

Knox Presbyterian Church  
225 South Hill Ave.  
Pasadena, CA 91106  
[www.knoxpasadena.org](http://www.knoxpasadena.org)



Hope, Peace, Joy, Love:  
A Devotional for Advent 2018

Cover design:  
Beth Bolsinger

The title for our Advent devotional this year is *Hope, Peace, Joy, Love*. These are traditionally the four themes for each of the Sundays in Advent, the four themes upon which we meditate as we light the candles in our Advent wreath. With each week that passes, the light in and around our Advent wreath grows, signaling the approach of Jesus, the “light of the world.” Light gradually chases back the darkness, reaching its fullness on Christmas Day, when we light the Christ candle.

As I compiled these reflections from the members of our church community, I noticed that many of us mention the discord and darkness of the world around us. And it makes sense, doesn't it? As we pause to reflect on hope, peace, joy, and love, we cannot help but recognize their absence. We cannot help but yearn for a different reality: one in which justice and mercy reign. Advent is the season that sheds light on our desperate need for the lived realities of hope, peace, joy, and love. Thus, Advent invites us to long for, anticipate, and expect the coming of the One in whom these things find their truest expression: Jesus Christ.

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will  
break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of  
death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*  
—Luke 1:78–79

Amen, come Lord Jesus, come.

—Lindsay Anderson-Beck

Sunday, December 2

### A Reading for the Candle Lighting

*The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The Lord Is Our Righteousness.*

—Jeremiah 33:14–16

Today, we light a candle for hope. May we grow in hope as we wait expectantly for the coming of Christ, who will do what is just and right in the land. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

## **First Sunday of Advent**

Sunday, December 2  
Hope

Luke 1:68–79  
Annelyse Thomas

Zechariah was an elderly priest unable to have children with his wife, Elizabeth. God had promised that Zechariah would have a son, but God's promise seemed wholly unrealistic, almost comical. For his doubt, Zechariah was struck dumb until his long-awaited son was born. At his son's birth, witnessing the fulfillment of God's promise to Zechariah and Elizabeth and to the people of Israel, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and was compelled to sing of hope. Zechariah sings of God's blessing and the wonder of God's salvation and redemption for his people.

The song is a beautiful entrance into the Advent season, but it also feels like a song far removed from our world today. It often feels as though we remain in the darkness and shadow of death, waiting for the sunrise to bring light and guide our feet into the way of peace. As Anne Lamott so aptly puts it in her article "Show Up With Hope" in National Geographic, "You would almost have to be nuts to be filled with hope in a world so rife with hunger, hatred, climate change, pollution, and pestilence."

And yet, the Advent season is a reminder that there is hope. Jesus Christ was and is the sunrise that comes from on high to bring light to our darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Zechariah's song reminds us that our hope is not a distant dream; our hope is the reality of our God who came in the flesh through his Son to save and redeem his people. This Advent season, we are invited into boundless hope grounded in the truth that God has not and will not forsake his people. We celebrate in joy the birth of Christ, the horn of our salvation, and we wait in hope for his glorious return.

Monday, December 3  
Hope

2 Corinthians 4:16–18  
Cynthia Eriksson

As an upper-middle-class, white, educated woman, I have never really experienced a time in my life when all I had was “hope.” I cannot imagine what it would be like to be displaced by war or violence, or to lose my family to a disaster or illness. I have way too many possessions, skills, and opportunities that make it easy for me to default to the belief that I can “fix” or “take care of” things.

Recently I have begun to taste some of the broader touches of sin that remind me of the battle we are waging as people of God. What do I say to unjust laws of immigration? How do I respond to my son’s despairing texts about climate change? How do I confront attitudes about sexual assault that continue to blame and ridicule victims? How do I act with justice when I read another social media post about a black person being shot and killed simply for being black?

What does it mean to have “hope” in these times of uncertainty and pain? How do we respond? It really isn’t something that we conjure up or will ourselves into! It isn’t a denial of the things that are “wasting away,” or the “troubles” that are there. Our hope is in the work of God renewing us. Our Savior is involved in our lives, and He doesn’t just want to save us, He wants to renew us!

