

2019 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



CHRIST CHURCH DENVER

LIVING FAITH AND LIFE TOGETHER

christchurchdenver.org

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Experience the Divine Love of God

I pray that, according to the riches of His glory, He may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through His Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. —Ephesians 3:16-19 (NRSV)

Dear Christ Church Families,

This Advent, we are reflecting on our experience of the immeasurable love of our God each week - love as HOPE, love as PEACE, love as JOY, and love as saving GRACE.

It is my prayer that together we may experience the full dimensions of God's love and to know by experience the love of our God that surpasses our ability to comprehend.

Let me invite you join with the congregation at Christ Church as we daily experience the Divine love of God poured out on us as Hope, Peace, Joy and Saving Grace.

This booklet provides individuals and families an opportunity to celebrate the Advent season, to help us prepare. Establishing rich traditions in the home lays the foundation for growing in Christ.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Terry McGugan', with a small cross symbol at the end of the signature.

Fr Terry McGugan

THE BOOKLET, READINGS, AND PRAYERS

This devotional has been published to be used every day of Advent by individuals and families. We encourage you to use it as written. However, this is meant as a blessing and not a chore and so use it as you can to help prepare for the Christmas feast.

The devotional begins on page 3 of this booklet. There are six parts of the devotional:

1. Lighting the Advent wreath
2. Saying the opening prayer
3. Bible reading for each day of Advent with a devotional thought for each day
4. Personal and Family Prayers
5. Saying the Lord's Prayer
6. Extinguishing the candle/s

The Advent Wreath

The circle of the wreath and the evergreens that make it up both signify God's endless mercy and undying love. Three purple candles and one rose-colored (pink) candle are evenly spaced around the wreath. The pink candle is a remembrance of The Virgin Mary. There is one larger white candle in the center of the wreath.

Each week, an additional candle is lit. As the light grows brighter, we are reminded that the Light of the World will soon arrive in glory. The central white candle is to be larger (often thicker) than the four in the wreath. This relatively recent addition to the Advent wreath signifies the Light of Christ and is first lit on Christmas Eve and relit/burned on Christmas Day. It can also be lit for the 12 days of Christmas (until Jan 6.)

Advent Devotional Service

Light the Advent Wreath Candle/s

The family gathers around the wreath choosing one member to light the candle/s for the day.

Opening Prayer

○ Gracious Light, Phos hilaron (said together)

○ gracious light, pure brightness of the ever living Father in heaven, ○ Jesus Christ, holy and blessed!

Now as we come to the setting of the sun, and our eyes behold the vesper light, we sing your praises, ○ God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, ○ Son of God, ○ Giver of life, and to be glorified through all the worlds.

Reading for the day

You may find the reading for the day on the pages that follow under the appropriate date for the day beginning on page 4.

Personal/Family Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

End this devotional service with all reciting the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Extinguish the Candle/s

You may now extinguish the flame/s from the candles of the wreath.

Advent Devotional Scriptures and Meditations

Advent Week I: “... so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” —Romans 15:13b

“Hope of all the earth Thou art.” God’s unfathomable love is experienced by us as hope. Hope that God’s rule and reign will come. Hope that the dying world will be recreated. Hope that there is a kingdom of Righteousness yet to come. Christian hope is not a better future but in the Person who holds the future. Therefore we can sing with Charles Wesley:

Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Advent I, Sunday, December 1, 2019

The promise of God’s coming kingdom from the Revised Common Lectionary:

In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths.’

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Monday, December 2, 2019

Jeremiah 29:11

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.

Of all the scriptures which have been habitually abused by the purveyors of the prosperity gospel, this one is at the top of the list; "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you." This has been extrapolated to mean God wants you to be rich and will make you rich if you just have faith in Him. I think we all can see the inherent dangers of such an interpretation. So let's take a more Advent approach to this passage.

First, Advent is a season where we look forward and backwards. Understanding, even when we are looking backwards we are also looking forward. Let me explain. In Advent we look back to the Advent, or arrival or appearance of the Messiah, Jesus Christ – back to the manger on a cold and starry night. And so looking back from our vantage point, we acknowledge that we know the full story. God become man in the incarnation. We look back to Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross and the amazing grace of Jesus' bodily resurrection.

