be still," Jesus says. As we cry out to Him, He is able to bring calm to the winds that rage within and around us. He is able to bring pause and clarity. Jesus is our peace, no matter how bad the storm we are facing.

What storm are you facing? How will you pause today to, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10)?

Dec 8

PLANTING PEACE

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.
—James 3:17-18

When their small boat set sail in Chile to cross the notoriously treacherous Drake Passage to Antarctica, there was so much that could go wrong. The 2004 expedition would attempt to be the first to climb an unnamed peak in Antarctica. First, they had to trek by foot for weeks across the ice. Most had no sailing or mountaineering experience. And all of them came from opposite sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The “extreme peace mission” was the idea of Heskell Nathaniel, an Israeli outdoorsman, and sponsored by Israel’s Peres Centre for Peace. But the group was not made of peace activists. Some had served in different armies and served time for attacks on the other side. Others were political activists. Some had lost family members in bombings. But they had to work together for success and survival. “I’m not so naive as to believe we will bring peace,” one of the team members said. “But I think it will push forward other groups of people to go ahead and talk, just sit and talk.”

The crew was ultimately successful in summiting its peak and raising awareness for Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and potential peace. But first they had to be willing to extend grace, mercy, forgiveness, and trust to their teammates from across the border. These are qualities of “wisdom that comes from heaven,” as James describes them. And he likens the process of finding peace to planting: When we plant and cultivate peace, we harvest and experience righteous fruit.

Often peace means taking the first step and planting the seeds of peace one at a time.

What conflict is keeping you from shalom wholeness? What step of forgiveness or grace will you take to cultivate peace or heal a relationship?

Dec 9

THE INVITATION TO PEACE

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.
—Matthew 11: 28-30

The shepherds gained a special place in history on the night of Jesus's birth, but in their time, they were nothing special as far as society was concerned. The shepherds were the everyman, the working class. They labored under the sun and stars. They tended animals. They probably smelled like the animals they kept. They had no entitlement. They were probably looked down on by the religious elite. And they probably would have immediately understood and embraced the agricultural example in Jesus's teaching years later: the yoke of walking in step with Jesus and following His lead. They would have embraced his invitation to come and find rest. They were weary with the burden of never-ending labor and scratching out a living in the fields.

What an invitation to peace! "For I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls."

It was no accident that the angels showed up above the fields outside of Bethlehem to make their proclamation of "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." It was a triumphant signal that God was there for the humble and lowly and weary and broken. Those people had a place in the stable to encounter the Messiah.

Jesus's invitation extends to us today. We can come and experience the deep rest of His peace.

What burden feels heavy right now? What step will you take as Jesus welcomes, "Come to me"?

Advent Week 3

REDISCOVERING JOY IN OUR DISCOURAGEMENT

The third Sunday of Advent signifies joy and reminds us of the angel's good news told to the shepherds. These daily devotions will lead you on a rediscovery of joy over the next seven days. Take time this week to light the third candle in your Advent wreath as well. Imagine yourself on the hillside where the joyous announcement was made by a sky-full of angels. Joy is possible even in the midst of hardship and discouragement. As you watch for joy in the world around you during this season, surrender the pain and fear in your life and ask God to fill you with the gift of His joy.



And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” — Luke 2:8-12

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. — Isaiah 61:10



What brings you the most joy at Christmas? What keeps you from experiencing joy?



Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. — 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18



"Joy to the World"

JOY FINDS A WAY

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.” —Luke 1:46-48

Have you ever been to Yellowstone National Park? It’s an amazing place, filled with nature’s majesty. It’s also a unique place, basically sitting above a supervolcano beneath the earth’s surface. That’s where the park’s famous geysers come from. All that geothermal heat and combustion down there has to go somewhere, so it rises to the surface, escaping through vents we know as geysers. Some like Old Faithful spout water 180 feet into the air. Others heat large hot spring pools and churn up kaleidoscopic minerals. Others ooze out in slowly bubbling mudpots.

