



ADVENT

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Introduction to Advent

As a kid, Christmas Day was the highlight of my year. I was all about the gifts, and my anticipation was off the charts. Those last few days of school before Christmas break were spent inhaling cookies and treats at class parties, then slipping into a sugar coma while I daydreamed about all the toys that might be waiting under the tree. At night, I'd lie in bed wide awake, my mind still racing with possibilities.

One year, I even discovered my parents' secret hiding spot for the presents. After that, it became a yearly ritual to sneak into that "vault" and get a preview of everything I'd be unwrapping on Christmas morning.

I think it's fair to say that when it comes to Christmas, I mastered the art of snooping much more than the art of waiting.

It wasn't until years later that I began to see how that struggle to wait actually connects to the deeper meaning of the season. Advent, it turns out, is all about waiting. The word advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "arrival."

As Christians, we live between two arrivals: the first coming of Jesus as a baby in a manger to offer redemption and forgiveness, and the second coming of Jesus as the King of Kings who will make all things new. We celebrate the first as we wait for the second.

And while our Christmas marketing makes everything look magical and picture-perfect, the truth is waiting for Jesus to do His work in us and in our world is rarely pretty. As we wait, we're longing, deep down, for our wounds to be healed, for our brokenness and imperfections to finally fade, for relationships to be restored, and for the world to be made right.

Traditionally, the Church has reflected on the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love during Advent. I'm starting to see that those aren't just sentimental, "Christmas-y" words—they're exactly what our hearts need in a season of waiting on Jesus.

So as you walk through this Advent season, as you read this devotional, and as you reflect on the arrival of Jesus, my prayer is this: that the deep struggles of your heart that surface in the waiting would be gently met—and slowly replaced—by His hope, His peace, His joy, and His love.

Blessings,
Pastor Micah Eldridge



Week 1

Hope

Hope, as promised.

December 1



Chris Williams

"It was right then that I started thinking about Thomas Jefferson on the Declaration of Independence and the part about our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And I remember thinking: how did he know to put the pursuit part in there? That maybe happiness is something that we can only pursue; and maybe we can, actually, never have it, no matter what..."

This is a quote from one of my favorite movies, *The Pursuit of Happiness*. Chris Gardner is down on his luck and ripe for a come-up that wasn't promised. He is losing hope. Desperate for a happiness he may never acquire, no matter what.

We have all felt hopeless because we all live here. A place where we pursue a life that eludes us. Growing up, I was told nothing is promised, not even tomorrow. I believed that. But in Advent, God heals our hope. History has met a promise that will outlast the sun, giving us all we hope for. No matter what.

"The Lord had said to Abram... 'I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'"

Genesis 12:1-3

If Abram were me, he would have freaked out. How could he build such a kingdom? He would obviously need a kingdom plan. How would he acquire enough land with enough resources to sustain everyone TO BLESS ALL PEOPLE ON EARTH? Why would God task him with all of this?

But this was no task or call. It was a promise. God was telling Abram what He was going to do with him. God's work gives us hope.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11

This is a promise God makes off the back of the one He made to Abram hundreds of years earlier, inviting him into a new hope. It's a promise He keeps making because we keep forgetting that we have already been promised everything we seek. Yet, we search for what we hope for in the place it doesn't exist. *Here.*

The true object of our hope exists where He invites us: the Kingdom. A place where the promises of God are the pillars of all we really hope for.

We don't want money—we want peace.

We don't want wif—we want joy.

We don't want followers— we want love.

And we were never searching for an infant—we were searching for hope.

This infant, Jesus, coming here, changed everything. He came to the place where “nothing is promised” to fulfill promises (Matthew 5:17) and make more. Once upon a time, all hope was dashed here. Advent reminds us that all we've ever hoped for can be plucked like fruit from the branches of a billion-acre orchard— baskets full and juice dripping from our jaws, to share with everyone. *Here.*

Miriam's Hope

December 2



Jasmine Kruger

I am terrible at waiting. When I experience patience, I know that it is directly from God because of who I am. I think that is why stories of God's timing in the Bible speak to me. They strike at a vulnerable part of me.

When I share what I am waiting for, the responses I receive aren't always encouraging. 'Cheer up, Jasmine, Sarah (from the Bible) had a baby when she was in her 90s!' I always empathize with those in a season of waiting. And recently, I considered a person in the Old Testament who could have very easily become resentful in her waiting.

In Exodus 2, Miriam follows the floating baby Moses right to the life of royal treatment. She probably listened to her mom speak about how special Moses was for years while he received the best Egypt had to offer in provisions and education. And then, when Miriam is herself in her forties, she watches Moses run into the wilderness, and he doesn't return for another forty years. I had never considered before how old Miriam was. For eighty years, she endured the staff of Pharaoh. What did she think when Moses, the one who was supposed to deliver them, finally showed up?

Finally? What took you so long? How dare you just leave us?

But here's what we know about the Hebrew people: they kept repeating their origin story. I imagine she did find hope in the story of Sarah having Isaac in her old age. In the story of Jacob wrestling with God. In the memory of Joseph languishing in prison and waiting for God to remember him. She had to have focused on those stories of hope.

Because instead of letting eighty years of waiting make her bitter and entitled, as the people are rescued from Egypt, Miriam is singled out as singing:

*“Sing to the Lord,
for He is highly exalted.”
Exodus 15:1*

And she DANCED out of Egypt in her eighties. If she had not practiced dwelling on hope, bitterness would have taken the strength from her limbs long ago, and she wouldn't have remembered how to sing. But she did. And she was ready.

