

Hope
Peace
Joy
Love

Daily reflections
for the season of Advent 2021

COLLINS STREET BAPTIST CHURCH

"The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The season of Advent is many things.

In the Christian calendar, Advent is a season of four Sundays leading up to Christmas. Instead of being caught off guard by the Christmas rush, Advent provides a means of preparation. Sunday by Sunday we travel together toward the stable where, in the birth of a child, God comes to us in love.

The word Advent is taken from the Latin *adventus*, meaning 'coming' or 'arrival'. In Advent we look back to the first arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem and then forward to his second arrival — the day when Jesus comes as King of kings and Lord of lords to consummate God's reign on earth.

In looking back to Bethlehem and forward to God's future, we name the brokenness of the present — the wounding of our world and frailty of our lives. Together we declare that our hope is in God: the best is still to come! Even more, we rededicate ourselves to working toward that future today.

This Advent, we are guided in our reflection by the four Advent candles: the candles of hope, peace, joy and love. This booklet provides a set of daily reflections organised around those themes. Each day there's a passage of scripture to read, a question to reflect on and a prayer to lead you into the day. Perhaps, in this simple discipline, we can anticipate together "something greater to come."

Week 1: Hope

MONDAY NOVEMBER 29
HOPE IN THE LORD

READING: Isaiah 40.27-31

Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,
“My way is hidden from the Lord;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?
Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
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.

QUESTION

Words spoken to those in exile, these verses point to the one who is the source of hope – “the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” What do these verses say about the nature of our hope in God? What do they say to you?

PRAYER

*Eternal God,
when I am weary,
you are my strength.
When I stumble and fall,
you are my resting place.
When I am anxious, confused
and unsure of the way ahead,
you are my certainty.
My hope is in you.
Amen.*

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 30

A LIVING HOPE

READING: 1 Peter 1.3-9

³Praise 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, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of

trials. ⁷These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

QUESTION

These verses describe “a living hope.” What insight does this description of Christian hope provide? What difference does it make for you today?

PRAYER

*Praise be to you,
the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amidst the opportunities, challenges and trials of today,
I claim the hope of my inheritance in you.
Amen.*

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 1

AN INSPIRING HOPE

READING: 1 Thessalonians 1.2-10

²We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you,⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe

suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

QUESTION

The Christians to whom these words were written were called to a way of life "inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." What insight do these verses provide about this way of life? What do they say about your calling as a follower of Jesus?

PRAYER (Keith Green)

*Oh Lord, you're beautiful,
Your face is all I see;
For when your eyes are on this child
Your grace abounds to me.*

*Oh Lord, please light the fire
That once burned bright and clean.
Replace the lamp of my first love
That burns with holy fear.*

*I want to take your word and shine it all around
But first help me just to live it, Lord;
And when I'm doing well,
help me to never seek a crown,
For my reward is giving glory to You.*

THURSDAY DECEMBER 2

THE HOPE OF GLORY

READING: Colossians 1.24-29

²⁴ Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵ I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness — ²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. 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.

²⁸ He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

QUESTION

"Christ in you, the hope of glory." What do these verses say about the work of God in and through us? How is this connected to your living today?

PRAYER (David Adam)

*Waken me O Lord,
Open my eyes to your glory
Open my ears to your story
Open my heart to your fire
Open my will to your desire.*

*Waken me, O Lord,
To your risen power
To your presence every hour
To your never ending love
To your coming from above.*

*Waken me, O Lord
To your peace here today
To your meeting on the way
To your speaking in a friend
To your guiding to the end.*

FRIDAY DECEMBER 3

THE PROMISE OF HOPE

READING: Jeremiah 29.10-14

¹⁰ This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place. 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. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me

and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

QUESTION

To those languishing in captivity, the promise of God is one of hope. What underlies such a promise? What does it reveal about the character of God? What does it say about God's calling in your life?

PRAYER

This daily prayer of Mother Teresa of Calcutta inspired her service to God in caring for the poor and dying. It was in service that she discovered her future and her hope.

*Dear Jesus, help me to spread thy fragrance everywhere I go.
Flood my soul with thy spirit and love.
Possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life may only be a radiance of thine.
Shine through me so that every soul I come in contact with
may feel thy presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus.
Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as you shine,
so to shine as to be a light to others.
Amen.*

SATURDAY DECEMBER 4

A STORY OF HOPE

READING: Luke 1.26-55

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² 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,³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where

she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!⁴³ But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

QUESTION

What do you hear about hope in Mary's song? How does this connect with Mary's story as a young, expectant mother? What does it challenge in your story?

