



For the People of Mars Hill
by the People of Mars Hill





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"The Advent story reminds us that our past, present, and future hope rest not on our willingness, but on the willingness of the One for whom the angels sang, the shepherds worshiped, and the magi searched. Willing Jesus is the only hope for unwilling sinners!"

Paul David Tripp



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Introduction

*"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. **And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.**" -Luke 2:1-7*

Despite hearing this Scripture all my life, verse seven did not deeply resonate with me until recently. Imagine knocking on door after door, pleading with every inn keeper, only to give birth in utter filth then lay your newborn child in a cattle trough.

There was simply no room.

Fast forward to today, and nothing has changed, really. We're sending in cupcakes for our kids classroom parties, scrolling through websites for each person on our list, hanging wreaths on the doors and ornaments on trees, addressing cards then forgetting to mail them, piling under blankets on the couch and watching all the classic Christmas cartoons, wrapping gifts, sending canned goods to a food drive, hiding the good chocolate—the list goes on. And everything on the list is good and meaningful and valuable! But before you know it, the calendar is full of Christmas but no Christ.

There is simply no room.

At the beginning of this beautiful season of Advent, let's start by prayerfully making room for Jesus in our lives and in our hearts. Our hope at Mars Hill Church is that this Advent Guide will be a resource in helping you find a holy rhythm as we reflect on what this season means: that God so loved the world he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

The Mars Hill Advent Guide features daily devotionals written by covenant members of Mars Hill Church meant to encourage you and draw you closer to the heart of God. Also included in the guide are service project ideas with a corresponding verse, supply list, and talking points for parents or community group leaders to help aid in discussions. Finally, Advent is only the beginning of the Christian Calendar. For those who would like to continue in this rhythm, we have included the full liturgical calendar for 2022-2023.

PRAYER

Lord, we do not want to miss anything you have for us. Help us clear our minds and hearts for the thrill of hope the coming of Jesus Christ brings. Help us make room.

Tricia Butts, editor



Please join us for these family-friendly worship services:

CHRISTMAS EVE

5-6PM

CHRISTMAS DAY

10-11AM

Week One

Hope



Week One Service Project

Service Emphasis: The Homeless

How to Serve:

Blessing Bags

Verse:

Deuteronomy 15:11 - "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'"

Supplies Needed:

Gallon sized ziplock bags

Water bottles

Non-perishable snacks (apple sauce cups, peanut butter crackers, granola bars, pretzels, trail mix)

Socks

Sharpie

Directions:

Fill bags with supplies. Using the sharpie, write an encouraging note on the bag. Keep bags in your car to hand out when you come across someone who could use a little help.

Talking Points:

God's Provision

We are all in need of a Savior

Loving our neighbors

Day One

by Kate Yates

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” -Hebrews 10:23-25

As Christmas approaches, we all have a variety of feelings, emotions and expectations—those we place on ourselves as well as others. As we grow older, the magic of Christmas fades as the hustle and bustle of trying to get it all done while maintaining our sanity becomes our focus and our goal. Taking time for Advent, which literally means “the coming or arrival, especially of something important,” is making the statement that we are choosing to prepare for the celebration of Christ’s birth. It is a great way to focus on why the holiday of Christmas exists. Over the next four weeks when you find yourself becoming stressed and overwhelmed with the never-ending to do list and the over-booked calendar, take a deep breath and remember the well known passage of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,” as ultimately that is what we are celebrating.

Entering into the holiday season our hearts and minds are full of hopes and expectations of what is to come. In our childhood most of those hopes and expectations were based on the toys and gifts we requested (or in some cases demanded!) from Santa. Now as adults those hopes may simply be, “let me survive this!”

So how appropriate that the first candle to be lit is to serve as a reminder of

the hope we have in Christ. The prophets who proclaimed the Savior was to come held out hope for just that (Isaiah 7:14 and Micah 5:2). And now, more than 2,000 years later, we celebrate his birth and hold onto the hope that he is to come again and take us with him to our eternal home (John 14:1-3).