Waiting is painful. It leaves scars. We are not the same people at the end of our waiting. But if we keep close to God and the hope that He provides, we will find ourselves at the end singing and grateful instead of entitled and bitter.

Simeon's Hope

December 3



Emily Lanphier

For nearly a lifetime Simeon waited. There was one thing he had to see, I will not see death until my eyes have seen the Lord's Christ. And yet, that was a lofty hope, for Israel had been aching hundreds of years for the promised Messiah. God, have you forgotten about me? Simeon must have wondered.

In a moment everything would change. Luke 2:26-28 picks up the story:

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, he (Simeon) took him in his arms and blessed God."

Luke 2:26-28

I will not see death until my eyes have seen the Lord's Christ.

When the infant Jesus was just days old, Simeon beheld the greatest gift the world has ever known. Simeon cradled and blessed Christ incarnate. In one moment, a lifetime of waiting was met with the fulfillment of a promise (and not just any promise!). Jesus entered history, and the world would never be the same.

Simeon's story is not unlike our own. We all wait. What are you waiting for? Is it a relationship to mend? A physical healing to come? A season of more abundance? We know that God's promises and intentions toward His children are deeply good, but they are often not instant.

Much of the spiritual life involves waiting.

Waiting with hope is both a defiance and an art. As we surrender our timelines and agendas, we rest in the character of a God with a track record of healing, deliverance, and the miraculous. We wait with hope because God is faithful to fulfill His promises.

We who wait in Christ are the ones with upturned eyes. We wait not only in the natural, but with the eye of our hearts. While we wait, we can also trust that God is working for our good beyond what our eyes can see. God's timeline is frequently different from our own, but He is always moving where He is invited. May we bind our hearts to hope because our faith lies not in our own strivings or the actions of others, but in the workings of a God who has been faithful to His people and will continue to be for all eternity. It's just who He is.

I will not see death until my eyes have seen the Lord's Christ.
Simeon's eyes saw. And ours will, too.

St. Patrick's Hope

December 4



Mary Kinnison

In the early 5th century, Irish raiders invaded Britain's shores, taking countless villagers into slavery in Ireland. The most famous of those captured was a 16-year-old boy named Maewyn Succat, more commonly known as St. Patrick. Maewyn spent the next six years of his life as a slave-shepherd in Ireland. Tired, cold, hungry, and isolated in the hills of a foreign country, Maewyn turned to the Christian God of his youth for hope.

One night, Maewyn heard the Spirit saying, "Behold, your ship is ready." In a daring act of hope, he abandoned his slave post and traveled two hundred miles toward the sea. There he found his promised ship awaiting and returned to Britain, where he later became both a priest and bishop. Upon his ordination, he changed his name to Patrick.

In his work entitled *The Confessions of St. Patrick*, Patrick recalls, "But after I reached Ireland, I used to pasture the flock each day, and I used to pray many times a day. More and more did the love of God, and my fear of Him and faith increase, and my spirit was moved so that in a day [I said] from one up to a hundred prayers, and in the night a like number" (16). God used Patrick's relentless prayers to form him into a God-fearing, Spirit-led man.

Patrick's constant intimacy with Jesus resulted in many visions, including visions of his previous captors. One night, he envisioned a man from Ireland bringing him a letter. As he received the letter, Patrick heard the words, "We beg you, holy youth, that you shall come and shall walk again among us" (23). Patrick had been in his homeland for thirty years but was compelled by his many visions to return as a missionary to the pagan and barbaric land of Ireland.

Upon return, Patrick faithfully shared the Gospel throughout the Irish region. Today, he is known as the Apostle to Ireland, as he baptized an estimated 120,000 people and established

approximately three hundred churches.

You may be asking what the story of St. Patrick has to do with the Advent season. Though Patrick's story is impressive, the source of his hope began the same way it begins for us: with the account of a baby born in Bethlehem.

The birth of Jesus is the pinnacle moment in eternity where heaven literally met earth. Patrick understood the hope of the incarnation, where physical hardships are diminished in light of fulfilled eternal promises. This kind of hope – eternal hope – gave Patrick a boldness that changed the world.

This Advent season we are reminded that even in earthly despair, we are heirs to promises beyond our physical situations. Jesus's birth bestows on us joy for today and strength for tomorrow. And since God works all things together for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28), one day we will find ourselves standing in the glorious culmination of all things hoped for.

Quotes taken from The Confession of Saint Patrick.

<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/p01.html>

Finding Hope

December 5



Ana Rase

I was nineteen years old when a petite old woman from Houston, Texas, visited my hometown in Romania, six thousand miles across the ocean. I was asked to translate for her as she ministered to different local churches. One night, in my mother's kitchen, she ministered to me. She told me things about my future, prayed for me to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied about my four brothers: that they would turn to the Lord and follow Him wholeheartedly, having a great impact for Christ. Her words lit a fire and birthed an uncontainable expectation that this prophecy would soon be fulfilled. The days ahead were filled with unquenchable joy.

Eighteen years later, I'm still waiting. Only the Lord knows the ache, the tears, the pleading I have done on my brothers' behalf. God also knows my disappointment. You see, "hope deferred makes the heart sick" (Proverbs 13:12a)

Hope deferred, family dynamics, and devastating events have made me question at times if these words will be fulfilled.