So we are looking back, but we are also looking forward to the consummation of God's glorious plan of salvation. This is the narrative which plays out all through the New Testament: His promised return, riding on the clouds triumphant and glorious, resurrecting the dead, renewing creation and life eternal for those who belong to Jesus in God's glorious kingdom established on earth.

Therefore, when we read this passage from Jeremiah, we understand it is not talking about just a promise to the exiled Jews living in captivity, but rather speaking to the future which will unfold for all people through the person, activity and second coming of Jesus Christ.

The Lord Declares, "I have plans for you" – forgiveness, salvation, redemption through Jesus Christ. "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you" - the greatest gift of prosperity one can receive is freedom from sin and judgement. He continues, "Plans to give you hope and a future". Your hope lies in the second coming of Jesus Christ when we will be raised from the dead, the creation will be renewed and we will live forever in His kingdom established in creation for all eternity. As John wrote in Revelation 21:1- 3b, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City the new Jerusalem

coming down from heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.” So, in this first week of Advent, we take hope in the knowledge that God’s plans for you and for me are eternal.

-Terry McGugan

Tuesday, December 3, 2019

Colossians 1:27

To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

“Hope springs eternal!” my dear friend chimed as she described her optimistic and generous nature. And she was truthful, for she, of all people I know, exhibits more hope in others than anyone with whom I have ever worked. We were colleagues for 22 years at the middle school, sharing the same kids; she, a language arts teacher and me in social studies. But I know her “hope” was more of a “fingers crossed,” “preferred future” kind of hope. And this is the common view of hope and, frankly, we like being around the hopeful – don’t we?

But this is not the kind of hope God, in His great love, gives to us, not something that ephemeral. No, His hope, the hope of Advent, is a gift, so glorious that it is called a mystery. Originally this great gift was given only to His covenant people Israel. Now God has shared this mystery with we who are not Jews by birth, not under the covenant. And what is this great gift? It is Christ in you! The Messiah long awaited, the Redeemer of Israel – Christ in you.

But that’s not all, for the Christ in you produces a hope, true and lasting hope – the hope of glory. What is the hope of glory? It is the sure knowledge that what God has promised, He will bring about. Someday the Lord will return and He will return in power and great glory. He will be revealed in His majesty and splendor before all creation, seen and unseen, and every tongue will proclaim Him Lord of all. He will set right all that has gone wrong and judge the living and the dead.

So on this third day of Advent, rejoice with thanksgiving that Christ is in you and He has given you the ultimate hope – the hope of glory.

Wednesday, December 4, 2019

Romans 5:5

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Okay, I'm a little confused. How does hope put me to shame?

Only a few verses back (Romans 5:2) we read this verse, "And we boast in the hope of the glory of God." And the next verse reads, "... we also glory in our sufferings." So as I am thinking about this, there is a conflict between the boast and the experience. Hope and the suffering – not a very "Adventy" kind of thought is it? Shame is the self-imposed judgment when one feels he or she does not "measure up."

The world suggests that when there is good living, there is smooth sailing. – no worries. When all is well, all is right. But this is not always your experience or mine. So, by the world's standard, you and I may not "measure up" – hence the possibility of feelings of shame.

But God's standard is so much different than that of the world. We don't have to "measure up" to Him, because we can't measure up. So with Him there is no shame. Instead, His love is poured out in us by His Holy Spirit and that is why we experience hope. This passage is so clear. God's love is experienced in hope. And what is the source of this hope? Verse 6 says, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." Your hope is the knowledge that your sins have been paid for by our Lord Jesus Christ, and that He will return in glory.

This is the season of excessive everything according to the world's standard. And the social pressure to over-plan, over-schedule, over-indulge, over-spend, and then collapse January 1st has become a cultural norm. Failure to "over-everything" may cause a sort of cultural shame for those who choose otherwise.

So this Advent, let's ditch the world's standard and instead, revel in the hope that does not shame us – the love of God, poured into us by His precious Spirit.