Before we begin with the Christmas story, take some time to reflect where you are in life and what sort of expectations and hopes you may be bringing into this season. Can you relate to the psalmists of Psalms 42 and 62? Take some time to read through those and reflect on how your heart may relate or not.

In desperate times it can be hard to hold onto hope and believe that God is on our side and that he can bring us through. But it is also in moments of desperation and we throw our hands up in utter surrender that we find God shows up. Zechariah and Elizabeth were, I believe, past the point of holding onto any hope of having a child, but it was then that God showed up!

Pause this reading to read their story in Luke 1:5-25; 57-80.

Can you relate to Zechariah's doubts? What about his question, "How can I be sure of this?" Do you want God to give you certainty when he is asking you to simply trust him?

Is there an area in your own life in which you have given up but God is asking you to keep hoping?

PRAYER

Lord, please grow our hope this Christmas season. Open our eyes to see your faithfulness in new ways. And we ask you to help us remind one another of the hope we have in you and the promise of your return. Amen.

Day Two

by Tana Fleming

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

How does one even begin to talk about, to explain hope? It’s such a nebulous thing; it can’t be held, or seen, only felt in the heart. For those of us who strive to understand hope, who try to “muster up” hope, there is hope (pun intended). Because hope is not something we have to manufacture or pursue.

What it is not: As one of the most misused words today, biblical hope is not wishful thinking, as in, “I *hope* we win the ballgame,” or “I *hope* the weather stays pretty.” In these instances we are expressing wishes for a specific outcome. Furthermore, hope is not simply an optimistic outlook in regard to circumstances.

In Scripture, hope is an eager, confident expectation. But an expectation in what? Or better, in whom? As Isaiah said, “hope in the Lord.” Our hope, our waiting with confident expectation, is in a person, not a wishful outcome.

Hope does not exist without faith. They are bound together in the past, present and future. Because God has been faithful in the past, we can have renewed strength (faith) in the present and look towards a future with confident expectation (hope).

The Hebrew word for hope, *tikvah*, means cord or rope and comes from the root word that means *to bind or wait upon*. The first time *tikvah* is used is in the second chapter of Joshua. The scarlet cord, *tikvah*, Rahab tied to the window was her hope—her confident expectation as she waited—that the spies would be faithful to their promise to spare her family.

The true meaning of hope came into my life 30 years ago. It was a gift from one of my closest friends, a beautiful young wife and mother who loved the Lord, ministered to the poor, and brought joy wherever she went. So, when she was diagnosed with cancer, I had faith that God would heal her and my hope was in that outcome. Her hope, however, was in God, and as she waited on him, her strength was renewed and her faith became palpable. Her expectation was in God and his faithfulness. She was not healed of cancer this side of heaven; the outcome was not what I wanted. But I learned that what I thought was hope was actually a desperate cry for a specific outcome. I was clinging to a specific outcome instead of clinging to God and his faithfulness.

Without hope, we will be tossed and thrown by any number of circumstances. But with hope, that cord that binds us to God, we will have strength and joy. We will even soar like eagles!

It is in community where we encourage and strengthen each other, as we wait on the Lord, as we wait with confident expectation on the One who has been and Who will be faithful in all circumstances.

*He bids us build each other up;
And, gathered into one,
To our high calling's glorious hope,
We hand in hand go on.
-Charles Wesley*

PRAYER

Father, thank you that we have a living hope in Jesus, who binds us to you. I pray for any who have lost hope, that you will renew their strength so they will not grow weary but soar like eagles for your glory.