So, how do I hope when expectations and dreams are delayed or when my prayers go unanswered? How?

Patiently. I wait patiently for the Lord to help me, to turn to me, to answer my cry. I wait on Him to lift me out of the pit of despair, out of the bitter waters.

I wait on Him, trusting He'll do what He said He will, without attaching my own interpretation of when and how. I wait.

"Be still in the presence of the Lord, and wait patiently for him to act."

Psalm 37:7a

Hope is an expectation, a yearning, a desire that's yet to be fulfilled. Hope factors in time. Hope is a seed we plant in the soil of our heart. As I wait, I wait proactively. I wait in surrender to the One who made the promise. I wait with my eyes fixed on Him, not on the circumstances around me, because the events in my life often give me a reason for disappointment. I wait, relying not on my own understanding, but relying on Him. I wait and trust. Trust in His character. Trust in His power.

I hope my brothers will surrender their lives to God's will and purposes. Oh, what joy awaits that moment! The celebration, the sounds of angelical trumpets ushering in new birth. I wait in hope of what is yet to come.

I pray. I trust. I wait. With hope.

The Christ Child came not too late, not too early, but in the fullness of time. And the hope of those who were waiting was not disappointed.

And so we, too, wait.

Sabbath Meditation

December 6



Cami Gerdes

Hope, like many things in this story of expectancy and redemption, is backed by the promises that had been spoken many years prior to Jesus coming down to earth. Hope is the symptom and action of a heart turned towards trust in the midst of despair while living in this chaotic world.

As you continue in Advent and enter into Sabbath, I invite you into examination: How are you positioned in the tension of the world around us and the promises of a coming kingdom? How can you further position yourself towards hope?

Prayer:

To begin your Sabbath, take time with the scripture below, do this alone or in the company of family or friends.

- **Take a deep breath in, welcome God's presence as you pull away to find rest.**
- **As you release your breath, relax your body and find physical comfort in pausing.**
- **Read each line out loud, pausing to take in what has been promised to you - allowing the Word to move your heart deeper into God's presence.**

"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.

Of 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."

Isaiah 9:6-7 NIV

End your time with gratitude, thanking God for what He has given to us through Jesus.

May the word of our God bring you to hope as you find rest in His presence.



Week 2

Peace

Peace, as promised

December 8



Bethany Fatahian

Amid the Hallmark movie marathons, school Christmas plays, rush to wrap gifts, and sugar cookies with hot cocoa, life can seem chaotic instead of peaceful. For many, this time can stir both joy and heartache as the season's beauty can be shadowed by memories of what has been lost, by loneliness, or by the quiet weight of unmet hopes. The first Christmas was filled with chaos, too: crowded streets with travelers, a frantic search for shelter, and a newborn's cries surrounded by the noise and smells of farm animals. And yet, in that humble place, peace broke through, and a holy hush was brought to a weary world. That "peace" was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

Later swaddling clothes were swapped for prayer shawls, and the baby grew up. There we find Jesus sharing his final encouragement with his disciples before his death and resurrection and He says...

"Peace I leave with y'all. My peace I give to y'all. I don't give to y'all as the world gives. Don't let y'all's heart be troubled or fearful." John 14:27 (YALL)

Jesus didn't promise them a life free of pain (they were about to experience the worst pain watching Him die!) However, He left them with peace.

The concept of peace in the Bible is much deeper than the simplistic way we use the word today. Jesus gave the gift of taking all that is broken and restoring it to wholeness, whether it is our lives, our relationships, or our world. By sharing it with His disciples as a group, He emphasized the communal nature of His gift of peace and its broader application beyond the original disciples to the Church today.

The peace of the world is...
us trying to escape,
us seeking to control,
and is highly circumstantial.

The peace of this world is ignoring or numbing problems through distraction and trying to keep everything in check until the next difficulty of life comes by. It depends on all going right: good health, financial stability, no conflicts. But the moment life gets hard, that peace disappears.

Jesus's peace means...
healing of hearts,
mending of relationships,
and His very presence.

Jesus's peace is not something we earn, manufacture, or hold onto by sheer effort. It is a gift, the gift of Himself. Where Jesus is, there is healing, freedom, love, joy and changed lives. That is the promise of peace we have.

Jesus came incarnate as the Prince of Peace, and He sends us out incarnate into the world around us. His presence calms our hearts and allows us to bring the peace of God to a hurting world. His peace is not only for you, but for all of us collectively, inviting hearts burdened by worry, loss, and longing for rest. When we choose to live and rest in that peace, the world sees a glimpse of His kingdom and experiences Immanuel: God with us. Christmas is the celebration that even in our own hurried chaos, heaven has already drawn near.

Joseph's Peace

December 9



Mike Snow

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

John 16:33

Advent is well known for being a season of preparation and waiting. These two words often come with a tension between uncertainty and anticipation. God frequently places dreams in our hearts and minds to prepare us for what's next. Our limited human minds begin to build an idea of what these dreams will one day look like, but those ideas often fall short. God's ways are always higher than our own (Isaiah 55:8-9). In that tension, however, there is an opportunity to partner with God and trust that He intends the best for us through the waiting. That partnership brings peace, and the tension soon becomes an adventure.

I am reminded of the story of Joseph in the Old Testament (Genesis 37-45). Joseph, the favored son of Jacob (Israel), had incredible, God-given dreams of a future rooted in leadership. Through his limited human nature (and maybe a little immaturity), he shared these dreams with those closest to him, as if saying to them, "Look at me. I'm an important man!" But, in his arrogance, he caused so much offense that his brothers plotted to kill him.