-Phil Sorensen

Thursday, December 5, 2019

Romans 8:24-25

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.

For each of us, our lives often unfold through the “already-not yet” paradigm. As I look back on particular moments in my life, I already promised to marry my wife when I put the ring on her finger and yet we waited several months before we were hitched. As we now anticipate the arrival of our first child, we are already parents and yet we await the reality of our role in His life. The “already-not yet” paradigm is weaved throughout the New Testament as well; and here in Romans 8, Paul is reminding us that we are already saved through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ when we put our trust in Him. At the same time, our salvation is not yet complete as we await Christ’s second coming when we will be called to dwell with Him forever in heaven. The paradigm causes us to wait with hopeful anticipation during the in-between time: today.

As followers of Christ today, we are called to imitate Him; in His service and His suffering. This is no simple or straightforward calling. However, in the trials and tribulations of life, we must remain hopeful that He who already began a good work in us through Christ [at salvation], promises the - not yet - of dwelling with Him forever. Therefore, as you reflect upon the divine love of Christ this Advent season, may you remain hopeful in the already-not yet promise of relationship with our Savior forever.

-Brady TenBarge

Friday, December 6, 2019

Psalms 147:11

“...but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, In those who hope in His steadfast love”

I shall never forget participating with my students in a class led by an exceptional Christian businessman. He asked each of us to answer three questions: what do you have faith in, what do you hope for, and what do you love. Eva, who had recently come to us from communist Poland,

answered that she hoped to survive. We were stunned. Most of us said we hoped to be good Christians, find someone to marry, have a family, and enjoy a career making a good living to support our families.

In this verse the psalmist begins with “the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him.” This is one of countless times that God says in His Word that He takes pleasure in His creation—in us! But why in those who fear Him? Fear means not only to be afraid but to reverence as in the honor we owe to our parents and leaders, which combines profound respect; but also, when we disregard or disobey—be afraid! The psalmist elaborates and clarifies in the second line: “the Lord takes pleasure...in those who hope in His steadfast love.” I am sure if I gathered again with Eva and the other students, most of us would confess that many of our hopes were never realized. But the one hope that is unchanging is in the steadfast love of God that promises eternal life through Jesus. In the meantime, we know God takes pleasure in us who hope in His fierce love.

-Dan Russ

Saturday, December 7, 2019

Romans 5:2b-7

And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, Who has been given to us.

I suspect most of us experience our first suffering as a physical suffering, or at least I did. Oh sure, there is angsty suffering. I was depressed a lot in high school, but who isn’t? And I had personality disorders galore when I was younger, and middle-aged, and even now in elderhood. But when I was in a major car accident in 1996 that included First Responders & EMTs aplenty, the Jaws of Life, and even a care flight to hospital, that definitely signals major physical suffering. I was poked and prodded, x-rayed, and connected to various contraptions, but although my body was suffering, I wasn’t actually suffering—I was elsewhere. When I woke up, I was filled with joy. My first thought was, “How odd.” It took me a while to figure out that when I was “elsewhere,” I was being filled with the Spirit. And that sort of clicked something in place for me.

Since my accident, I have faced two kinds of cancer, as well as two major operations, as well as life's many disappointments, and the Romans 5 pattern holds firm. My suffering had produced perseverance—God is always with me and He loves me—which produced maturity—if God is with me, what have I to fear?—and that has produced a solid hope flowing from first-hand experience with Divine Love.

-Kathy Russ

Advent week 2 Experience the Divine Love of God as PEACE

Advent Week 2: 'Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way ...'—2 Thessalonians 3:16a

Stepping in from the frigid Christmas air of 1864, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow penned these words:

And in despair I bowed my head:

“There is no peace on earth,” I said,

“For hate is strong, and mocks the song

Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

A rather dismal thought isn't it? For so many, peace is a political experience – no war or regional conflict as Longfellow expressed. For others, peace is a personal experience – tranquility – no hassles.