Day Three

by Allison Gaillard

"Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." -Romans 12:12

"Hope is like the sun. If you only believe it when you see it you'll never make it through the night." -Princess Leia

If you know anything about the Gaillard family you know we are Star Wars junkies. Our son's first words were, in fact, "Star Wars." If you know nothing about Star Wars, know it is a movie based on hope. The dark side hopes it can defeat the republic/rebellion. The Jedi hope they can make the galaxy a better place. Planets hope to live free. Everyone hopes they are on the right side.

Isn't this the same for us: we hope we are on the right path in our faith journey, we hope our marriage is sacred, we hope we raise our kids right, we hope we are healed from sickness, we hope we are making a difference, we hope for the best.

Thrive & Flourish, the monthly women's gathering for the Mobile campus, has taught me that in order to really understand the weight of a word, like hope, we must look at its counterpart: hopeless. According to Merriam Webster, hopeless means "having no expectation of good or success: despairing, not susceptible to remedy or cure, incapable of redemption, impossible." How many times have we looked at impossible situations and thought *No good can come from this* or *What could God possibly be up to? This is impossible*.

Time and time again, the Word of God is filled with hope. We serve a God who is in the impossible business, a Heavenly Father who wants to redeem all, and one who should give us all hope.

As a runner, I hope that the training I've put in pays off; that I make it to the finish line. Race days show me what I am truly made of, especially when the race gets hard, and I get tired, and I just want to quit. That's when I have to dig deep, refocus, and trust my training. My body knows what to do. It was trained for this. My mind has to shift to what I can't do and be reminded this is nothing new. This is what I trained for. And the same is true for our faith journey. There are days where we just want to quit, but we must be reminded that, while the next step might be the hardest, we do not walk alone. What seems like an impossible situation has already been ordained in heaven. When we think we are past the point of redemption, we must be reminded to shift the focus to the Redeemer, and we put our hope in him and his plan. Because we not only hope in Jesus but we recognize that he is hope, the greatest hope.

I will leave you with another Star Wars quote, this one from Jyn Orso: "We have hope. Rebellions are built on hope." For Christians, our faith is built on hope and that hope is Jesus. We hope for the day that Jesus returns and we dwell with him forever.

PRAYER

Lord, may we rest this Christmas season in the hope we have in you. Help us to shift our focus back to our Redeemer and the hope he offers whenever we feel our situation seems impossible. Thank you that we never walk alone.

Day Four

by Jo Newell

"Thy Word was found and I ate it, and Thy Word became for me a joy and the delight of my soul." -Jeremiah 15:16

Having lost my 8 year old daughter in a drowning accident and my husband to COPD, I do not approach the word *hope* naïvely. Before my daughter died, when I was 37, I had areas of "magical thinking" as a part of my theology. I did not believe that anything so tragic could happen to me. I loved God, I had been diligently seeking him since I was saved at age 25, studying and teaching his Word and especially sorting out the types and shadows and mysteries of the Old Testament as revealed in the New. He and I were tight, and his ways fit nicely into my belief system. (Insert eyeroll.)

However, after my daughter Ashley's death, the things in which I had put my hope had been cut down to a stump. My knowledge of and belief in the cross held firm, but the shallow nonsense of my immature religion vanished.

Hollow. Stunned. Sickened. Hope-less.

Luke referred to two people in his gospel who, three days after the crucifixion of Jesus, were walking on the road to Emmaus and talking with each other about all that had recently happened. Jesus Himself came up and walked along with them, but they were kept from recognizing Him. He saw that they were sad and their faces were downcast. He asked what they had been discussing, and Cleopas told him of the prophet who had been handed over by the religious rulers of Israel to be sentenced to death and was crucified. Then Cleopas said, "*But we had hoped* that he was the one . . ."

Hoped. Hope-less. Disillusioned. Confused.

But then, Jesus, beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

And then, Cleopas and his companion said, "Did not our hearts burn within us as we walked along the road and he opened to us the Scriptures?"

Just as Cleopas and his friend found renewed hope in Jesus being alive, they found hope for the future in the revelation of Scripture.