Joseph quickly found himself betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, and eventually thrown into prison for a crime he didn't commit. His life headed in the opposite direction of the dreams he held close. Yet, through every painful twist and turn in his story, Scripture reminds us that "The Lord was with Joseph." (Genesis 39:2)

This is the heartbeat of Joseph's story. In the pit, in Potiphar's house, and in prison, the Lord was with him. Joseph learned to live in peace, not because his situation was peaceful but

because the presence of God was steady and sure. His faithfulness in the waiting—his quiet obedience and stewardship when no one was watching—prepared him for the day when God’s dreams would unfold in full.

When the time was right, God lifted Joseph from the prison to place him in the palace. He was trusted and given authority over all of Egypt. Through Joseph’s wisdom and partnership with God, an entire nation was saved from famine. The most beautiful part of Joseph’s story was when he stood face to face with the brothers who once betrayed him. Instead of vengeance and anger, he offered forgiveness and peace. His dreams of long ago were fulfilled more fully than he could have ever imagined.

Joseph’s peace didn’t come from the fulfillment of his dreams but from the faithfulness of his God. That same peace is what the season of Advent invites us to embrace.

Centuries later, another Son would come—one also favored by the Father. Like Joseph, Jesus would be betrayed, rejected, and unjustly condemned. Yet He would be used by God to bring salvation to the world. The peace that Joseph carried into Egypt would one day be perfectly represented in Jesus Christ, our Prince of Peace.

Another Joseph's Peace

December 10



Mande Saitta

"The family tree of Christ:

Abraham had Isaac,

Isaac had Jacob,

Jacob had Judah and his brothers,

.....

..... (still going)

.....(STILL going)

*Jacob had Joseph, Mary's husband, the Mary who gave birth to
Jesus who was called Christ."*

Matthew 1:1-17

The book of Matthew documents the forty-two generations between Abraham to Christ. Bringing up the rear of King David's genealogical line is Joseph, the man who would wed Mary, the mother of Jesus. A man not parenting the Savior from a place of biology but rather from the burden of obedience.

Despite his royal heritage, Joseph is described as altogether average. His story is anchored by the story of the child he helped to raise, with nothing extraordinary to suggest he stood out among his peers. No mansions are mentioned; no accolades to be found. He worked for a living, as a "tekton", a skilled builder. Later, he taught the trade to Jesus.

But Joseph was faithful, noble, and kind. The sort of gentleman needed to surrender to the call of marrying a pregnant virgin bearing the Light of the World.

I can imagine the sleepless nights Joseph had upon learning his fiancée was with child. Imagine him tossing and turning, wandering into the field nearby, seeking answers in the silent night. Maybe he screamed at the moon in distress. There is little peace to be found when wrestling with the bombshell of an unforeseen pregnancy.

And yet, Matthew 1:20 says, “While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God’s angel spoke in the dream: ‘Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to get married.’”

A dream brought the necessary clarity to say yes to what could’ve been a mess.

But newborns, even the saving kind, aren’t peaceful. The King of Kings was also the Son of Man. Jesus wore the full breadth of the human condition as Immanuel, God with us. Joseph plunged headfirst, alongside Mary, as a caretaker to his eventual Redeemer - with hungry wails, potty training, and bathtime all implied.

It was a radical act for a time and place that dictated expectations and demanded etiquette. Joseph’s willingness wasn’t borne from the perfect peace of his everyday circumstances but from an iron will of obedience to the One who reigns as peace.

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” John 16:33

Peace is hard fought. Like the earthly parents provided to Jesus, we’re bound to a mortal life full of irritation, grief, and distress. But seeking peace is the warfare of choice against chaos. We actively chase peace by aligning our will to God’s through prayer, the renewal of the mind, and worship.

In the wait, pursue peace to the death. Each battle won is a sweet victory that only the Prince of Peace can deliver.

Teresa's Peace

December 11



Emily Lanphier

Sometimes peace comes to us at the most paradoxical times. This was the case for Saint Teresa of Avila who discovered the grace of personal, private prayer only upon leaving the very convent she had joined as a nun.

Teresa lived in Spain in the early 1500s and became a Carmelite nun to avoid an arranged marriage. At the time, young women in the early modern era had two options: family life or entering a religious order. So Teresa became a nun. However, her community lacked fervor and looked a lot like the secular culture of the time. Many individuals were running from marriage instead of seeking a life set apart for God. The convent was worldly.

Unexpectedly, Teresa had to leave her community for an extended time because she fell ill and almost died. It would take her three years to recover her health, and it was in this very time of weakness and convalescence that the Lord did a profound work in her heart that transformed her spiritual journey and eventually shaped the Church on a larger scale. Teresa learned to pray, and not just the liturgical songs and corporate prayers of her religious order. Teresa began to pray personal prayers to a personal God.

St. Teresa's encounter with Christ during her illness became a catalyst for religious reform in her day. She founded her own convent of St. Joseph upon the conviction that the faithful to Christ should be set apart from the world and embody poverty, service, and consecration. Her life did not get easier as she served the Lord, but her ability to trust with peace deepened. She wrote, "Let nothing disturb you, nothing frighten you. All things pass. God does not change. Patience achieves everything."