But taking a more biblical view, we are told that peace is the resolution of our active rebellion against God through the death and resurrection of His Son. Advent heralds the arrival of His Son, God's peace agent. As you read each devotional thought this week may the Lord continue to give you peace.

Advent 2, Sunday, December 8, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10 The promise of the Messiah's kingdom of peace from the Revised Common Lectionary:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all My holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Monday, December 9, 2019

Isaiah 9:6

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.

This prophetic hymn begins in Isaiah 9:2 and contains some of my favorite images from all the Christmas readings. In this hymn, we understand that the world will be transformed by the birth of Jesus. Light will break through darkness; a time of battle will end triumphantly; a new era will dawn, all because the child has been born. To indicate the supernatural nature of this child, He is given a group of names, including the name Prince of Peace—and this text is the only place in Scripture where the name Prince of Peace appears.

Now, we know the transformed world described in this text, a world of endless peace, established and upheld by Christ, is not the world we live in today. But this text tells us that there WILL be peace in the Kingdom of God, and this WILL be brought about by God, by the zeal of the Lord of Hosts. The text also reminds us of the sovereignty of God in Jesus: neither principality nor power can or will prevail eternally. And the text reminds us that God values peace, though contemplating God's peace this Advent season can be complicated by the demands of life. What would it look like for each of us to use this image in prayer? When we feel stressed, we can take a deep breath, and simply pray, "Prince of Peace, help me." I plan to do this in the days leading up to Christmas, and I hope some will join me. The prayer, "help me," always gives me at least an instant of peace, because it reminds me that I am not in charge and I am not supposed to be in charge. So my experience is that focusing in prayer in this way brings me to a deeper sense of connection with God. As I make myself open to God, bringing a life situation (like holiday stress) to Him in prayer, I am made aware of His strength and presence, and am reminded of His love. I wish for all of us the continuation of a happy and holy Advent.

-Terri Colburn

Tuesday, December 10, 2019

Romans 5:1-2a

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

How often during these busy weeks do we find our hearts ruled by things other than Christ's peace? Take a moment with me. Reflect on where you are right now, in this moment. What is ruling your heart?

I am grateful that the apostle Paul tells us directly how it is that Christ's peace can rule in our hearts:

"And be thankful." No matter where we find ourselves, Jesus allows us to anchor ourselves, in gratitude, to His divine love. Imagine this... God ordained the time and place of your birth, so you might encounter Him (Psalm 139:16-17, Acts 7:26-27). In all your circumstances, Jesus is continually praying for you (Romans 8:26-27, Hebrews 7:25). There is nothing so strong as our

Lord's love and He will never abandon you (Deuteronomy 31:8, Romans 8:39). Before you loved Him, He loved you and made plans to sacrifice His Son on your behalf that He might enjoy all eternity with you (John 14:1-3, 1 John 4:9-10).

Will you, with me, remind yourself throughout this day, (week, Advent season, life) of God's divine love? In remembering His love, we cannot help but be thankful. In the midst of His love and our gratitude, may the peace of Christ reign over our hearts. - Amen.

-Wendy Cowperthwaite

Wednesday, December 11, 2019

John 14:27

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.

The disciples were having a bad day. First, Jesus had reminded them that He soon would die (and be raised again – which they didn't understand); He had washed their feet (which they really didn't understand); told them that He was going away and that they couldn't follow; and said that one of them would soon betray Him. And to make matters worse, the day would end with Jesus being arrested, tried, and sentenced to die. That is one bad day.

So Jesus gave them something for all their bad days. He gave them peace. He tells them not to be afraid. This is simple to understand, since we know that God will redeem all believers.

But understanding is one thing, trusting is another. Even the simplest instruction often seems impossible on a bad day, and life gives us plenty of bad days. So Jesus gives us more. He gives us the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:15), our counselor, guide, and our ally in all of life. Our peace is not found in trusting ourselves to somehow be fearless. It is found in trusting the Holy Spirit who lives within us.

How do we build this trust? First, pray for it. Ask God that we might feel the power of the Holy Spirit, and for a heart that consistently seeks and eagerly obeys His will. We can also read the scriptures to see the success of those who trusted God, and the failure of those who didn't. Then, having done this, all that is left is for us to step out in faith. God really is with us every step of the way. And the more we look to Him, the easier it gets.