Joy is kind of like those geysers. It’s our feel-good emotion, and when it’s there, it’s going to find a way out. Sometimes it’s quick to burst out. Sometimes it takes a while to work its way through the mud in our lives. Sometimes it’s a combination of both.

Maybe that’s the way it was for Mary and Elizabeth, two miraculous mothers-to-be in Luke’s Christmas account. Both women were facing a mixture of emotions in their unexpected pregnancies. Behind Elizabeth’s elation were decades of shame, scorn, and crushed dreams of having children. Maybe that’s why she spent five months in seclusion. Behind Mary’s wonder were judgment and scorn from others, and certainly some fear and confusion of her own. Maybe that’s why Mary hurried to the hill country, away from the judgmental eyes of her neighbors.

But when the two women united, joy erupted. Elizabeth’s baby, John the Baptist, leaped in the womb. The Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth, and she joyfully blessed and affirmed Mary. Then Mary burst into song, praising God and rejoicing. All the fear, uncertainty, and pain faded in the face of encouragement and joy.

How is your sense of joy in this season? Who can you reach out to in order to find encouragement or to encourage?

Dec 11

JOY COMES IN THE MORNING

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? ... But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.
—Psalm 13:1-2,5-6

When 11-year-old Riley moves across the country to San Francisco, her world is **thrown for a loop**. So are the five core emotions inside the headquarters of her brain: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust. If you've seen the Disney movie *Inside Out*, you know those colorful characters are the ones who run the control panels of the girl's actions, experiences, and memories. Spoiler alert: After a meltdown in emotional headquarters, Riley's world is in upheaval. But there's a touching scene at the end when Joy hands over the controls of the emotional console to Sadness. Sadness is able to let Riley cry and let out all the bad feelings. As her parents support and hug her, Riley cries and smiles contentedly at the same time. And Sadness and Joy hold hands and form a new memory together.

Sadness and joy are often the same for us. Life is hard, and pain is real, even in the “joyous” Christmas season. Rather than putting on a fake smile or trying to power our way to happiness, it's important to express our hurts and sorrows. God wants us to pour out our hearts to Him. The psalmists give us great examples in their prayerful songs and poems. When we are willing to cry out, “Where are you God?” and allow Him to hold and support us, He can fill us with the comfort and strength to choose joy and experience His presence. As King David put it in Psalm 30:5, “Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”

What sadness or pain do you need to express to find support? How can you create your own personal psalm to pour out your heart to God?

Dec 12

CELEBRATE JOY

Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength. —Nehemiah 8:10

Christmas was a fairly forgotten holiday in London and most of England by the 1840s. Easter was celebrated. So was Boxing Day. But Christmas? Meh. So publishers didn't see why anyone would want to read Charles Dickens's latest book, *A Christmas Carol*. Turned out, everyone did. As we know, Dickens's story was a hit, and still is. Because of that book, Dickens has been credited with saving Christmas and shaping the way we celebrate the holiday today. Not just in England, but in the U.S. too.

Of course, we all know the story of Mr. Scrooge and his "Bah, humbug!" It's ultimately a tale of Scrooge's redemption, but the Cratchit family serve as a reminder of the joy of the season, no matter how miserly and harsh the world is around us.

Long before Dickens, Israel's leader Nehemiah led the Jewish people back from exile in Babylon to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He also led them back to God and to the worship they had forgotten. When Nehemiah had God's Law read to the people, they wept with remorse and regret. But as a representative of God's work and voice, Nehemiah was a reminder of grace and restoration. His declaration was to celebrate and embrace the joy of the occasion, "for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

We know that the pace and activities of our holidays can bring a mixture of emotions that threatens to chase joy into the shadows. As we choose to cling to the joy of the Lord, let us embrace and experience the joy of the season in His hope, peace, and love in our lives.

What is squashing your Christmas joy? What can you say no to in order to say yes to joy this season?