There, too, is where I have found my hope over the years. During heartache or weariness or panic or frustration, the revelation and illumination of Scripture is our hope.

The Holy Spirit has faithfully warmed my heart with a verse or verses that were so intimately personal I looked for my name at the top of the page.

Whatever emotion had plagued me or haunted me was soothed with a biblical ointment for my soul. No earthly remedy has had the power to change my troubled countenance to peaceful tranquility the way an anointed Word from my Divine Author has.

"Call to me and I will answer you and I will tell you great and unsearchable things which you do not know." -Jeremiah 33:3

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, Thank You that as men of old were carried along by the Holy Spirit as they wrote the Word, I am carried along by the Holy Spirit as I read it and embrace it and find hope in its supernatural comfort.

Day Five

by Haley Porter

*"I love the Lord, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.
Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
Then I called on the name of the Lord:
"O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!"
Gracious is the Lord, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
The Lord preserves the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.
For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling;
I will walk before the Lord
in the land of the living."
-Psalm 116*

This passage is one I hoped in during my junior year of college. A struggle with PTSD and the loss of my grandfather had dropped me into a depression that wasn't backing down.

When I say I hoped in it, I mean transparently that for a few months, I just hoped that it was true, because I struggled to trust it from what I was seeing in my life. I didn't feel *heard* or *helped*. I didn't feel *rescued from tears*, *guarded*, or *rested*. What I felt was ignored and taunted, plagued by tears, alone, and anxious. It often made me angry to read this passage because it didn't look true for my situation at all.

I noticed many psalmists wrote such praises, but very often they followed cries of grief which felt much more familiar: "Have you forgotten me forever?" "How long will I store up anxiety in my mind?" Yet, they almost always finished with hope, despite what they saw and felt. How does one confront their soul like David when he said, "Why are you cast down, oh soul? Hope in God!" (Psalm 43:5) In a place of despair, where can one see hope enough to say, "the Lord has dealt bountifully with me!" (Psalm 13:6)

Paul once wrote to the Romans that if we look around us, we see that creation is groaning in pain. And to the Corinthians he writes that if we look at ourselves, we see that we too are wasting away! So then, where do we look for hope? Paul answers: to what is not seen. He goes on to write that yes, we groan and waste away in what we see, but looking to Christ, we hope in what we do not see!

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection has made us able by his Spirit to look past temporary pain to eternity. With the psalmist we can look honestly at our troubles and see God. He is there praying for you when your prayers are lost for words. He is behind the timeliness of tender comforts from a friend. He is the breath keeping you alive when you sleep, and the new mercy for the day when you wake up. He knows suffering personally and is coming back to bring us into perfect eternity. Because he is always true, even when it may not look like it, we have full rein to continuously look to him for hope.

PRAYER

Father, we are more prone to despair than we are to hope, but you are trustworthy, and a sure hope for us! Please help us look to you, the God of hope, and fill us with all joy and peace as we believe, so we may overflow with hope by the power of your Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13). In the name of Jesus, amen.

Day Six

by Sam Holt

*"For behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy,
and her people to be a gladness.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem
and be glad in my people;
no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping
and the cry of distress."
-Isaiah 65:17-19*

The past year has been wonderful, but it has also been full of great pain. The joys and sorrows of life have reached new heights and new depths. My heart has leapt for joy and broken in sorrow. A recent development of this that is new to me is anxiety. That's not to say that I have never experienced anxiety but that I've never had it like this. It's deep, severe, and unpredictable, affecting both body and mind. And yet, life goes on. Nothing seems to wait for these new emotions. Work, bills, other relationships. Nothing stops. There's no pause given to the moment. No stopping. Go. Go. Go. Weep while you work; grieve while you go. How is this sustainable? What hope is there for the one simply trying to keep their head above the waters?

Remember the old days.