-Bruce Dunn

Thursday, December 12, 2019

Isaiah 26:3-4

Those of steadfast mind You keep in peace— in peace because they trust in You.

Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock.

It's a high-octane culture in which we live. And this season can be a frantic holiday cycle where social, charitable, and familial opportunities abound. This season brings too many current events to critique, too many friends to keep up with, too many social media posts to compare with, too much traffic to navigate and too many desires that go unmet, but not enough...Peace.

Steadfastness and peace - it can be exhausting to read, much less to experience. So what does it mean for us to be "those of steadfast mind" in a culture of happenings and hurry?

The cultural solution to the culturally created madness is mindfulness. It's all the rage right now. A Google search of the word will give you all kinds of helpful business and religious and therapeutic mindfulness solutions. But it's not a trendy cultural concept. It's an old, tested, trustworthy, Christian idea. Jacob had a dream about God's presence within His creation – angels ascending and descending upon the earth. His response teaches us about mindfulness of God who is always present: "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" (Gen. 28:17). God is unchanging – "an everlasting rock." When life moves beyond our ability to keep up, God doesn't move or change. We can seek comfort in Him.

Can we be mindful of Him in the chaos? Can we re-mind ourselves of the unchanging God? Can we trust that God is bigger than the frenetic situation that concerns us? As we prayerfully do this, God promises to keep us in His Peace this Advent. Practice trust. Practice mindfulness of God. Receive His Peace.

-Brian Gray

Friday, December 13, 2019

John 16:33

14 "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.”

This passage is so important for us! How often in my life have I fallen asleep to the fact that Jesus himself said — “In this world you will have trouble?” I have repeatedly forgotten this truth and slipped into an entitlement spirit - that my work, children, marriage, friendships and economics should go well because God loves me and I work to be a good person. If I can hang onto the reality that my pain and trouble are, unfortunately, normal and to be expected...then what does Jesus have to say to me in the midst of them? I think that’s a far more answerable question than “Why am I suffering?” When I fight against having pain and trouble in my life, I’m doubling my pain. If I accept my pain and trouble, I experience more peace, oddly, in the midst of it.

One of “these things” that Jesus is referring to in this bittersweet passage is the mysterious gift of the Holy Spirit. Earlier in this chapter He says, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth.” I believe if we can submit to the truth that “in this world we will have trouble” we are poised to receive the greatest gift of hearing the still small voice of the Holy Spirit whispering deep within us, reminding us, “I have overcome the world.”

-Kelley Gray

Saturday, December 14, 2019

Philippians 4:6-7

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.

Whenever I hear this verse, I remember my sixth-grade piano recital. The recital was imminent, and I was filled with dread that I would choke, embarrass myself and disappoint my parents. So, I memorized this Philippians promise and for days, repeated it like a mantra. But the anxiety didn’t leave. I only have a vague recollection of my performance but I know mistakes were made and fear gripped my heart until I stepped off the stage. At the time, I thought, “That whole promise didn’t really work out.” But today as I read these

verses, I find it interesting that I can't even remember which piano piece I played. But I remember these verses verbatim, and I remember presenting my request to God.

It's easy to read these verses as if they are a transactional formula and the key to instant gratification: Present your request, take your peace. But keeping this verse in the context of Scripture as a whole, I wonder if it's not yet another call to relationship. Perhaps when we present our requests with thanksgiving, nothing evident will change in our circumstances. We may not even experience the peace we are looking for in that moment. But the more we engage, the more we enter into union with Christ — the oneness we were made for — the more the peace that passes understanding will permeate our lives and His promise will come.

-B.J. Larson

Advent week 3 Experience the Divine Love of God as JOY

Introduction to this week

Advent Week 3: "... I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."—John 15:11b

This week we reflect upon the joy of the Lord. Joy is that deep sense of knowing and being known by God. It is an intimate gift originating with our Savior and shared by Him with us. Joy is nothing worked up by you or me. Joy is the gift of our Lord's own experience with the Father and given to us through His Spirit. Such was the Spirit that moved Isaac Watts to write:

Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!