Her vision and leadership were so impactful that she went on to establish many more convents and even write groundbreaking works on spiritual life. Her book *Interior Castle* is thought to be

one of the great and enduring works on one's personal spiritual journey.

St. Teresa of Avila is a model for how the peace and presence of God often meets us in the valleys and margins of life. It is tempting to believe that peace comes when life is going well. But as followers of Christ, the life force of the Holy Spirit is always working in our hearts when we allow Him. If we wait with quiet trust, we can know that God is working deep things in our heart that might even bring transformation to the world around us.

As we reflect on the birth of King Jesus, we can see the way God is weaving together a story that reaches far beyond us and our circumstances. Trusting that God is working in us, we also find peace that passes understanding.

Finding Peace

December 12



Shireen Eldridge

Peace.

What is it really? We all want it. Our world talks about it. We chase after it. But if we stumbled upon it, would we even recognize it?

I've been searching for peace most of my life. Inner peace to quiet my overactive, anxious mind. Circumstantial peace to calm the chaos swirling around me. World peace, well, because isn't that the cliché answer we think will solve it all?

Maybe you can relate. Those racing thoughts that bounce around like pinballs: *What should I make for dinner? Did I send that check for soccer? I need to text my friend who is recovering from surgery. And that annoying broken doorknob is still not fixed.* It's exhausting.

And that's before we even add in the noise of the world—wars, injustice, politics, pain. Every headline tugs at my empathy until I feel completely flooded. I find myself wanting to plug my ears, close my eyes, and hum “la la la” just to block it all out. Because honestly, my mind can't handle one more ping in this pinball machine.

So where do I even begin to look for peace? What would it look or feel like?

The world offers solutions. The techies tell us peace comes with the latest gadget or app to help manage my life so I can keep doing it all. But this only masks the chaos. Social media says peace is self-care—a good me-day—but this is only temporary. The world defines peace as the absence of conflict or everyone “living their truth.” But this isn't realistic.

It's all counterfeit.

None of it satisfies the ache in our souls. Because peace isn't a product or a practice, it's a person. Jesus.

Isaiah calls Him the Prince of Peace. And when we look at His life, we see what real peace looks like. It is unhurried, unshaken, and full of compassion. No overstimulating pinball machine here.

In John 14, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful."

If Jesus has given us His peace, this same peace is possible for me and for you. The same Holy Spirit who filled Jesus now lives in us. He quiets the noise within, gently shows us where to make changes, and empowers us to carry His peace into a restless world.

If the world's peace is counterfeit, I want the real thing: the peace Jesus gives.

Peace that steadies my thoughts when life feels loud.

Peace that shapes how I love others.

Peace that lets me walk through life unhurried, not worried, and anchored in the Prince of Peace Himself.

Sabbath Meditation

December 13



Cami Gerdes

Peace is our invitation into a life that exemplifies our time spent in the garden, walking in God's presence, completely unified. Advent invites us into the anticipation—not just of a baby given to us but of a new Eden. As you reunify yourself with God through Sabbath rest, invite His Spirit to reveal where there is separation and ponder where God's peace can stir anticipation for what is to come.

Prayer:

Begin your Sabbath here; alone or in the presence of family or community.

Take a moment to re-posture yourself into Jesus' Shalom, remembering that peace between you and God brings peace to others through you.

- **Quiet your mind and breathe deep**
- **Imagine life in the garden (read Genesis 2:8-25 if that is helpful.)**
- **Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you where you can be in cohesive partnership with the Lord here and now.**
- **Taking your time, allow your mind to wander closer to wards the peace you find in the quiet**

Finish with this prayer aloud:

Heavenly Father, you planted Eden before time, breathing life into dust, calling mankind to walk with you in delight— forming us for perfect communion with you.

We confess that we have turned from your perfect design, allowing the weeds of sin to disrupt the harmony you intended. Yet in Christ, You began a new creation. In His life, death, and resurrection you gave us a way back. Restore us now, even as we live in this broken world.

Heal what is divided in us — our hearts, our relationships, our world. Through your Shalom, reunite us with you, with one

another, and with all creation. May our lives reflect the harmony we were made for.

In Jesus' name, Amen.



Week 3

Joy

Joy, as Promised.

December 15



Emily Wagoner

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near."

Phil 4:4-5 (NIV)

Joy can be a tricky thing when the circumstances of life bring sorrow, stress, or worry. Many of us have heard of this elusive "joy" that prevails despite hardship, but how many of us can say we truly live each day with experiential joy?

We know that joy does not necessarily equal happiness, but it certainly cannot equal misery. Scripture tells us that joy is not tied to our success or security, but is it tied to something else? How do we capture "joy"?

The answer can be found in Philippians 4:5: "The Lord is near." When the angels appeared to the shepherds in Luke 2:10, proclaiming "good news of great joy for all the people," they shouted an unimaginable truth: God is here. In the midst of our circumstances, "the Lord is near." In chaos and confusion, "God is here." When the responsibilities of life become too heavy, "the Lord is near."

Rejoice, Rejoice, Immanuel.

This is why joy accompanies Christ's birth. Immanuel, God with us, is not only a great cause for joy, it is what sustains joy in us as we walk hand in hand with Him. As we meditate on "joy" this week, set aside time to seek the presence of God. He is so profoundly available to His children. Pause, breathe deeply, and speak the name of Jesus. Allow yourself to be still and sense His nearness, if even for a moment. Look for Him in creation and in His Word. Look for Him in songs and greetings and moments of quiet, thanking Him for the sweet gift of His presence and the joy He is stirring in our hearts even now.