Like I said, anxiety is a recent development in my life. Call it bad theology or bad diet or a familiar spirit, it is terrible. It rips and claws at you like a rabid beast. Sometimes it's more subtle than others. It doesn't always seem connected to

anything. Sometimes it just happens. Sometimes it seems like it's just part of life. Work is dull and unsatisfactory. Relationships wain and fade. People move on. It all seems so...fleeting. How do we break the cycle? I'd venture that one method is to simply read and remember. Remember the old days.

Remember when the nation of Israel cried out in the stinging heat of Egypt. A nation of slaves. Slaves? They were meant for more than that. They were the promised people. Their numbers would be as the stars and yet they were slaves, not divine royalty, or a blessed nation.

Then you read how God heard their cries and broke the very laws of nature that *he* put in place to govern the natural order. How Egypt practically bled themselves dry of their gold and riches to simply get the Israelites to leave.

The Bible is full of stories of the people of God undergoing tremendous plight and sorrow and God remembering His covenant with them and not forsaking them. Consider David, how he ran from Saul. I mean, he was the one who was anointed with oil by Samuel right? The next king, and here he is running and living in caves and off the land. And like with Israel, God restored David. He redeemed David. He was true to his word. David did sit on the throne and was, in fact, the greatest king in Israel's history.

But that's just it isn't it. It's that though life is tremulous and uncertain, God is faithful to His word and to His people. And in those old days, recorded in history for us, lies our hope. Hope for tomorrow, for eternity. But God's faithfulness is not just on display in the Bible, though that would be sufficient hope for us, but He has also been faithful in every one of our lives. How many times, in sorrow and grief, has God been your comfort? How much common grace have you been shown? How much hell have you been spared? Just think of how much calamity would have befallen you thus far, if you had not Christ as an intercessor before the father.

One such passage containing a fragment of this image of hope is found in Isaiah 65. Verses 17 through 19 say that God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. That the things of the past—pain, sorrow, suffering, and the like—will not be remembered. He says to be glad and rejoice, for he is creating this new place, this new Jerusalem, to be a joy and the people therein to be a gladness. He says He will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in His people and there shall no longer be the sound of weeping because no one shall weep for there shall be no more distress.

God is coming for us. He will not leave us. When life gets hard and seems unbearable, we have the relief of looking back and remembering that God is faithful and does not forsake His people.

When anxiety fights its way into my heart, I can look to these passages and have hope. I can have confidence in God. And so can you. We can do this. God will preserve us for that day. But, until then, we wait. And, while we wait, we remember. Remember the old days. Remember the old days when God sealed, by His very blood, a new day. A day when all our sorrows and fears will be carried away in a flood of joy found in the glory of the face of Christ that will cause us to look back no longer. To no longer remember the old days.

PRAYER

Father, though life is uncertain, we have hope in your faithfulness. Thank you for your Word that shows us time and again how steadfast your love for your people is. We praise you for restoring us to you, Lord.

Day Seven

by Jack Hester

"For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." -Romans 8:24-25

I love this verse because it defines for us what gospel hope is. In other words, what hope looks like when we understand it through the gospel of Jesus.

There are two kinds of hope. The first is the kind of hope that is based on some logic and legitimate expectation: "I hope you and I are able to make the most of this business partnership!"

And then there is the hope that we are most familiar with which is a shot in the dark: "Man, I hope I win the lottery!" Both of them have stated desired outcomes, but one of them has a basis for their hope and the other is left to chance.

I don't know if you have ever had to become the main caregiver for a loved one in your family. I have, and it is an intimidating task. There are days when you begin to wonder if you have what it takes to continue. If they are going to eat, you have to feed them. You have to help them get out of bed every day, get them dressed, administer medicine, and sometimes you will even have to change their clothes when they have an accident because they cannot control their bodily functions. All of this with little to no appreciation or recognition because they are unable to speak/communicate.

Sounds like a daunting task doesn't it? Tell me this, when you think of this situation do you find yourself with a little sense of despair? Maybe even depression? Hopelessness?