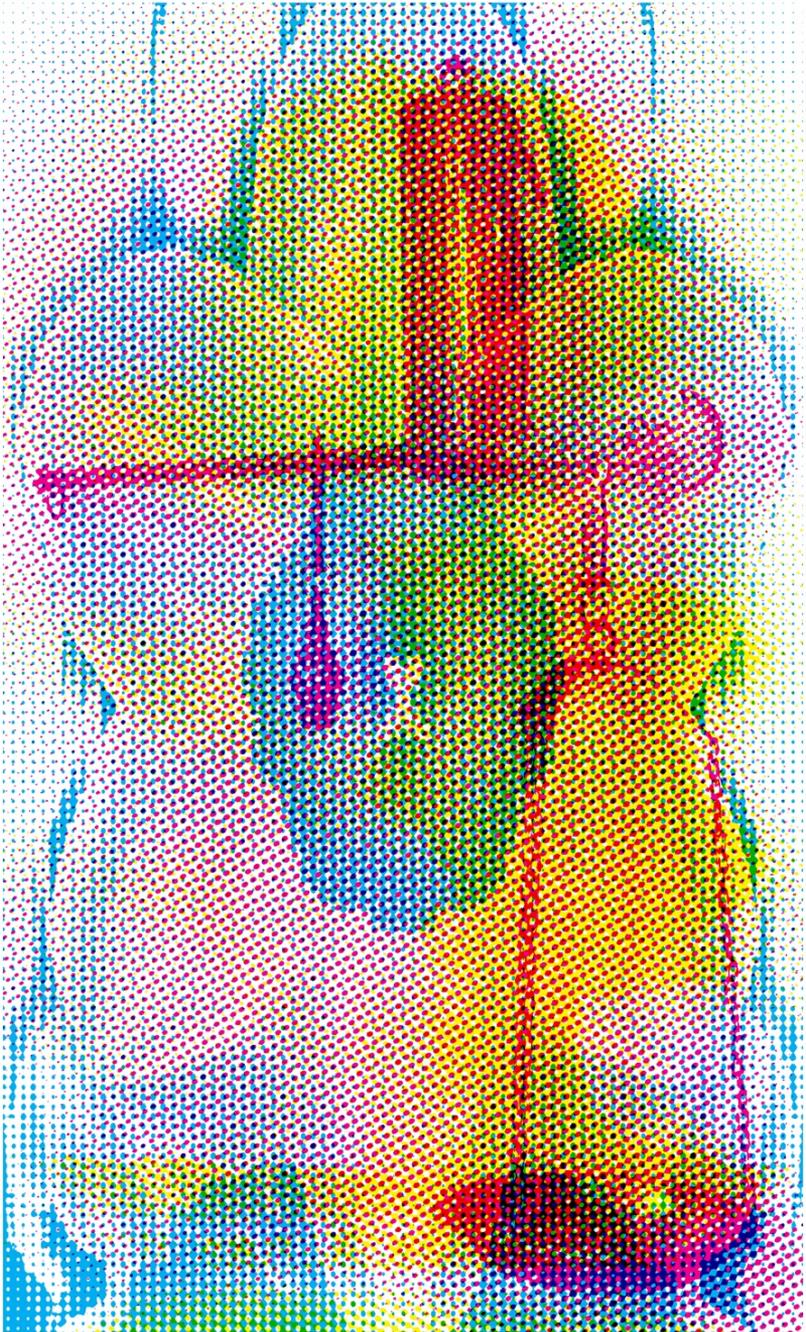
The hope is not based in the possibility that our external circumstances will change, but rather the REALITY that our lives are being transformed from the inside out!

Our responsibility is the active attention to those things that are “unseen.” This is not a passive stance, or even just a receptive stance. Instead, it is fixed, constant, and stable. By God’s grace, the Spirit empowers us to keep focused toward the internal promises of what God is doing. The hope that we find in that transformation can energize and sustain us in the action we need to take to fight the lies and the sin that we encounter!

Advent is a reminder of the extraordinary moment when the “unseen” became “seen” in the newborn baby Jesus. God became man. God with us, with ALL of us! As we fix our eyes on the story of this in-breaking of God, may we cultivate the hope of transformation that allows us to act for the sake of the world!

Tuesday, December 4  
Hope

Isaiah 9:2-7  
Clovis Blackwell



Tuesday, December 4  
Hope

Isaiah 9:2–7  
Lisa Blackwell

An eye for an eye,  
A tooth for a tooth,  
To reap what is sewn:  
Perpetual motion machines.