PRAYER (Francis Drake)

*Disturb us, Lord,
when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord,
when with the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision Of the new Heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord,
to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.
Amen*

Week 2: Peace

MONDAY DECEMBER 6
SLEEP IN PEACE

READING: Psalm 4

Answer me when I call to you,
my righteous God.
Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.
²How long will you people turn my
glory into shame?
How long will you love delusions and seek
false gods?
³Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful
servant for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him.
⁴Tremble and do not sin;
when you are on your beds,

search your hearts and be silent.
⁵Offer the sacrifices of the righteous
and trust in the Lord.
⁶Many, Lord, are asking, "Who will bring us
prosperity?"
Let the light of your face shine on us.
⁷Fill my heart with joy
when their grain and new wine abound.
⁸In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, Lord,
make me dwell in safety.

QUESTION

This psalm of David is a plea for help that ends in a declaration of faith: "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in peace." What does this psalm say about the nature of peace found in God? What does it say to your present experience?

PRAYER

*Righteous God,
may the light of your face shine upon me today.
Grant me your peace.
Amen.*

TUESDAY DECEMBER 7
PEACE BEYOND UNDERSTANDING

READING: Philippians 4.4-9

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

QUESTION

What is this peace “which transcends all understanding”? As you reflect back on your own experience of faith, have there been moments in which you’ve known an unexplainable peace? If so, what have those moments taught you?

PRAYER (Reinhold Niebuhr)

*O God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference;
living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardships as a pathway to peace;
taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;
trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will;
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you
forever in the next.*

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 8
PERFECT PEACE

READING: Isaiah 26.1-12

In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:

We have a strong city;

God makes salvation
its walls and ramparts.

²Open the gates
that the righteous nation may enter,
the nation that keeps faith.

³You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.

⁴Trust in the Lord forever,
for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the
Rock eternal.

⁵He humbles those who dwell on high,
he lays the lofty city low;
he levels it to the ground
and casts it down to the dust.

⁶Feet trample it down –
the feet of the oppressed,
the footsteps of the poor.

⁷The path of the righteous is level;
you, the Upright One, make the way of the
righteous smooth.

⁸Yes, Lord, walking in the way of your laws,
we wait for you;
your name and renown
are the desire of our hearts.

⁹My soul yearns for you in the night;
in the morning my spirit longs for you.
When your judgments come upon the earth,
the people of the world learn
righteousness.

¹⁰But when grace is shown to the wicked,
they do not learn righteousness;
even in a land of uprightness they go on
doing evil

and do not regard the majesty of the Lord.

¹¹Lord, your hand is lifted high,
but they do not see it.

Let them see your zeal for your people and
be put to shame;

let the fire reserved for your enemies
consume them.

¹²Lord, you establish peace for us;
all that we have accomplished you have
done for us.

QUESTION

The “perfect peace” described by the prophet is not a peace of quiet streams but of judgement, zeal and justice. What do these words say to you about the peace of God? What do they say about your calling as a servant of God?

PRAYER

*O God, I pray for the power to be gentle;
the strength to be forgiving;
the patience to be understanding;
and the endurance to hold firm to what is right.
I pray for the vision to see and the faith to believe
in a world free from violence and fear.
I pray for the courage to be a peace-maker,
And to fulfil the destiny for which I am called and created.*

THURSDAY DECEMBER 9
THE BLESSING OF PEACE

READING: Psalm 29

Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

² Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
worship the Lord in the splendour of his
holiness.

³ The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.

⁴ The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is majestic.

⁵ The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of
Lebanon.

⁶ He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,
Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷ The voice of the Lord strikes
with flashes of lightning.

⁸ The voice of the Lord shakes the desert;
the Lord shakes the Desert of Kadesh.

⁹ The voice of the Lord twists the oaks
and strips the forests bare.

And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

¹⁰ The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord is enthroned as King forever.

¹¹ The Lord gives strength to his people;
the Lord blesses his people with peace.

QUESTION

The psalmist paints a picture of God that underscores the blessing of peace granted to God's people. What is it about the nature of God that enables such a blessing?

PRAYER

*God my Lord and King,
my creator and my keeper,
I receive today your blessing of peace.
I enter this day as your vessel of peace.
Amen.*

FRIDAY DECEMBER 10
THE PRINCE OF PEACE

READING: Isaiah 9.2-7

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

³You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.

⁴For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.

⁵Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,

will be fuel for the fire.

⁶For 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 Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷Of the greatness of his government and
peace there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

QUESTION

What do these prophetic words say to you about the promise of God's peace?
What role does the "child" play in the outworking of this peace? How does this
connect to your vocation as a child of God?