What if I told you that the family member you are taking care of is a new born baby? Does that change how you feel? Of course it does, but why? Because there is hope. Hope that you will not always have to do those things for that person.

Notice how Paul says we were “saved in this hope.” Somehow our salvation is not so much about what we are experiencing right now as much as it is about what we will experience later in a perfect and full capacity! Things won’t always be like they are now! He also says that when we do hope for what we do not see, we “wait for it in patience.” So true. When we know that something is coming our way we live with an eager expectation! That is hope! But because it is a sure thing, we can exhibit patience along with our hope. Just like taking care of a baby, it is only a matter of time until this passes and my hope is realized.

When we think of advent, it is filled with hope—gospel hope. Hope that is sure because God always follows through with his promises. This hope goes hand in hand with patience. We wait, in eager expectation, for the fullness of our salvation to become a reality. It is no wonder that when it came time for the Messiah to show up on the scene, God sent him in the form of a baby. What a great picture of patient, gospel hope.

PRAYER

God of hope, we thank you for your faithfulness to all that you have promised! We want to be astute and aware during this season to be mindful of the sure and steady hope that you have provided to us as a beacon, directing us and drawing us to our high calling in Christ Jesus. Help us to be mindful of the eternal, and patient in the present, even in the mundane things of life.

Almond Spritz Cookies

"My memories growing up are all of the cookies and candy my mother made. Almond Spritz cookies were my favorite."
-Donna Hudson

Ingredients

1 cup unsalted butter softened
2/3 cup granulated sugar
1 large egg
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon almond extract
2 cups all-purpose flour
1/4 teaspoon salt

Instructions

Preheat oven to 350°F.
Beat together softened butter and sugar very well; so it's pale and fluffy, and increased in volume. That can take up to 5 minutes.
Then add an egg, vanilla and almond extract and beat again until smooth consistency.
Add dry ingredients (flour and salt) and mix again on low speed so not to overmix the dough. You want to keep the dough light and airy!
If you are using a cookie press, just follow the manufacture instructions to fill the dough. Then press the dough on a baking sheet (do not use parchment paper!)
Put the baking sheet with the pressed cookies to the refrigerator for 10 minutes. It will help them to keep the shape while baking.
Bake at 350°F for about 7-9 minutes, until the edges of the cookies are light golden color. Let them sit on a baking sheet for about 10 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack.

Recipe credit: veronikaskitchen.com



Week Two

Joy



Week Two Service Project

Service Emphasis: Weary Workers

How to Serve:

Pass out candy bars to store employees

Verse:

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

Supplies Needed:

Candy bars

Large address labels

Markers/crayons/sharpie

Directions:

Decorate address labels with an encouraging message then stick one label on every candy bar. Pass out candy bars to cashiers who are working extra hard during the holiday season.

Talking Points:

Jesus came to save us—He did all the work. We are free and can rest in that truth.

Importance of encouragement

Joy that comes with an act of kindness

Day One

by Julia Summerlin

"And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ... When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.' -Luke 2:10-15

"Good news of great joy"

How often do I experience great joy?

I know this good news, this gospel for all people.

I personally know this Baby born "in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

And yet, how much does my life reflect great joy?

These shepherds understood that knowledge and feelings were not enough. Their behavior had to change. Action was required. "Let us go" and see this good news. "Let us go" and see the Source of this great joy. "Let us go" and personally see this Baby, a Savior, our Savior, my Savior.

The shepherds' story is my story because someone shared "good news of great joy" with me. My heavenly host wasn't composed of angels but of parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers, ministers, and more who shared this good news. They gave me directions to the Christ child who is the source of *all love, all joy, all peace*, and so many more gifts. Like the shepherds, I chose to "go and see" and believe this good news. The Spirit of Almighty God is alive in me, definitely good news, and the fruit of the Spirit is joy, great joy.