Instead,  
Justice,  
Love,  
Mercy,  
Walking with humility  
Will shatter the yoke of the oppressors,  
Will fuel the fire  
Lit by a child:  
The Prince of Peace.

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

Just as Jesus’ birth brought hope to the shepherds in the second chapter of Luke’s Gospel, so it continues to bring hope to people around the world today!

My wife Phyllis and I lived in Thailand for a season of our lives in ministry. The number of Christians in Thailand is small, and the dominant religion is Buddhism. Though Christmas Day is not an official holiday there, still many Christians are excused from school and jobs to celebrate Jesus’ birth. And these Southeast Asian Christians have a special way of celebrating Christmas hope. The young people of the local church gather on Christmas Eve to practice a pageant of Jesus’ birth. They hold a vigil, practicing the entire night at their local church. They look forward with hope to the next morning. Then, on Christmas Day when the entire congregation gathers to worship, they present their pageant: the celebration of Jesus’ birth.

Let us learn from our Christian brothers and sisters around the world who teach us how to live with hope as we await Jesus’ coming.

Thursday, December 6  
Hope

Psalm 25:1–5  
Janice Peters

*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.  
O my God, in you I trust;  
do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.  
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.  
Make me to know your ways, O Lord;  
teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.*

This Thanksgiving was a poignant one for me. I spent it with a small group of relatives and friends. We all had particularly good cause to be thankful, in the light of loss and ongoing threats to the families we love.

The last thing I did before returning home was to accompany one of these family members to her weekly chemo treatment.

No doctor has ever said to her, “We can cure you.” Yet she remains determined to live, enduring not only her condition but also its violent treatment, in the confidence that God would not allow her to have this sickness unless God knew she could beat it.

Advent invites us all to consider our condition, personally and communally, and to persevere in hope. We have this confidence: that God can, and has, and will, defeat all our suffering and sickness.

Wherever God leads us, whatever path God takes us down, we can endure patiently and faithfully. Our hope is in God, the God of our salvation.

Friday, December 7  
Hope

Isaiah 35:1–10  
Kelley McFarland



Saturday, December 8  
Peace

John 14:1–4, 27  
Heidi Klumpe

When I wake up at home on Christmas, my sister and a cat will be in bed with me. My mom will belt her favorite Baptist hymn from the bottom of the stairs, and no one will be allowed down until my dad has arranged his camera and his cats for the perfect photo. Once downstairs, we will find eggs, grits, Sara Lee coffee cake, and distressingly generous gifts.

However, one Christmas tradition will be missing for the first time. My grandmother has moved out of the house that I (and my mother) have visited nearly every Christmas of our lives because last year, on Christmas Eve, my grandfather passed away.

The knowledge that I will go home for Christmas is a talisman that charms many other days. I understand why Jesus soothes his disciples' anxiety by reminding them of the rooms He has prepared for them (John 14:1–3). In that security of having love and having beloveds, I find peace. No matter my failures, boredom, or loneliness, I have a place at home. But what about this year, when some rooms are not prepared?

The Greek word for peace in John 14, εἰρήνη, comes from a root meaning to join. This contrasts the word for anxiety, μεριμνάω, meaning to tear up or separate. For the entire month of December, I will visualize the peace and security that comes from being joined together with my family. But the painful separation from my grandfather need not bring anxiety. He too went on to rooms prepared for him, to experience a love and security of which our familial relations are just a foretaste.

About these rooms Jesus said, "You know the way." In light of the Gospel, we know He is the Way. Perhaps our vision of peace is this: the long chain of saints slowly marching toward prepared rooms, to join our loved ones and Love Himself. Christ, head of the church, stands at the head of the line. Though when He came there were no rooms for Him, He has secured rooms for all of us, including my grandfather, my mother, and me.

Sunday, December 9

A Reading for the Candle Lighting

*God will judge between the nations,  
and settle disputes of mighty nations.  
Then they will beat their swords into iron plows  
and their spears into pruning tools.  
Nation will not take up sword against nation;  
they will no longer learn how to make war.  
Come, house of Jacob,  
let's walk by the Lord's light.*  
—Isaiah 2:4–5

Today, we light a candle for peace. May we grow toward peace as we wait expectantly for the coming of Christ, who reigns over nations and is our light. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

## **Second Sunday of Advent**

A Prayer for Peace

When we're worried and confused,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
For those lonely and abused,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
For the scattered and afraid,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
When another needs our aid,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
When we're faced again with trials,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
When we need to reconcile,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
For our neighbors far and near,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
May Your will always appear,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
When we're struggling inside,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
Let Your love light be our guide,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
For the sake of every life,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
May You help us end the strife,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
May we show others only love,  
    Lord, grant us peace.  
Create a peace like Heaven above,  
    Lord, grant us peace.