PRAYER (St Francis of Assisi)

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is discord, harmony;
Where there is error, truth;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born into eternal life.*

SATURDAY DECEMBER 11

A SONG OF PEACE

READING: Luke 1.57-79

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son.⁵⁸ Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

⁶¹ They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbours were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David

⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us —

⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors

and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,

and to enable us to serve him without fear

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;

for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation

through the forgiveness of their sins,

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the path of peace."

QUESTION

Zechariah's song has been called a song of peace. What does this song reveal about the nature of peace and of the God of peace?

PRAYER

*God of peace,
I will live today in the gift of your mercy
and in the calling of your peace.
Amen.*

Week 3: Joy

MONDAY DECEMBER 13
SHOUTS OF JOY

READING: Psalm 47

Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.

²For the Lord Most High is awesome,
the great King over all the earth.

³He subdued nations under us,
peoples under our feet.

⁴He chose our inheritance for us,
the pride of Jacob, whom he loved.

⁵God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.

⁶Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.

⁷For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise.

⁸God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.

⁹The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted.

QUESTION

There's an exuberance to this psalm that is almost infectious. To catch the joy of it, you can't be seated when you read it. So stand up and read the psalm out loud! What do you hear?

PRAYER (St Augustine)

*Lead us, O God, from the sight
of the lovely things of the world
to the thought of thee their Creator;
and grant that delighting in the
beautiful things of thy creation,
we may delight in thee,
the first author of beauty
and the Sovereign Lord of all thy works,
blessed for evermore.*

TUESDAY DECEMBER 14

REJOICING IN HEAVEN

READING: Luke 15.1-24

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins^[a] and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

QUESTION

Each of these parables ends with a declaration of joy. What undergirds these expressions of rejoicing and what does this tell you about God?

PRAYER (John Newton)

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 15
THE JOY OF CREATION

READING: Isaiah 35

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, ²it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendour of our God.
³Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
⁴say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you."
⁵Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
⁶Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
⁷The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.
⁸And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
⁹No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
¹⁰ and those the Lord has rescued will
return. They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

QUESTION

The imagery of the prophet's words is rich. What do you hear? What do you learn about joy in these verses? What pictures of joy resonate most for you?

PRAYER

These words, penned by Henry Van Dyke in 1907, were first set to the Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. If you are brave enough, sing these words out loud as a prayer today.

*Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee
God of glory, Lord of love
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee
Opening to the sun above
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness
drive the dark of doubt away
Giver of immortal gladness
fill us with the light of day*

*All Thy works with joy surround Thee
Earth and heaven reflect Thy rays
Stars and angels sing around Thee
centre of unbroken praise
Field and forest, vale and mountain
Flowery meadow, flashing sea
chanting bird and flowing fountain
call us to rejoice in Thee*

THURSDAY DECEMBER 16
A WITNESS TO JOY

READING: Psalm 30

I will exalt you, Lord,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
² Lord my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.
³ You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of
the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit.
⁴ Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful
people;
praise his holy name.
⁵ For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favour lasts a lifetime;
weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.
⁶ When I felt secure, I said,
“I will never be shaken.”
⁷ Lord, when you favoured me,

you made my royal mountain⁸ stand firm;
but when you hid your face,
I was dismayed.
⁸ To you, Lord, I called;
to the Lord I cried for mercy:
⁹ “What is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?
¹⁰ Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me;
Lord, be my help.”
¹¹ You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me
with joy,
¹² that my heart may sing your praises and
not be silent.
Lord my God, I will praise you forever.

QUESTION

This psalm is a testimony to God’s presence in the psalmist’s life. Take some time to reflect back over the last 12 months and note the ways God has been present to you. What evidences of God’s provision and grace can you name?

PRAYER

*For every evidence of your grace,
Lord, I am thankful.
For every sign of your goodness,
Lord, I am thankful.
For every breath and every moment,
Lord, I am thankful.*

FRIDAY DECEMBER 17
A VISION OF JOY

READING: Hebrews 12.1-3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the

joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

QUESTION

According to these verses, Jesus was gifted with a vision of joy. This “joy set before him” enabled Jesus to endure shame, even death. What was this joy? What could Jesus see that we struggle to see?

PRAYER (Thomas Merton)

*My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.*

*And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

SATURDAY DECEMBER 18
GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

READING: Luke 2.1-20

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ 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. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ 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.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the

Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

QUESTION

Unsuspecting shepherds in a field are confronted by a heavenly choir proclaiming "good news of great joy." It was a pivotal moment for those shepherds. What are the moments of greatest joy in your life? In what ways have those moments changed things for you? What do these experiences teach to you about the nature of lasting joy?

PRAYER

*God of life and joy,
may I find in this day one ounce of the joy
that fills your heart.
Amen.*

Week 4: Love

MONDAY DECEMBER 20

LAVISH LOVE

READING: 1 John 3.1-3

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not

yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.³ All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

QUESTION

“Behold what manner of love the Father has lavished upon us ...” There is nothing understated about the love of God for us. It is all encompassing, overflowing and without end. Do you sit easily with such an expression of love on God’s part? If not, what makes this uncomfortable for you?