Let men their songs employ;

While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains

Repeat the sounding joy,

Repeat the sounding joy,

Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

Advent 3, Sunday, December 15, 2019

Isaiah 35:1-10 The joy of the coming kingdom from the Revised Common Lectionary:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

"Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Monday, December 16, 2019

Nehemiah 8:10

Nehemiah said, "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."

Religious folk are generally thought to be pretty, well... staid. But here we find the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah instructing the people, with a word from the Lord himself, to engage in some serious indulgence. (Take that, SNL church lady!)

Ezra, Nehemiah, and the gathered faithful had reason to celebrate. For years, Jerusalem laid in ruin. Now, after nearly a century and a half, the Persian Artaxerxes granted permission to Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem, giving him full authority to oversee the project of urban, cultural, and religious renewal. The walls were rebuilt, the exiles returned, the Law was reestablished. It was time

to party; to once again experience God's love, to express what must have been overwhelming joy with "great rejoicing" (Nehemiah 8.12).

And in this great celebration, note how the people were specifically instructed to "send some to those who have nothing prepared." It wasn't on account of slothfulness that some among them had no "choice food or sweet drinks." These were kinfolk returning from exile, destitution, dispossession, and ruin. But even if they had nothing to contribute, God wanted them—the impoverished—included in this feast.

This Advent, as we remember the covenant faithfulness of our God, from the rebuilding of Jerusalem to the restoration of all things in Christ (Acts 3:21), let us celebrate. Let us exude joy over a God who is "making all things new" (Revelation 21.5). And let us not neglect to invite others to the celebration, most especially the destitute—the exiles and refugees, the dislocated and dispossessed among us. Let us not forget to "send portions" to the poor. (Nehemiah 8.12)

-Joseph Wolyniak

Tuesday, December 17, 2019

Zephaniah 3:17

The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior Who saves. He will take great delight in you; in His love He will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.

It's best to read today's verse after the preceding line (v16): "Do not let your hands hang limp." What a great image of the discouragement we so often feel as we face the challenges of this life. Sometimes the burdens this world bears just makes me want to go to bed and cry myself to sleep. By the end of the day, I'm limp all over. I feel helpless, hopeless, and defeated. Much of the book of Zephaniah describes the dire situation we're in (and some of it sounds quite contemporary): violence and deceit, loss of faith, false gods, greedy officials, arrogant leaders, treacherous preachers, eager rebels. Why wouldn't we have limp hands?

The hard truth of my limp hands is that, really, my hands can't do much to change things anyway. It's not a defeatist attitude to recognize that, as Niebuhr wrote, we must take this world as it is, not as we would have it. The good news of limp hands is that the source of our hope is not our courage,

our hard work, our savvy politics, or our acts of power; it is solely the presence of God. “The Lord your God is with you, He is mighty to save.” And the focus of His presence and mightiness is our belovedness. “He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love...” Thanks be to God, He is with us, He is with us, He is with us.

-Kathy Mulhern

Wednesday, December 18, 2019

Psalm 5:11

But let all who take refuge in You be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread Your protection over them, that those who love Your name may rejoice in You.

This Psalm starts with a plea, “Give ear to my words, O Lord and give heed to my sighing.” (vs. 1) It is one of those Psalms that begins in despair and explicitly “calls out” the struggle against the evil and rebellious attitudes and behaviors of those who oppose God and His ways. It is a Psalm from inside the fight for holiness, not a spectator’s view of a battle nor a sanitized commentary of what happened in the end. It is a live update of the heart during the struggle. Have you ever watched a televised football game when they have “mic’d” one of the defensive players? During the game the mic’d player yells for help, screams during moments of defeat and shouts encouragement to his teammates all of which captivate us, since these are “live” and “real-time” from the field, during the battle. Psalm 5 does the same; it echoes these same “real-time” emotions within the fight against evil; and, foreshadows the battlefield that Jesus enters at His birth. Recall that shortly after the joy of welcoming Jesus, the savior of the world, we confront an extreme and harsh story of the battle for power and evil. Herod is enraged by Jesus and sets out to kill all the children under two in Bethlehem (Matt 2:16-17). How terrifying. Evil personified.