Tuesday, December 11  
Peace

Ezekiel 34:11–16  
John L. Thompson



Peace in a field of slender Mariposa lilies interspersed with the remnants of fire-blackened trees.

Tuesday, December 11  
Peace

Ezekiel 34:11–16  
Annelise Thompson

We certainly have experienced the “days of clouds and thick darkness” mentioned in Ezekiel this year. From the darkness of political discord to the billowing clouds of smoke from wildfires sweeping the state, it is hard not to think that we—Christians and non-Christians alike—are a scattered people, our peace and homes destroyed.

It is a comfort then to start the season of Advent, a season for peace and hope. In these verses, God calls out to his scattered sheep, reminding us that he himself will look for us. As we look towards Christmas, we know that in a few short weeks God will come to us in the form of Jesus to bring peace and justice to a dark and cloudy world.

And the promises of the Lord continue to far exceed our expectations. Our God shown to us here does not just promise to find us. He also promises to gather the scattered flock, guide us towards land we can call home, and feed us with the best that this home has to offer. He offers healing, strength, and justice—strengthening the weak and bringing down the strong. We see this promise fulfilled in the life of Jesus.

Even in the season of Advent, it can be hard to find peace after the darkness has lifted and the clouds have cleared. We know that flowers can bloom in the aftermath of destruction, but it is hard to believe that peace could flourish on ground covered in ash. This photo of flowers blooming in just such a place reminds me that the damage from darkness and clouds will still be with us as we move forward. We do not leave that behind, but with God’s help, even with these damaged pieces we can find healing, strength, and peace.

For many, Advent is a time of peaceful, expectant contemplation. A past reminder and future promise of Immanuel, God with us. Ephesians 2:11–22 proclaims the fruit of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—reconciliation.

Through multiple metaphors, we read of the destruction of the barriers, walls, and other markers of division between Jews and Gentiles. The text emphasizes that through this reconciliation peace has been established. This claim is frustrating. One look at current events justifies the fury and frustration we feel at the lack of peace in our world.

Yet, there is an undercurrent in the text. God in Christ has made peace by tearing down and replacing old divisions with new structures. Thus, the peaceful contemplation of Advent is not necessarily a serene time of reflection. Rather it is active, imaginative resistance to all that remains of the dividing walls of hostility that continue to separate us. For us, Advent is a call to defy the divisions that currently persist as we enact the peace that God has already proclaimed.

Poetry and prose are the tools that invigorate and empower me to engage in the promise and work to which we're called. One delightful example is this passage from Annie Dillard's *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, which so perfectly captures the clarion call we Christians have received. May it move you as it has moved me:

*On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.*

Peace: tranquility, exemption from the rage and havoc of war, harmony and concord among individuals, security, safety, prosperity, felicity. The sense of contentment and harmony with God, one another, and creation. Paul offers us this promise of peace in his letter to the Philippians:

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Paul explains that true peace can be found by keeping your focus on God at all times. When we pay attention to God's stories, we find comfort in the future of His established kingdom on earth. When we pay attention to the work and promises of Jesus Christ, we realize we have nothing to fear. Jesus will come again to renew and redeem the brokenness around us, replacing them with love and peace. Therefore, through Jesus, peace can flow like a calm river through the sin-stained universe and the distress and turmoil of our lives. We can rest knowing that our future is secure and that His presence is with us: constant and loving.

Friday, December 14  
Joy

Psalm 30  
Carrie Hofmann

Dear one,

Maybe you're hurting. Maybe you've experienced deep loss and grief. Maybe the weight of this aching world is heavy on your heart. So often the joy of the Christmas season is mingled with sadness and loss.

A wise woman once told me that our lives are like tapestries. In the midst of the struggles, the strife, the hard times, all we can see are the tangles, knots, fraying edges, hanging threads, and seemingly random stitches. A jumbled mess that makes no sense.