During Advent season and every season of our life, it is imperative that we go and see our Savior, that we spend time with our Father. Whether it is through daily Advent readings, Bible study, prayer, or celebration, the more time we spend with our Savior the more our knowledge and understanding of this good news grows. As a result of this growth we become increasingly more aware of the great joy within us.

So, how often do I experience great joy?

Maybe the question is how often do I “go and see”?

PRAYER

Father, we praise you with great joy for Your good news to mankind. We thank you that you call us to relationship with you. May our awareness of your great joy within us grow as we celebrate this Advent season.

Day Two

by Russ Wood

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." -Romans 8:38-39

This could seem like a strange Scripture for Advent season I suppose, but, then again, the whole Advent thing was pretty strange too. Ponder it for a moment as we think about the idea of joy during this season.

It has been said that happiness is something dependent on outside circumstances whereas joy stems from inside, from the heart. Whether that's true or not, knowing that the love God has for us is permanent, unshakeable, and secure in Jesus the Messiah prompts us to be filled with his inexpressible joy.

Nehemiah 8 tells us the joy of the Lord is our strength. It's a joy that blasts through circumstances to give us an internal peace, strength, and security, knowing that the One who has come in a manger is none other than Emmanuel, God with us. And since he came in the person of Jesus Christ to give himself—the righteous for the unrighteous—so we can be rescued from the depths of sin and corruption and reconciled to God. As we put our faith in Jesus, we can embrace the security of that love.

My grandson works part time for a restaurant franchise. Late one afternoon he got a call from the restaurant asking if he could go to work that evening for another of their restaurants some distance away. They needed help for a homecoming event. My grandson didn't have anything else to do so he said, "Sure." My grandson loves the Lord and continually exhibits that joy. When he

arrives at the restaurant he begins work as his usual joyful and fun self. After a while one of the workers says to him, "You aren't from around here, are you?" My grandson asks, "Why?" The worker responds, "Well, you are so full of joy. Everyone around here is depressed." So he made it his goal that evening to cheer up the workers and customers as he engaged with everyone.

What's your goal? Is the joy of the Lord your strength such that it gives you durability in spite of circumstances? Does it effervesce to the point of contagion? Does it give you a quiet peace knowing that, in spite of circumstances, you are secure in the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord?

This Advent season, be reminded that nothing can separate you from the love of God which is in Jesus. He came, he gave his life for you, and he rose again. In him your joy will be made complete and your eternal life secure. *Nothing* can separate you from his love, *nothing!* Hallelujah!

Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Rejoice!

PRAYER

Loving Father, in the name of Jesus, thank you that your love is stronger, more sustaining, more durable, more penetrating than anything I know. Fill me with a joyous comfort, an inner peace, resting in Your strength, knowing that nothing can separate me from your love. That puts a smile on my face; joyful and grateful indeed. Amen.

Day Three

by Roz Dorsett

"Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." -Romans 12:10

We like sports in our household, all of them (Roll Tide). We can turn up the tension with just a game of Jenga. Regular sports aren't even enough. As I type this, there are two fantasy sport trophies sitting in my house with nowhere to go. I think we all have a strand of competitiveness in us, but our family has a hefty dose.

A certain biblical sport, though, is one we should get more into. It's one that requires letting the other team/person win. Where the goal is to help others be successful.

"Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." -Romans 12:10

Scripture calls us to outdo one another. And all the competitive people said Amen.

What would happen if we all aimed to "outdo one another in showing honor"? As a competitive person, I not-so-humbly accept the challenge to one-up someone else. And in this instance, sing it with me, "the Bible tells me so." The word of God is challenging me to outdo someone, how exciting! And I say again, what if we all did? What would our marriages look like? What would our churches look like? What would our world and society look like?

One time I heard that if a retail company's product price is not competitive enough, it will fail. That is, if the product does not cost enough money for the consumer to think it has value, it won't sell. A product's value is determined

by its price. Jesus determined our price a long time ago. In Philippians 2:3 we are told just how much to value others: above ourselves. By honoring another, you are saying you see great value in them.