David & Isaiah's Joy

December 16



Steve Moorhouse

Isaiah 61:10

What's beyond bleak? Is it the end of caring? Desolation and total emptiness? Feeling totally forsaken? Is this what David meant when he wrote, "the valley of the shadow of death"?

Isaiah faced a beyond bleak challenge when the Assyrian army was pressing in. Amid the valley of the shadow of death, he wrote of a coming Messiah who would bring great light. A child to be born who would be a "wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father and Prince of Peace."

Happiness comes and goes. That's what happiness does. It comes, and just as quickly it goes depending on outward circumstances. Joy is different. Rather than being something that happens to a person, it is something that happens within a person. The same David who wrote "the valley of the shadow of death" expressed exuberant joy when he danced before the Lord bringing the ark into Jerusalem. Was he still in the valley when he expressed joy? Likewise, Isaiah wrote "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God" (Isaiah 61:10) They both dug deep for joy that was rooted in a relationship with Yahweh.

Like David and Isaiah, have you ever found yourself in a situation that was beyond bleak? I felt like that when I heard the doctor tell my sister she had cancer. Her response? She prayed to have "glimpses of joy." A glimpse is a brief, partial view of something, not the whole picture but enough to bring an inner sense of joy. A glimpse can be experienced in the blink of an eye. Her prayer has been answered repeatedly because her joy is rooted in Jesus. The joy she has found has given me glimpses of joy as well.

Advent is anticipation for a birth to be celebrated. Even in the waiting, joy can be found by those who look for a glimpse of joy that is yet to come.

Mary's Joy

December 17



Cami Gerdes

Time and time again the scriptures teach us about the resiliency of God's people to actively choose joy in the midst of hardship. Through many forms of suffering, the Lord has faithfully been the foundation in which we have been able to bring our pain and find ourselves settling down into a joyful contentment. This joy that Advent speaks of goes beyond happiness or even the joy of the season.

When Mary sang her song of praise in Luke 1:46-50, she overflowed with gratitude. She was invited into a divine partnership, and through her, God's plan for redemption would now come to be. She was favored and her heart was filled. Mary may not have fully understood everything she would face when giving her "yes", but her hands were open.

She would go on to face many difficulties as a consequence of her willingness. I can't help but think of how many times judgement was cast onto her, how grieved she was knowing the Son of God was to be born in a stable, or how deeply she felt the pain of her heart being pierced witnessing her gift being hung on the cross. I cannot imagine the amount of times she could have closed herself off believing this call was too much to endure. But Mary's secret lay in the light of the truth she had carried in her womb: she knew who would be sitting on the throne.

This is the theme of God's suffering people not just in the scriptures but even now. The resiliency of life in Christ is found in the unwavering decision to look upon God, trust His word, and choose to give victory to the promises He has spoken even if they have yet to be fulfilled. By clinging to joy, we actively decide to reject the darkness of this world and embrace the light.

The weekly themes of Advent have each held a unique partnering of suffering and new life. Hope is found in recognition that things have gone wrong and there are promises for all things

to be made right. Peace came to earth as a gift given freely to us so what has been separated can once again be reunited and reconciled. Joy is what we experience by living from these truths.

Advent brings us face to face with the glorious act of Jesus' sacrifice from pre-conception to resurrection. We take a month to remind ourselves of the miracle of the Son, given to earth as a baby through a lowly young girl, laid —not amongst kings — but among dirt and animals.

The joy of the birth of Jesus literally brought heaven to earth, but it was not without sacrifice. We, like Mary, get to continue in a beautiful and finite season of anticipation. Jesus will return to us; and, through abiding in the truth of this gospel, we will find ourselves embracing joy, even in the face of grief or pain.

Vibia's Joy

December 18



Cole Denne

"Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy... I will see you again, and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."

John 16:20, 22b

In 203 A.D., a young noblewoman from Carthage—part of the Roman province in North Africa—was about to be baptized. Vibia Perpetua was wealthy, educated, and came from a respectable family. The twenty-two year old was recently married and a brand new mother to a beautiful baby boy.

And then she was arrested.

Rome had not yet embraced Christianity. On the contrary, to call Christ Lord was to reject Caesar. Perpetua had committed treason. She and her fellow believers were going to die.

Perpetua wrote of her terror from prison. The darkness. The fear. The extortion of the soldiers. The heat and crowding of her many fellow prisoners. *"And to crown all, I was tortured with worry for my baby."*

You might anticipate Perpetua wrote about her wrestling with God. You might think she asked Jesus how He could allow this to happen to her, to her husband, and to her son.

You would be wrong.

Instead, she wrote of miracles and visions, the fellowship of her brothers and sisters in Christ, the provision of the Lord, and His faithfulness to ensure the health of her baby before parting ways with Him for good.

She wrote of the joy in her sufferings and her victory in Christ.

When the time came for Perpetua's trial, her father publicly pleaded, "Have pity on your father's gray head. Have pity on your infant son!"

The governor echoed the plea. "Just make the sacrifice," they urged.

By this they meant honor Rome, its gods, and declare Caesar as Lord (a legal requirement for all citizens). Simply worship and show your allegiance, and you will live.

"I will not," she said.

"Are you a Christian?" the governor asked.

"Yes, I am."

When the governor condemned them to the beasts, she wrote, "We returned to our cells in high spirits."