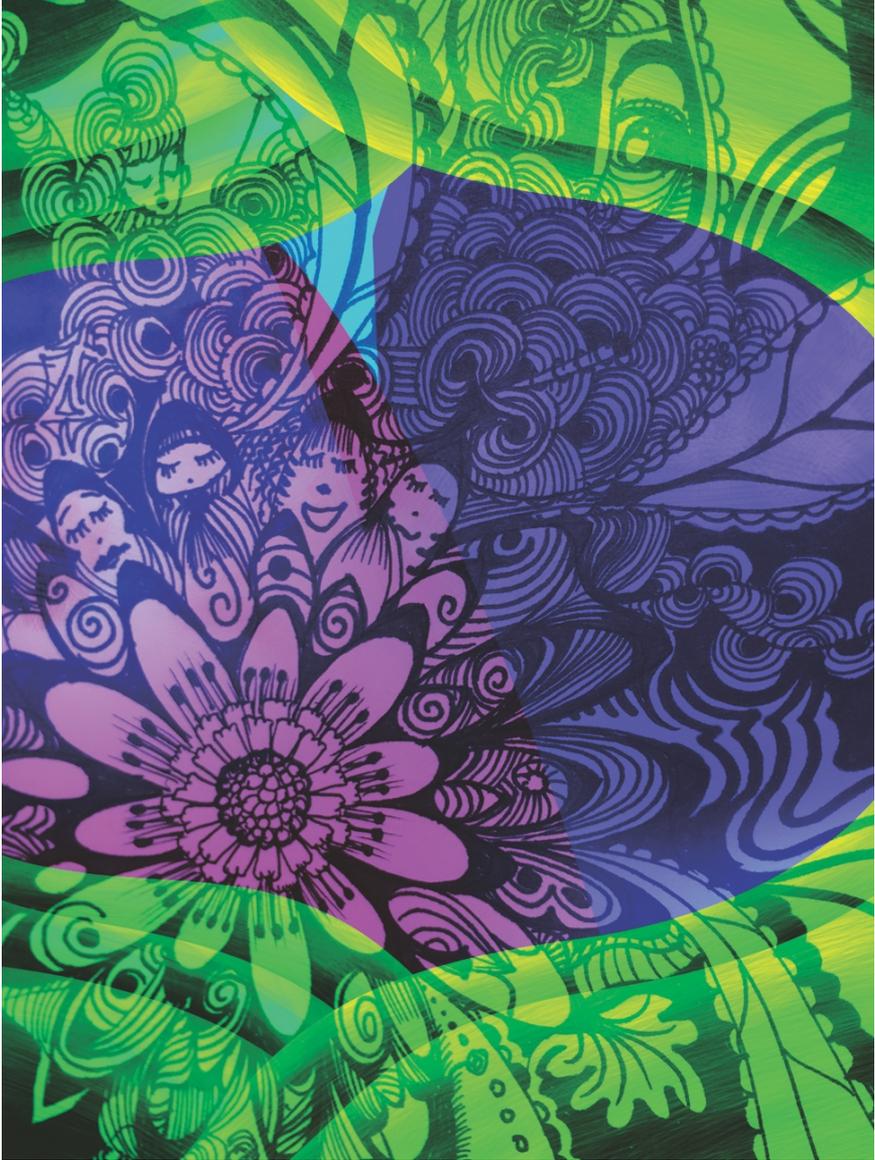
But at some point we realize we've seen only the back of the tapestry. Turn it around, and you will see the astonishing work of art that has been woven so carefully over years and years. The beauty that is our lives, crafted in His Image. No thread is wasted; the One weaving them together knows exactly how all the stitches come together to reveal His glory.

*Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.*

This Advent season, while you reflect on God's greatest gift of his beloved Son, may you see glimpses of the front side of this precious tapestry that is your life, and choose JOY.

Saturday, December 15  
Joy

Zephaniah 3:14–17  
Shirleen Chang



Sunday, December 16

### A Reading for the Candle Lighting

Isaiah 12:2-4

God is indeed my salvation;

I will trust and won't be afraid.

The LORD God, is my strength and my shield;

he has become my salvation."

You will draw water with joy from the springs of salvation.

And you will say on that day:

"Thank the Lord; call on God's name;

proclaim God's deeds among the peoples;

declare that God's name is exalted.