CHOOSE JOY

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. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. —James 1:2-4

If you've spent much time in nature, you've probably come across the odd sight of a tree growing out of a rock. In the city, you've probably seen a flower blooming out of a tiny crack in a sidewalk or street. Plants like that make a stark contrast to our expectations. They go against the grain of what we normally expect from nature and science. We know plants of all kinds need soil to grow and live. Yet these hardy botanical survivors somehow find a way to send roots through the tiniest crevices or to draw nutrients from the most meager supplies. They defy their harsh environments and find a way to thrive.

Joy allows us to do the same. It gives us the strength to persevere even when our circumstances look bleak and we are surrounded by cold, hard reality. Does it make sense to feel joy when we face trials? No. But when we choose joy, when we choose to look with thankfulness for what God will do even in our bleakest days, we can find the strength to persevere another day, and another, and another. And we continue to grow stronger in our rocky surroundings.

It's not easy. Maybe that's why Paul said it twice: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). He knew we needed reminders often. He had certainly lived through the difficulties of prison, beatings, hatred, ridicule, loneliness, injustice, and more. Yet Paul continued to choose the action of joy, to rejoice, and to place his focus on God, even when life felt like nothing but a rock and a hard place.

What is the rock you are facing right now? What step will you take to choose joy even when it's hard?

Dec 14

FEEDING JOY

When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, LORD God Almighty. —Jeremiah 15:16

What is your favorite Christmas feast? Are you a traditional American big meal person, loading up the table with platters of turkey, ham, mashed potatoes and gravy, sweet potatoes, casseroles, cranberry relishes, and pies for dessert? Do you prefer or include other cultural delicacies? Does your table include tamales, latkes, Christmas pudding, Buche de Noel, suckling pig, lutefisk, or other dishes passed down by heritage or family preference? Food plays a big part in holiday traditions around the world. It certainly draws us together as family and friends to reunite and celebrate and share the joys—and sometimes the painful awkwardness—of each other's company.

How do we choose joy when the painful moments of the season or life in general feel crushingly heavy? One way is to devour God's Word like Jeremiah, who said, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight." In the same way, they are our spiritual sustenance. They feed us. The principle of "You are what you eat" applies to our spirits as well. As we take in the words of God, savoring and digesting them, they are able to refuel and renew us. They change our perspective and nourish joy within us, and they fill us with the strength to grow stronger, no matter what we are facing. Let's feast on the promises of God throughout this Advent season.

How is your spiritual diet? What Scripture will you choose to savor and return to throughout this week?

UNITED IN JOY

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
—Isaiah 61:10

Is there anything more radiant than a bride on her wedding day? She is the picture of beauty. We are captivated by weddings, and the bride is the center of attention. That's true whether it's your cousin's ceremony or England's Royal Wedding. Whatever the setting, the bride is the princess on her wedding day. Some little girls begin dreaming of that day as preschoolers twirling around in princess dresses and their mother's oversized high-heeled shoes. There is a beauty in the union of a bride and groom, and a purity in the moment when the bride appears and walks down the aisle to her soon-to-be husband. A wedding is one of the most joyful celebrations we can have on this earth.

It's one the Bible compares to our relationship with Jesus. Isaiah says God has clothed us like a bride or groom, fixing us up in our finest through His salvation and restoration. He has given us reason to experience joy like a wedding day. Jesus compared Himself to a bridegroom when He taught on earth. John used the imagery when he described Christ's return in Revelation 19:7: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready."

When we think ahead to our eventual union with Jesus, we can find joy in the celebration of all it represents: Instead of sorrow, pain, or death, there will be joy, wholeness, and life. When we remember the significance of Jesus's birth and our first encounter with Him, we can experience joy that flows from His perfect, unconditional love.

What memories of your relationship with Jesus bring you joy? What do you imagine the wedding of Jesus and His followers will be like?