God calls us, by faith, to stand against the raging forces that seek to unseat His power, rule and authority in our lives and our communities. It is hard, and we are weak. So, we pray and express our need of a savior on our side. We can rejoice knowing that our prayers and pleas are “mic’d” by God. He hears our sighing in all of our battles. We need only to stand with Him in faith. Oswald Chambers frames this posture of faith like this: “Faith never knows where it is being

led, but it loves and knows the One who is leading.” Today, offer your pleas for God’s protection and refuge on all whom you love and, in faith, know that He hears us and waits for us to come to Him.

-Steve Mulhern

Thursday, December 19, 2019

Psalm 30:5

For His anger lasts only a moment, but His favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

“Well, the God of the Old Testament is vengeful and wrathful and angry, but Jesus is the God of love and mercy.”

How many times have you heard or even believed the above statement? I know I used to, especially when I was an atheist. It’s a pretty common misconception of God that keeps many from belief.

If you hold to that belief, you might come to this verse in Psalm 30 and think, “Yeah right...” God’s anger is red-hot through the whole Old Testament, right? From Adam and Eve getting kicked out of the garden, to the flood that wiped out humanity, to Sodom and Gomorrah, to the 10 plagues on Egypt, to all the different “-ites” getting slaughtered, to the exile, it would appear that God is a God of wrath, at least until Jesus arrives on the scene.

But that’s not what I read, at least, not any more. There was a moment of anger from God in those first chapters of Genesis, but from then on, the Bible is on a non-stop trajectory toward Jesus and beyond. God pursued His people, and He pursues us with favor in mind, and though we may face some of the immediate consequences of our sin, we are forgiven.

The momentary anger and weeping we (and God!) have for our sin is nothing compared to the favor and joy that comes with mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

-Chris Orme

Friday, December 20, 2019

Psalm 94:19

When anxiety was great within me, Your consolation brought me joy.

We live in a time of constant distraction. Tragedy, natural disaster, corruption, violence, and evil bombard our media feeds. And, even when we find the means to steal away, to unplug, to seek rest and solace from these worrisome external forces, stressed and fretful thoughts within us can betray our respite. If your mind is anything like mine, anxiety finds ways to invade and abound. Maybe you also have had the experience of waking in the middle of the night tossing and turning, with a sense of dread for the quickly approaching ring of the morning alarm. Or, like me, you have found yourself so burdened in thought while driving that when you suddenly come back to reality you have no recollection of how you got there. It is not too hard for us to identify with the anxiety described by the writer of Psalm 94 as being “great within me.” We are weighed down, overwhelmed, and feel helpless.

By now, we have been on our Advent journey for quite some time, anticipating and waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The encouragement we receive in Psalm 94 comes from God and His divine love. He is our consolation, our solace, our comfort; the antidote to anxiety. He rises up against the wicked. He stands for us against evildoers. Because of His help, we will not dwell in the silence of death. And, His unfailing love that supports us along our distracted journeys and when we cannot sleep...brings us joy.

The joy we find in Christ is not a mere feeling like happiness. It is deep, grounded and sustained—it gives us strength and courage. We are relieved of the oppressive weight of anxiety. It is a joy that sends us into the world, as we pray each Sunday, “with gladness and singleness of heart.”

What anxious thoughts distract your mind? Where do you feel trapped, afraid, hopeless? What can you release to Jesus today to experience His consolation and joy?

-Curtis Robbins

Saturday, December 21, 2019

Psalm 16:11

You make known to me the path of life; You will fill me with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand.

The joy of the Lord can be found in unexpected places.

Over the past few years, the same image has often come to me in prayer. I am sitting on a dock, dangling my bare feet in the water. Jesus sits next to me; His feet are in the water too. We are both in a comfortable silence, shoulders barely touching each other. No words are spoken, but I know what Jesus is inviting me to do: jump in!