Today, we light a candle for joy. May our joy increase as we wait expectantly for the coming of Christ who is our strength and salvation. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

## **Third Sunday of Advent**

Sunday, December 16  
Joy

Isaiah 12:2–6, Luke 1:46–55  
Pastor Matthew Colwell

There is a moment late in the novel *Zorba the Greek* when Zorba bursts into dance. He and the narrator have been in conversation when suddenly Zorba casts off his shoes, claps his hands, and bounds into the air. When the dance is finished, the narrator asks what in the world had come over him. "What could I do, boss?" Zorba replies. "My joy was choking me. I had to find some outlet." Zorba then explains how, just prior to his dance, the narrator had made a comment that revealed the value the narrator placed on their friendship. The narrator's words had filled Zorba with such joy it erupted out of him in dance.

The trouble with joy, however, is that you cannot simply make it happen. I know of no artist who can reliably sculpt, carve, mold, or craft it. And there is no recipe I have found for its creation. At its core, joy is not an action but a reaction. It is a response to something wonderful. And yet, if we take the time to acknowledge or reflect on something glorious, joy can soon follow.

The call to "sing for joy" in Isaiah 12:2–6 is given as the prophet reflects on how God has "done gloriously" and is "great in your midst." Mary's outpouring of joy in Luke 1:46–55 emerges as she recognizes, along with Elizabeth, what God has done for her. Mary's poem of praise has often been put to music, as the words seem like lyrics to a song. Mary is portrayed like a character in a musical theater production so elated by some new recognition that she starts to sing or dance on stage.

Each Christmas, we remember news so wonderful that, if we pause to consider it, we might find ourselves erupting into song or dance. We recall how God came to be with us in Christ, taking on our human condition, and bringing the glories of heaven near to us. Remembering this, what can we do but burst into song? "Joy to the world," we sing. "The Lord is come!"

Monday, December 17  
Joy

Isaiah 52:7–8  
Pamela Ebstynne King

As I have spent time the last two years studying joy, I have come to realize that it's one thing to know about joy and another to know joy—through recognizing, feeling, sharing, and doing joy. For a small word, “joy” is really complicated. These three verses in Isaiah nicely highlight some of joy's complexity.

As a Fruit of the Spirit, joy is more than an emotion. It involves how and what we think, feel, and do. What separates joy from other positive emotions (e.g., happiness, delight) and other virtues (e.g., gratitude, forgiveness) is that joy is informed by what matters most. For Christians, what matters most is defined by our faith.

In this passage, Isaiah proclaims much of what is essential to the good news of the Gospel—peace, salvation, the reign of God, the comfort of God. In addition, he describes our active response of joy:

- Listen and attend to news of what brings joy
- Sing and shout with joy
- Burst into shouting for joy

He also points out that joy is so significant that it cannot be contained; joy results in spontaneous shouting and singing and, in other passages, dancing and feasting. Joy is to be experienced together. It is not an individual endeavor.

Isaiah also makes explicit the connection between joy and suffering. You see, joy is double-fisted. It takes two hands—one to hold the things that matter most that are realized and one to hold the things that matter most that are left unrealized. Joy and sorrow go hand in hand because they are both a response to what matters most. Isaiah addresses the Israelites as the “ruins of Jerusalem” and speaks of the redemption of Jerusalem. That is double-fisted joy: holding the reality of being in ruins in one hand and the confidence of redemption in the other.

That is what we celebrate during Advent! Although we live in ruins, we find joy in anticipating our Savior, who brings redemption, restoration, and flourishing to God's people. So this Christmas we can burst into song, singing, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come!” because Christ's birth is what matters most. Christ is the source of our true joy.

*As for me, I praise joy, because there is nothing better for people in this life than to eat, drink, and be joyful—for that alone will accompany them all the days of their lives which God has given them in this life.*

The author of Ecclesiastes (AKA Qoheleth) is quite frank—life sucks, sometimes. There is simply no getting around the fact that for many people at some time or another, or often, life is *hebel* (by which he means something like “pointless,” “meaningless,” “enigmatic,” or “absurd”). In Qoheleth’s day, there were oppression, war, and class differences. Bad people ended up ahead in life, and good people ended up with the short end of the stick. People worked hard and had nothing to show for it. Today, as I write this, life sucks for people affected by the fires in California, for people whose lives have been devastated by mass shootings, for people in Yemen who face bombings and famine, for people whose loved ones have been the victims of political violence, for people whose children seem unruly at times in spite of all the love they give them, for people who face depression.... The book of Ecclesiastes gives no easy answers. In fact, it gives no ultimate answers at all. And that’s the beauty of this book because, often in life, there are no easy answers.