Joy is not escape. Joy is knowing the promise we have in Him who shed his blood for us. Joy is remembering the love of our Savior, the life He gives us, and the truth that He reigns.

Joy is what we have when all we have is Christ.

Joy is knowing that Caesar after Caesar crushed Christians but could not crush Christianity.

Joy is knowing that the gates of hell failed to prevail over the church.

Joy is knowing that the same God who visited with young mothers in prison visits with me.

May we remember that joy is not the absence of hardship. It is the presence of Christ.

Finding Joy

December 19



Tamara Fisher

I don't know a happier teen than my son, Chase. He is full of life, craves adventure, and knows no stranger. Laughter is his favorite pastime. Do you know someone like that? Aren't they so easy to be around? When Chase was a little boy, his boyish fervor was difficult to restrain. Boy, did I try. He ran headfirst into trouble and was equally attracted to noise and mess. I was weary trying to mold Chase into a more manageable child; then we experienced cancer. Cancer moved me from desiring containment to desiring connection. It was there where we both found joy.

Chase was diagnosed with optic nerve gliomas at the age of seven. He was born with a genetic disorder that made him predisposed to those types of tumors, so we were on the lookout for them but still were taken by surprise when the oncologist laid out the chemotherapy treatment plan. We began the arduous journey of healing. Healing really does feel like a journey, right? And an arduous one at that. Joy can be hard to come by and might even feel like something that can be put aside for later when the present burdens feel like too much. You would never know listening to Chase tell the story.

Chase looked forward to his weekly treatment days. He never complained. He energetically engaged with the nurses and doctors for all eighteen months of the chemotherapy that ended successfully, halting the growth of the tumors behind his eyes. Was Chase able to access that joy so easily because he was more predisposed to it the same way his body was predisposed to tumors? I don't know.

I do know there is a happiness that we've all experienced that is dependent on a specific set of circumstances. As soon as the circumstances are less favorable, the happy feelings leave. I also know there is a joy that seems both other worldly and so very natural, as though it is our correct state of being. It supplants our melancholy and is even more keen when the

circumstances are dark.

There is a sweetness to God's presence when happiness fails to serve us, and we reach the end of our rope. When we move beyond ourselves, what's found is the source of all hope, Jesus. In Him is a joy that can't be shaken by the mere shifting of life's circumstances. It is through connection with Jesus that we get access to this joy.

This spring we got the news that the tumors in Chase's optic nerves had started growing again. It was so tempting to be swept up in the frustration and sadness of it all, but as faith begets faith, joy begets joy. We experienced the gift of God's closeness in one of our darkest seasons and knew that it was available in this new season as well.

The guise of happiness had been stripped away already, and what was left was a joy that no earthly circumstance could steal.

Sabbath Meditation

December 20



Mande Saitta

Providential Feet

Her feet are swollen.
So is her belly.

This tiny babe,
Concealed.
But familiar to her.
He's all she knows for certain.

Unrevealed is everything else.
She signed up for a mystery.
Like all babies are.

The days are full.
Down
 they
 count.

She works,
She walks,
She wonders,
She whispers,
She waits.

But she knows.
She knows, she knows, SHE KNOWS -
That the dust covering her feet, dense and gritty,
Is like the love covering the call.

Her feet are swollen.
But so is her heart.

I remind myself often that the extraordinary stories we study in the Word collide with ordinary people.

People like David, before his days of royalty and rule.

People like John, back when fishing nets were his constant companions.

People like Mary, a young lady padding around a humble home when an angel encountered her with surprising news.

People like me.

People like you.

Romans 10:15 declares, *“And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”*

The Lord sent Mary, not because she varied so wildly from you and I, but because she committed to voyage with the Sender. With soles the shade of onyx but bearing a driven-snow soul, Mary toiled, traveled, labored, and delivered to us the Good News. All of the commonplace, sitting right next to the astonishing yet-to-come held in her belly. All the joy of the simple mingling with the sacred.

What extraordinary thing is Father asking you to do with the small hours of your ordinary life? Take some time to journal the calls He is whispering to you, then praise Him with joy for trusting you with each one.



Week 4

Love

Love, as promised.

December 22



Josiah Gerdes

"As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you. Remain in my love."

John 15:9 (CSB)

Every Christmas, surrounded by the traditions and nostalgia, many of us read the story of Jesus' coming. The willingness of Mary, the lowly conditions of his birthplace, and the oppressiveness of the empire are all familiar to our imaginations.

Amidst all the familiarity, there is a thread I don't want us to miss. In fact, it is perhaps the most important thread running through this story and the rest of Jesus' life. This is because it is the core of who He is. It is His love.

Love is what Jesus operated out of.

Love is what drove Jesus to the cross and held Him there.

And as we remember this week, love is why Jesus came to live among His creation.

The story of Jesus being born is not only a moment in His life, it is one of His many acts of divine love. Have you noticed that? Throughout all of His life, His love is moving Him *toward* others. He is moving toward us.

In perfect love, Jesus does not stay stagnant and is never oriented inward. His love is always giving, it is always self-sacrificial. Just as the Father loved Him, He loves us.

He gives His love freely to us, patiently waiting for us to choose to just abide in Him. As we remain in His love, we are transformed into people of love ourselves, not the self-serving kind of love but a sacrificial, others-oriented love.

As we navigate the Christmas season, let us not lose sight of what brought Jesus to Bethlehem: love. Let us keep our eyes on this love that moves towards us, and may it remind us to move toward others.