Dec 16

JOY RESTORED

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
—Psalm 51:10-12

Christmas trees can trace their roots all the way back to ancient cultures, including the Egyptians and Romans who decorated with evergreen boughs to mark the Winter Solstice. The Christmas tree tradition we know got started in Germany in the 16th century, and it's believed that Martin Luther first added candles to light the tree and made it part of Christian celebrations. German settlers in Pennsylvania brought the tradition to the U.S. in the 1830s. But the trees became widely popular across the U.S. and Great Britain in 1846, when a London newspaper showed an illustration of Queen Victoria, the German Prince Albert, and their children celebrating around their Christmas tree. From the beginning, evergreens have been loved for their constant reminder of flourishing life through the long, dark winter. Even through December's shortest days, the evergreens promise a restoration of life and growth.

Sometimes we need a restoration of joy just like King David did when he wrote Psalm 51. His famous prayer followed the darkest days of his adultery with Bathsheba and the arranged murder of her husband. David had finally hit his low and poured out his confession and remorse to God, asking for forgiveness and renewal. He longed for a restoration of the joy of his relationship with God.

How often we too need a cleansing fresh start! So much can jade our hearts and choke our joy, whether it's our own sin or the busyness and pressures of the holidays. Sometimes we need the honesty of confession and the simplicity of quiet reflection. No matter where we've been or what we've done, Jesus is here, welcoming us with restorative joy.

What is coming between you and God? How will you pour out your heart to God?

Advent Week 4

REDISCOVERING LOVE IN OUR DIFFERENCES

The fourth Sunday of Advent signifies love and reminds us that Jesus was sent to us because of God's great love for us. For the next seven days we will rediscover and experience God's amazing love. Along with the daily devotions, take time this week to light the fourth candle in your Advent wreath. Let this reality be your focus this week no matter what else you are going through: Jesus is God's love embodied in our world and infused into our lives to heal us and draw us together. Experience the depth of His love and allow that love to overflow to others in grace and unity. Let love fill your days and nights as Christmas draws close!



So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. — Luke 2:16-20

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. — John 3:16



How do you usually like to let people know you love them?
When do you feel most loved by others?



And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

—Ephesians 3:17-19



“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

Dec 17

LOVE HONORS OTHERS

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

—Romans 12:9-10

They were a young couple, eking out a living in New York City. They had each other but little else. Oh, and their most prized possessions: Jim's gold pocket watch that had been his grandfather's and Della's beautiful, cascading hair. Both had secretly tried saving for months to buy a Christmas present for the other, but \$1.87 was all Della had. In a moment of Christmas Eve inspiration, Della sold her hair for \$20 to buy Jim a perfectly simple gold chain to match his pocket watch. As Jim arrived home, Della feared he would no longer find her beautiful. He held his wife close and gave her a set of combs she had long admired. "My hair grows so quickly," she told him. At least there was the perfect watch chain, which she excitedly gave him. Jim smiled as he told her he had sold the watch in order to buy her combs. "Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the most wise," wrote O'Henry to close his famous 1905 story *The Gift of the Magi*. "Everywhere they are the wise ones. They are the magi."

Is there a love more sincere than that which puts another first? Jim and Della didn't give gifts to each other out of compulsion or obligation. They didn't think twice about sacrificing their most prized possession to bring happiness to their true love. Their spirit is the same as that of the Magi, who gave freely to Jesus. The Magi are the source of our practice of Christmas gift giving. And, of course, theirs and our gifts are just a reflection of God's gift of Jesus. His love in action through us, as Paul describes in Romans, is sincere, good, devoted, and honors others before ourselves.

What gift are you most excited to give this Christmas? What other way can you honor someone above yourself in this season, even without money or means?

Dec 18

LOVE DEFEATS FEAR

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.
—1 John 4:18

There are a lot of things that could have kept those wisemen at home. Most of them would have come down to fear. There was fear of the unknown: a new star, a journey to a new land wherever this star would lead them. There was fear for their safety: Traveling the harsh, desert roads of the ancient Middle East was a dangerous venture. Besides the inhospitable terrain for you and your vehicles, aka livestock, you had to stay vigilant against robbers or warlords. The Magi could have easily feared loss. We know they carried gold, frankincense, and myrrh to give to Jesus. It seems they were wealthy. They must have been a target to would-be assailants. Fear of ridicule could have kept them at home. What if they were wrong about this star? They would have had hours and hours to second-guess themselves as they plodded onward. Fear of power could have derailed them or thwarted their mission as they were called before the mighty ruler Herod.