I am comfortable on the dock, sun warm on my shoulders, sitting with Jesus. How deep is the water anyway? It looks deep. Where am I? I don't know. What lies beneath the surface? There's no way to tell. Once I'm in, can I ever get out?

When I ask these questions, Jesus doesn't answer me.

I jump—swimming with a friend through the valley of the shadow of death, I find joy. I jump—diving into places of personal discomfort and risk, I find joy. I jump—wading through the murky waters of everyday life decisions that I don't want to face, I find joy.

“Why so joyful?” you may ask. I have found that these invitations to jump have led me to experience His love more deeply. And when I jump, Jesus' plan has always been and always will be to jump with me. Of course He jumps with me! That's His name: Emmanuel, God with us.

-Marie Robbins

Advent week 4 Experience the Divine Love of God as SAVING GRACE

Introduction for this week

Advent 4: “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

is experienced in His saving grace? These simple words from the Savior, spoken to Nicodemus and spoken to us, confirms that His greatest love gift is that of His Son, given to make it possible for us to live forever with Him, in His kingdom. This is why, with Charles Wesley, we worship Him with these words:

Hail! the heaven-born Prince of peace!

Hail! the Son of Righteousness!

Light and life to all He brings, Risen with healing in His wings

Mild He lays His glory by,

Born that man no more may die:

Born to raise the son of earth,

Born to give them second birth.

Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the new-born King !"

Advent 4, Sunday, December 22, 2019

Isaiah 7:10-16 The promised Savior from the Revised Common Lectionary:

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted."

Monday, December 23, 2019

Isaiah 61:10

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.

If you've ever attended a wedding, you know there are few occasions more resplendent and joyous. So it was for the ancient Israelites. Isaiah waxes lyrically about the "garments of salvation" and "robe of righteousness," comparing the promise of God's grace to an unimaginably spectacular nuptial celebration—complete with groom in beautiful headdress and bride adorned in jewels. His soul exults God and rejoices in the Lord with an irrepressible exuberance.

And yet:

While the prophet is gushing with such rich and lofty imagery, his words are actually being penned at one of the lowest points in the history of His people—a time when they had all but lost their way, utterly vanquished by their Babylonian foes. By 605 BC, the great King Nebuchadnezzar successfully besieged and destroyed Jerusalem. It would have been so easy for God's covenant people, the children of Sarah and Abraham, to give up. It would have been so easy to just look at their surroundings, weigh the evidence, and abandon hope. Hope deferred... and deferred... and deferred can quickly sour; quickly seem foolish, even painfully delusional.

And yet:

The prophet speaks these words, at the outset of his oracle, into the void of darkest despair: "Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance will be revealed." Isaiah 56.1 In the bleakest of hours, Isaiah proclaims an audacious hope: that the love and saving grace of God would come in the very midst of vanquished expectation, in the midst of rubble and ruin.

Centuries later, amid the Roman conquest, Israel would again wonder if its hope deferred was hope in vain. Many wondered if the poetic promises of prophets were true.

And yet:

An obscure teenage girl would make the daring claim that in her womb, there was reason to hope once more. Like Isaiah before, her soul magnified the Lord and rejoiced in God. For God, she claimed, was a promise-keeping God. And His help, in remembrance of His mercy, had come. His deliverance, in her womb, was at last revealed.

-Joseph Wolyniak

Tuesday, December 24, 2019

Galatians 4:4-5

But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.

I often have difficulty connecting personally to Biblical truths — even statements as grand and sweeping as this incredible statement from Galatians. But what Paul tells us in his letter is intensely personal. You are now a son, a daughter. I've heard it said that prayer is when words like "God" and "us" give way to "You" and "I". As a prayer, this verse then becomes "You God, my Father, sent Your Son to save me...and now I am Your beloved son, Your daughter." Any parent knows we look at our children with intense love simply because of who they are. And if you're a child, just know that is how your parents look at you. God has always been a father, and has always loved His Son, Jesus. In love, He sent His Son to you. And so now you, who were always His creation, have become an object of His love.

-Dan Larson



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