In spite of all of life’s absurdities, several times Ecclesiastes recommends joy—calling it a “gift from God” (Eccl 5:19) and our “reward” (Eccl 5:18, 9:9). Experiencing joy, however fleeting it is, is not an antidote to the difficulties of life. It is not an opiate, numbing the pain or making us forget about it for a moment. Joy is not an escape. Eating and drinking and taking joy in the fruit of our hard work and in our loved ones is a gift from God. It is a momentary glimpse into the sublime. Joy won’t fix things, but it’s a wonderful thing. In the words of John Goldingay, longtime Fuller professor whose first wife lived for many years with multiple sclerosis, joy is “not enough, but it’s not nothing.” This Christmas, as we celebrate the birth of the Author of joy, take a moment to eat, drink, and rejoice. Let the sunshine hit your face, watch your children play undisturbed, savor the taste of your favorite food, pause and relish a hug or kiss with your spouse, watch your favorite movie. In the midst of all the difficulties in life this Christmas season, take time for joy, in whatever God-given form that takes. It won’t be enough, but it won’t be nothing either.

Tuesday, December 18  
Joy

Ecclesiastes 8:15  
Eliana Riley



Wednesday, December 19  
Joy

Jeremiah 31:10–13  
Tod Bolsinger

*To save us all from Satan's pow'r  
When we were gone astray—  
Oh tidings of comfort and joy....*

Paul lies in a bed as Advent approaches. His grade-school children and his valiant wife come into his room every day. They touch his hands, they caress his face, and he smiles back at them. The cancer is steadily moving to its unavoidable conclusion, but still they comfort each other. Paul's life is a heartbreaking reminder of a world that is still under "Satan's power" suffering the dismay of mortality. Around me fires are ravaging our state, and a nearby city is still reeling from a mass shooting, and we have Jeremiah calling to mind a season in the life of Israel when they suffered exile and slavery praying for a day of comfort and joy.

*Comfort and joy.*

Comfort is what we experience in those moments when all is right with the world. It is the quiet of a moment that causes us to take a deep breath and smile serenely at all that is good. The release of worry. The tenderness of a loved one's touch. The taste of good food. The gentleness of love that lets us fall safely to sleep.

Happiness, like comfort, is rooted in the word *happenings*, and is often linked to life circumstances. Joy, however, is an in-breaking of hope and celebration while the world is still incomplete. Joy, C.S. Lewis taught, is a *dissatisfaction* that is better than any *satisfaction*. It is both a longing for and foretaste of heaven at the same time. It is a tangible but fleeting assurance that someday everything will be the way it's supposed to be. Comfort is care in the midst of brokenness; joy is the assurance that someday healing will be the final word.

In a day when young dads die, fires rage, and the freest nation in history clings to its guns, we need tidings of both comfort and joy: We need both a human touch and God's presence, both the reminder that we are not alone in what we are going through and the assurance that someday it will be—blessedly—different indeed.

A vivid childhood memory of Christmas is attending the Christmas Eve service at our church. The best part was the candle-lighting. We would pick up our little white candles and cardboard holders at the entrance and would fiddle with them throughout the whole service until the moment when the sanctuary lights were dimmed. The ushers would go forward to light long tapers which they then took to the end of each aisle to light one little, white candle. People would carefully tip the flame toward the person next to them, trying not to drip wax or put the flame out. The congregation sang “Silent Night” as we passed our flame from one candle to another until the whole sanctuary slowly grew bright with a warm, nurturing glow.

This passage in 1 John is about God’s love as a light that shines in the world through Jesus Christ. The sending of God’s Son was both the revelation of God’s love and the very essence of love itself. God’s love is revealed in that God sent God’s one and only Son. The greatness of God’s love is seen in the costliness of self-sacrifice.

Verse 12 claims a dynamic relationship between God’s love and our love, in that loving other people and knowing God are elements of an inseparable whole. We love God as we love others, and as we love others, we know and love God.

This loving is not something we do on our own. The resources for believers to love one another are rooted in the efficacy of Jesus’ saving death. God’s love, which is seen in God sending God’s Son into the world, is manifested in us! Think about it: The expression of God’s love in Christ not only assures us of God’s love but also inspires our duty to love one another. We are to love each other, first because God is love, and secondly because God loved us. And when we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is made complete.