Fear could not stop the Magi. Nothing would stop them on their mysterious journey. They came as if called. They came to worship and give powerfully symbolic gifts—gifts fit for a king—to the infant Jesus. They also came as representatives of the message that the gift of Jesus is for every race, every people, every nation. Love thrives in the absence of fear. And as John describes, perfect love drives out fear. The love of God embodied in Jesus fills us with the courage to cross borders and face danger and discomfort. It frees us from insecurity and rejection and judgment. It frees us from the divisive fear of the other and brings us together, united as God's children.

What fears are troubling your heart? How can you step out against fear, empowered by God's perfect love?

UNFAILING LOVE

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:38-39

The Great Plague was London's last major outbreak of bubonic plague, but it claimed as many as 100,000 lives from 1665 to 1666. It spread to the Derbyshire village of Eyam, about 160 miles north of London, in a bale of cloth infested with carrier fleas. Forty-two villagers died in September and October. The plague had been killing millions of Europeans for centuries. These villagers didn't understand all of the science, but they knew the plague spread from person to person. By spring, the remaining citizens prepared to flee their homes to survive.

But the newly appointed rector, William Mompesson, with the help of the trusted former rector, Thomas Stanley, convinced the villagers to remain and quarantine themselves in their village. By staying, they knew they were choosing death, but they knew they would also avoid spreading the plague to other villages. They chose to protect the lives of others beyond their own boundaries. Death hit Eyam hard, killing 260 of its 300-800 inhabitants in a year. "It must have been terrifying, but every single family would have had that strong belief in God, and would not have feared death," Joan Plant, Eyam churchwarden and direct descendant of one of the survivors, told the BBC.

The citizens of Eyam must have clung to the truth of Paul's words, that nothing in all the universe or eternity can separate us from God's love, not even death. Despite suffering and grief, they chose to love and protect their neighbors in nearby villages even more than themselves. They knew they were held firmly in the embrace of God's love no matter what.

What feels like it is separating you from the love of God? If there is truly nothing that will break the bonds of God's love for you, what courageous step will you take?

Dec 20

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.
—John 13:34-35

Harley Davidson riders are known by their leathers. Surfers are known for their board shorts. Gangs identify by their colors. You can spot a Las Vegas Raiders fan by the black and silver skulls. A cheese hat? You're loyal to the Green Bay Packers. You knew Groucho Marx by his glasses and bushy mustache. Abraham Lincoln's top hat was a dead giveaway. Early punk-rockers were recognizable by their three-foot mohawks. Flannel was the '90s mark of grunge rockers. Handlebar mustaches now reveal a hipster. Braided beards and ruthlessness? Pirates. Reggae and dreadlocks often reveal a Jamaican, mon. Brazilians are known for their expressive warmth.

What are Christians known for? Jesus said it should be our love for other people. Early on, the church shone with Christlike love as believers shared all they had to care for each other's needs. When pandemics hit Roman cities, Christ followers chose to tend to the sick even while the persecuting Romans fled. But there have been clear collective blunders, like invading countries and killing innocent women and children during the Crusades.

So how are we doing now? Are our churches known for who we're trying to keep out or who we are welcoming in? Are we known by our service or our self-preservation? Our willingness to listen or our quickness to shout down? Our devotion to our political party or our devotion to Jesus? Does our encouragement or criticism come through louder? Are we marked by anger or grace? Outrage or compassion? Are we recognized by our expressions of Christ's love or our indignation about what others call the holiday? Are we too busy to show love and kindness in our daily interactions? Let's let everyone know we are Jesus's disciples this Christmas by our love for others.

What do others know you for? What can you do to put Jesus's love into action?