PRAYER

The words to this old hymn carry something of the same message. Take time to read them, thoughtfully.

*O the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast unmeasured, boundless, free
Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me
Underneath me, all around me, is the current of thy love
Leading onward, leading homeward to thy glorious rest above*

*O the deep, deep love of Jesus, tis a heaven of heavens to me
And it lifts me up to glory, for it lifts me up to thee*

*O the deep, deep love of Jesus, spread his praise from shore to shore
How he loveth, ever loveth, changeth never, nevermore*

TUESDAY DECEMBER 21
THE CRY FOR LOVE

READING: Psalm 86

Hear me, Lord, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.
²Guard my life, for I am faithful to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God; ³have mercy on me, Lord,
for I call to you all day long.
⁴Bring joy to your servant, Lord,
for I put my trust in you.
⁵You, Lord, are forgiving and good,
abounding in love to all who call to you.
⁶Hear my prayer, Lord;
listen to my cry for mercy.
⁷When I am in distress, I call to you,
because you answer me.
⁸Among the gods
there is none like you, Lord;
no deeds can compare with yours.
⁹All the nations you have made
will come and worship before you, Lord;
they will bring glory to your name.
¹⁰For you are great and do marvellous deeds;
you alone are God.
¹¹Teach me your way, Lord,
that I may rely on your faithfulness;

give me an undivided heart,
that I may fear your name.
¹²I will praise you, Lord my God,
with all my heart;
I will glorify your name forever.
¹³For great is your love toward me;
you have delivered me from the depths,
from the realm of the dead.
¹⁴Arrogant foes are attacking me, O God;
ruthless people are trying to kill me –
they have no regard for you.
¹⁵But you, Lord, are a compassionate and
gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and
faithfulness.
¹⁶Turn to me and have mercy on me;
show your strength in behalf of your
servant;
save me, because I serve you
just as my mother did.
¹⁷Give me a sign of your goodness,
that my enemies may see it and be put to
shame, for you, Lord, have helped me and
comforted me.

QUESTION

This psalm reads like a plea for reassurance. In the midst of adversity, doubt and suffering, the psalmist speaks out loud what he knows to be true of God despite his current circumstances. Have there been moments like these in your experience, moments in which you've had to remind yourself of God's love as a truth to which you cling?

PRAYER

*Hear, O Lord, and answer me this day,
For I am poor and needy. Guard my life, I pray,
For I am devoted to you.
You are my God.
Bring joy to your servant,
For to you I lift my soul.*

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 22

THE PRACTICE OF LOVE

READING: Colossians 3.1-14

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language

from your lips. ⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. ¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

QUESTION

Of those who are deeply loved by God, much is required. The bar for the practice of our faith is set high. What do you find most challenging in these verses?

PRAYER

*God of love,
my mind is yours —
grant me the gifts of clarity and resolve;
my heart is yours —
grant me the gifts of humility and renewal;
my will is yours —
grant me the gifts of gentleness and determination;
my life is yours —
grant me the gifts of surrender and grace.
For the good of all, I pray.
Amen.*

THURSDAY DECEMBER 23
UNFAILING LOVE

READING: Lamentations 3.19-24

I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.

²⁰ I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.

²¹ Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:

²² Because of the Lord's great love we are not
consumed,

for his compassions never fail.

²³ They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

²⁴ I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."

QUESTION

Take time to read these verses out loud, slowly, deliberately, and several times.
What do you hear as you read them? What phrases stay with you?

PRAYER

This time, read the same verses as a prayer.

*O God, I remember my affliction and my wandering,
I remember the bitterness and the gall.*

I remember them, O God, and my soul is downcast.

*Yet this I call to mind,
And therefore I have hope:*

Because of your great love, I am not consumed.,

For your compassions, they never fail;

They are new every morning;

Great is your faithfulness.

I say to myself, O God,

You are my portion.

I will wait for you.

FRIDAY DECEMBER 24

THE JOY OF LOVE

READING: Matthew 2.1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

QUESTION

There is a connection in this story between the joy the wise men experienced on finding the child and their immediate response of worship. The joy of encounter and the response of love flowed one from the other. How do you understand this connection? Has there ever been such a clear connection for you?

PRAYER (Mary Oliver)

*Oh, feed me this day, Holy Spirit,
with the fragrance of the fields
and the freshness of the oceans
which you have made,
and help me to hear and to hold in all dearness
those exacting and wonderful words
of our Lord Christ Jesus,
saying: Follow me.*