Like the candles at the Christmas Eve service, the light of God’s love in Jesus comes to us in one bold flame, which is then passed to others. Let us take our candles into the world to bring the light of God’s love into the darkness. As we gaze upon all the lights of the season, let us be reminded of God’s light in us and inspired to share it with those around us.

Friday, December 21  
Love

Lamentations 3:21–24  
Larry McCutcheon

I understand these verses come in the midst of lament, but my most vivid encounter with this passage took place during one of the happiest, most sacred days of my life—my wedding.

Our attention was originally drawn to Lamentations 3:21–24 because the passage was read in the wedding ceremonies of both sets of our parents. It was not, however, the reading that made the impression on me at our wedding. After our vows and before exiting the sanctuary, we sang the hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” The lyrics of the hymn are based on this passage in Lamentations. As we sang this song with those gathered in the congregation, my wife and I turned to look out upon the congregation. There it was, God’s faithfulness on display.

When I think about what it means that God loves us, I think about God’s faithfulness. In my experience, God’s love was and is often expressed in the community that has surrounded me. I looked at those gathered in the congregation and was flooded with memories of late-night chats, unreserved hospitality, shoulders to cry on, and an unfathomable demonstration of love. I have no doubt that God is faithful. I have no doubt that God is love. My prayer this Advent season is that, as you reflect on the in-breaking of God in the form of Jesus Christ, you would see the evidence of God’s faithfulness in your own life through those gathered around you.



Sunday, December 24

A Reading for the Candle Lighting

*During all their distress, God also was distressed,  
so a messenger who served him saved them.  
In love and mercy God redeemed them,  
lifting and carrying them throughout earlier times.  
—Isaiah 63:9*

Today, we light a candle for love. May our love overflow as we wait expectantly for the coming of Christ, who loves us with a steadfast love. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

## **Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Living Stream

Water, strong and clean  
rushing stream moving over rocky bed  
Smoothing the rough stones.  
Water, fresh and new  
spreading in rings from a cupped hand  
Caressing new skin.  
Love as strong as water filling us up,  
cleansing our wounds,  
carrying our brokenness,  
bringing new life,  
and lifting us up.

We sing of the deep love of God  
overflowing boundaries,  
overcoming obstacles,  
overwhelming hearts.

This Christmas I am a newlywed. On a sunny California day just a few months ago I promised, “with Jesus as my Lord, my model, and my resource,” that I would “lay down my pride, be sensitive to your needs, and put your interests before my own.” Unsurprisingly, living these promises has been far more difficult than speaking them! Our newborn marriage is like a newborn baby: full of squalls, a bundle of joy, and rather messy. Like caring for a vulnerable infant, marriage has required painful self-sacrifice, and it has challenged our well-worn routines and identities. We hurt one another, are forced to face our own selfishness, and struggle to apologize and extend forgiveness.

Love humbles itself for the sake of the beloved. Isn't this what the birth of Jesus demonstrates? As the Apostle Paul puts it, “though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Phil 2:6–7). The God of the universe entered our world through the messy, painful process of birth—and a birth amongst animals, dirt, and straw, no less. In a small, inconsequential town, to small, inconsequential parents, the infinite became finite, the boundless bounded. The Author of life and the One in whom all things hold together “became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, MSG).

At Christmas we remember that Jesus came in the most humble, human form because of His great love for us. He put on flesh in order that His beloved might know Him and trust that He knows and loves us. Jesus stepped into our time and space to free us from our self-worship and teach us how to live in humble dependence upon God, our Father. So this Christmas, “with Jesus as our Lord, our model, and our resource,” how might we encounter anew and be transformed by the humble, self-sacrificial love of God?



In the beginning was the Word  
and the Word was with God  
and the Word was God.  
The Word was with God in the beginning.  
Everything came into being through the Word,  
and without the Word  
nothing came into being.  
What came into being  
through the Word was life,  
and the life was the light for all people.  
The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.

A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.

The true light that shines on all people  
was coming into the world.  
The light was in the world,  
and the world came into being through the light,  
but the world didn't recognize the light.  
The light came to his own people,  
and his own people didn't welcome him.  
But those who did welcome him,  
those who believed in his name,  
he authorized to become God's children,  
born not from blood  
nor from human desire or passion,  
but born from God.  
The Word became flesh  
and made his home among us.  
We have seen his glory,  
glory like that of a father's only son,  
full of grace and truth.