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
—Matthew 5:43-44

From a distance, the priest thought it must be roadkill left by wild animals. But as he drew closer, he heard humanlike moaning, and he could tell it was a man's bloodied body. Robbers had done this, stealing all the man had and leaving him to die. The priest moved as far away as he could. "He's almost dead anyway," he thought. "I don't have time for this." He hurried on. The next man who passed reacted similarly. "I can't get involved with this unclean mess," thought the priestly assistant as he veered around the scene of the crime. The third man who eventually came along was a Samaritan who immediately stopped. After some first aid, he lifted the victim onto his donkey and transported him into the city. He treated the man's wounds all day and night, then paid the innkeeper to continue. "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor?" asked Jesus. "The one who had mercy on him," the expert in the law replied (Luke 10:36-37).

Did you ever notice the man trying to prove a point to Jesus couldn't even bring himself to say the word Samaritan? That's because the Jews hated the Samaritans. The prejudice went back thousands of years in their shared ancestry when the tribes of Jacob split. Talk about a grudge! The groups had fought battles and disagreed about worshiping God (the Samaritans had their own temple, as if the Jews would have let them in at Jerusalem anyway).

But when Jesus told a story to illustrate God's command to love your neighbor as yourself, He flipped the religious teachings on their head. The hated Samaritan lived out God's love. He loved his enemy. He pleased God. And as Jesus taught, God's love and salvation are for everyone, enemies included. There is freedom in loving others, even those we don't like.

Who do you have trouble loving? How can you reach out to them with love this week?

Dec 22

LOVE RESPONDS

We love because he first loved us.

—1 John 4:19

The young girl was traveling from her Mexican village to the nearby chapel to visit the **Nativity scene**. Pepita was upset because she had no money to buy a gift to offer the baby Jesus during the service. But as she walked, she picked a bouquet along the roadside—weeds really. She was discouraged at her lack, but her cousin reminded her that even the most humble gift given in love would be acceptable in God's eyes. When Pepita brought her offering to the Christ child, her bouquet miraculously transformed into beautiful red flowers, known as *cuetlaxochitl*—poinsettias.

Our own Christmas tradition of giving and displaying poinsettias comes from Mexico. The first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, brought the plant home in 1828 to study and cultivate it. He began giving them to friends as the lovely red flowers bloomed around Christmas, and a Pennsylvanian botanist soon began growing and selling them as the tradition spread.

The original legend of Pepita reminds us of human love's humble response to God's love. "We love because he first loved us." When we are able to receive God's love, in all of its unconditional fullness, we are able to be vulnerable, accepted, and unashamed. We are aware there is nothing we can do to deserve this love. We understand our frailty and our smallness. There is nothing we can give to impress God, but all He wants is us. There is freedom in this realization, freedom to receive His love and to offer it back. There is even freedom to pass this love on to others, as John continues to write in 1 John 4. Our love is not an obligation or a duty we must grit our teeth and force. It is a renewing fountain continually flowing from the source of love Himself. Let's drink deeply from the true source of love this Christmas and rediscover its refreshing flow.

Do you feel loved? How can you remind yourself throughout the day of God's unfailing, never-ending love for you?

LOVE BLOWS OUR MINDS

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

—Ephesians 3:17-19

There is so much we don't know about the universe. Google “mysteries of the universe” and you can easily go down a black hole, pun intended, of mind-blowing topics. What goes on in black holes, with gravity so powerful and dense that not even light can escape? What exactly is dark matter and how does it work to hold fast-moving galaxies together? And what about dark energy that seems to be pushing the universe apart, expanding more and more quickly? Incredible imagery from the orbiting Hubble Telescope, Chandra X-ray Observatory, and infrared Spitzer Space Telescope has revealed exploding supernovae like the Crab Nebula, as well as thousands of other galaxies across deep space. It seems the more astronomers and physicists discover, the more there is that we don't understand. Maybe we never will.

For our God who is infinite and eternal, nothing is impossible. And if He is the Creator of a potentially infinite universe, then love is in and of His entire cosmic work, wherever His presence reaches, without end. Is your mind bending yet? And we think the oceans are deep! This is the same endless love embodied and extended to us in Jesus. Paul says the love of Christ surpasses knowledge. Nothing can contain it. Everything pales in comparison to it: our pains and problems, our complaints and questions, even our very existence and universe. Let's open our hearts as widely as possible to God's unfathomable love in this season and always.