Hosea's Love

December 23



Josiah Gerdes

Yesterday, we began to explore the theme of love in this season of Advent. It is a love that is not only to be taken internally but to motivate outward expressions of love. If we go back to the Old Testament, we find many examples of this sacrificial love the Father has for us. One of my favorite examples of this is in the story of Hosea and Gomer.

A deeply metaphorical story, the plot is designed to show the reader the extent of God's love for His people.

The book opens with God's command to Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman. Despite her continued infidelity and betrayal, Hosea continues to pursue her. Hosea's faithful and loyal love toward his wife paints a beautiful picture of God's continuous love toward His own wayward people.

There is a verse in chapter 2 that strikes me every time I read this book. It says *"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her."* (Hosea 2:14) God does not respond in harshness or in anger.

He responds in love.

As a result of His love, He does not just let us run away from Him. As hard as we might try, we can never escape the relentless love of God. At the same time, God never forces His love on us. We will not be forced to accept His love. Even when we repeatedly reject His love, He is always there waiting for us to turn to Him.

God's love in both the story of Hosea and the coming of Jesus feels scandalous to me. How is it that the God of all creation, who is sovereign over all people, puts Himself in this position? He is always in the position of being the one who is rejected. In our limited imaginations, this is not the position for the all-powerful God to be in.

Through His love, He fills this paradox.

In a confounding mystery, all of the love that we give back to God is His own. God's love, as we see throughout the entire Biblical narrative, is the foundation for all love. When we choose to turn to God, we are simply giving back the love He has poured into us.

John's Love

December 24



Cole Denne

There came a point in Jesus' ministry when many began walking away. He had just delivered a difficult teaching, and few could accept it.

Turning to the twelve, He asked, "You do not want to leave too, do you?"

Peter answered, *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."* (John 6:68–69)

They meant it, and they stayed—until He was arrested.
"Then all the disciples deserted Him and fled." (Matt. 26:56)

The events that followed are so familiar they can lose their sting:
Peter denied Him three times.
The people chose another man to be freed instead of Him.
The One who entered Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna was handed over to Rome, mocked, scourged, and crucified.
And His closest friends were not with Him except one.

John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," remained—watching with Mary, Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, and a few others. They stood beneath the cross as their Rabbi, son, friend, and Savior bled and gasped for breath.

Why did John return?

Why did the women stay?

Were they at less risk? Or were they simply unwilling to abandon the one they loved? After all, if Rome would crucify Jesus, why not His followers?

Why risk everything to watch someone suffer and die?

Wouldn't caution say: *Save yourself—one death is enough?*

The answer, of course, is love. It's the question that catches in our throat: *Would I have stayed?*

Sometimes, love doesn't fix or flee.

Sometimes, love stays.

And John, the one who stayed, would later write these words:

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."
1 John 4:7-9

It's unlikely that anyone in our lives will be publicly crucified.

But if they were... would we stand beside them?

Where is love inviting you to remain—when it would be easier to walk away?

Where is love calling you to wait—when fear urges you to flee?

Advent reminds us: Love came to us. Love stayed with us.

Now we wait with love.

And we stay.

Christmas Day

December 25



Dave Collins

The sun rose over Bethlehem that morning of the “first” Christmas just as it had for millennia. The overflowing crowds were once again trying to make it through the exhausting process of registering for the Roman census so that they could finally return to their home villages. Few, if any, had noticed the birth of a baby boy, tucked away in a cattle stall. Shepherds had come to see the boy, but, after all, who would notice shepherds? They were a common sight in the Judean hills. Even three “strangers” from the East would have largely gone unnoticed due to the crowds and the clamor and the dark of night. Yes, the wonder of the ages had occurred during the night, yet life continued unaware that God Himself had come to love, to heal, and to die so that His grace and mercy might extend to a sinful and broken world. The lives of every single person might be forever changed!

The angels who brought the news of Jesus’ birth returned to heaven. (Possibly all except one. I suspect that the mighty Archangel Michael stood close by the Holy Family, blazing sword drawn, ready to vanquish any threat to the Child.)

After coming to see the baby, the shepherds returned to their flocks, *“glorifying and praising God for the things that they had seen and heard”*. I’m sure that the shepherds’ return was a wild, noisy, wonderful cacophony of joy and laughter, wonder and awe.

After worshiping the Child and presenting their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the three Magi returned to their homeland. The star that had guided them to the Christ Child no longer shone (after all, the true “Light” of the world had come). The Magi had been warned in a dream to leave immediately and to take a different route home.

Mary and Joseph left Bethlehem and traveled to Jerusalem to dedicate their baby boy in the Temple. This was the beginning of a “journey” that would take them to Egypt (to escape Herod’s wrath), and eventually back to their hometown, Nazareth, where Jesus would grow in the love and admonition of God until it was time for Him to begin His public ministry.

The birth of our Savior and Lord was humble and without fanfare, yet it was the beginning of the most profound expression of love that the world has ever known! Scripture states that Mary kept all of the miraculous “happenings” (the shepherds, the angels, the Wisemen) in her heart and pondered them. As we celebrate this Christmas Day, as we visit the manger again, hear the song of the angels again, and consider the gift of God’s Son again, let’s not return to our “normal” lives. Instead, let us embody the wonder and joy of the shepherds, the dedication and reverence of the Magi, and the profound awe and gratitude of Mary!