What is your concept of eternity? What will you do to let your mind and heart be blown by God's all-consuming love this Christmas?

Advent Christmas Eve & Christmas Day

FINDING CHRIST IN OUR WORLD

The fifth and final candle of Advent represents Jesus Christ. This candle signifies the ultimate reason for our Christmas journey—the baby Jesus, God’s only Son, the Savior of the world. Jesus is truly the reason for and the meaning of Christmas, and He is the source of all the gifts we’ve discovered on this Advent journey—hope, love, joy, and peace. Celebrate the birth of Jesus! The waiting is almost over; the Messiah is coming. And even as we celebrate His arrival in our world, our anticipation grows—and we continue to live with longing and expectation for His second coming when His work will be complete and all the earth will be restored. Yet even now on the eve of Jesus’s birth, we rejoice. Christ has come! He will come again!



In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the

glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. —Luke 2:1-20



How have you most felt Jesus’s hope, peace, joy, or love this season?



Say all the verses you have memorized during the weeks of Advent.



“Go Tell It on the Mountain”



CHRISTMAS EVE: AN EXPECTANT PAUSE

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. —Luke 2:4-5

“**This is soooo not what we need right now!**” Mary and Joseph must have thought when they found out they had to report in Bethlehem for that Roman census. Mary should have been at home nesting, preparing the nursery, cleaning the cupboards, or weirdly reorganizing the hut for the twelfth time. If you’re a parent, you know what I mean. But instead of those final preparations, Mary had to endure a 90-mile journey on foot through the cold desert winter.

In pregnancy, you know the time is drawing near, but you never know exactly when the baby is coming. There are contractions. There may be false starts. But one moment you are rearranging the kitchen, and the next, labor has begun. There’s no going back. Your body and mind completely focus on the process of labor. This new life is entering the world, and your life will never be exactly the same.

In these moments, there is joy and there is uncertainty. There is contentment and there is expectation. There is the planned and the unexpected. There is completion and there is the journey ahead. Here on Christmas Eve, we find all the same things. As we finish our Christmas preparations, let’s also pause to rest a few minutes in the expectant now. The celebration will erupt. The emotions will swirl. The memories will be created. Our lives will add another new day, a special day not exactly like any other, and in that sense, our lives will never be the same. Like Mary, let’s ponder and treasure these moments in our hearts as we reflect on this threshold of birth and life, expectation and celebration, and God turned human in our hearts and lives.

What is heavy on your heart in the anticipation of Christmas? What is joyful in your expectant spirit?

Dec 25

CHRISTMAS DAY: THE BEST NEWS

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

—Luke 2:10-11

There's been so much bad news this year in the era of doomscrolling. How about some good news headlines? History brings us some momentous ones: "Peace. Greatest War of All Time Over." "Victory. Nazis Reveal Surrender." "Man Walks on the Moon." "Nelson Mandela Freed." But we can also find these feel-good stories from the past year: "A 6-year-old ordered \$350 in Barbies from Amazon. Her parents gave them to a hospital." "A farmer fell ill. So dozens of his neighbors showed up spontaneously and harvested his crops." "Bride and groom had extra food. So they took it to a shelter and served it."

Today we celebrate the best, most momentous news of all time: Christ has come! Jesus is here! He comes in the midst of troubling times. He brings hope in our despair. He brings peace in our worry. He brings joy in our sorrow. He brings love in our conflict. He brings life in our death. This is the good news angels announced in the night. It is the good news we can proclaim on this morning. Jesus is who we expectantly await in Advent, and Jesus is who we celebrate at Christmas. He is the Good News no matter how troubling the times. Jesus is here. Jesus will come again. Jesus will never leave us. In Jesus, let's celebrate with hope, peace, love, and joy in our hearts as we worship with the angels: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

How will you rejoice and celebrate today? How can you carry Christ's hope, peace, joy, and love forward with you all year?