If we all have at least a little bit of competitiveness in us, and we all try out the sport of outdoing one another in honor, who knows, maybe we'll all end up winners. The ball is in our court.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for the reminder that my worth is found in you and you alone. You humbled yourself before us, and my response will be to do just that every day to my brothers and sisters in Christ who are made in your image. Thank you for loving me. Amen.

Day Four

by Paige Oldshue

"Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints." -Philemon 1:7

Have you experienced the joy that abounds among the people of God's church?

Paul describes this joy in a letter to his friend Philemon and the church in Colosse who met in Philemon's home. Even though Paul is in Rome under house arrest, he has heard about the faith of the Colossian church and their "love for all of the saints," and he expresses the "great joy" he feels from the the love he has received from them and knowing that same love is being shown among the believers in the church.

Like Paul, I also experience "great joy" on Sunday mornings at Mars Hill where I have the privilege of greeting parents and their children when they check in with Mars Kids. On Sunday mornings, I receive a multitude of smiles, high fives, and hugs from children who are excited to be in church. I also witness parents who love their children so much they bring them to church to learn about Jesus. Don't get me wrong, there are some Sundays when I arrive at church tired, distracted, really not wanting to be there. My attitude is not pleasing to God.

Then I see that first child arrive to check into Mars Kids and I start to get the first spark of joy. Then the next child arrives and I get a hug. The next child arrives and I get a summary of his or her week. Through the amazing love and encouragement of Mars children and their parents, by the end of check-in, my heart is overflowing with joy. In serving the church, I have learned the bond among the believers in the church is unique and something God has

ordained so that our faith may be strengthened. This Christmas season, I pray you experience the great joy that comes from the steadfast love abiding in the church at Mars Hill.

PRAYER

Father, you are the source of true joy. I thank you that we get to experience this joy when we meet and fellowship with other believers in the church. Provide me with opportunities to encourage and love those around me and give me the self-discipline to be obedient when you call me. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day Five

by Caroline Eldridge

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." -Romans 15:13

In the Christmas season, I often find that I feel like I have to work hard to create joy. I see all of these people in movies and on social media looking so joyful with their families while doing all of the standard Christmas activities. I have discovered the pressure to create joy feels even greater when you have a family of your own. When my daughter was born, I had grand plans for our Christmas season but Covid changed these plans quickly. I felt so defeated when we weren't able to do all of the things I thought I had to do for my daughter to make it a magical Christmas. God used this to start a work in my heart over seeking true joy during this season.

Every time I work hard to create my own joy, I am always left feeling tired, empty, and sad. The idea that we must work for joy is one of the biggest lies from Satan, because whatever comes from that effort is not true joy but fleeting feelings of happiness. God assures us in Romans 15:13 that he is the true source of joy for our lives. Paul states, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

God can give us an everlasting joy that will sustain us even in those hard or busy times. Isaiah also gives us this promise for the future, "...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" (Isaiah 35:10). If we seek God, we are promised this joy forever.

Some people may have different feelings about the Christmas season, though. I know many people that have loved ones who have passed away and dread each tradition they will go through without them. They may wish for the season to pass quickly, but God wants them to understand that he is right there with them as well. He offers comfort and joy, and he wants those that are hurting to still see each day as a gift from him. John 16:22 offers this comfort for those that are hurting:

“So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”

David also shares in Psalm 30:5b:

“weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”

We can always find joy when we look at how God uses these moments to bring glory to Himself.

One of my roommates in college taught me this beautiful lesson through her own pain. After we graduated, she was engaged to a godly man, and they quickly learned he had cancer. He did not have a good prognosis, and so they married quickly at the hospital with their friends and family around them. It was a beautiful picture of true love from God. He ended up passing away a few months later, just days before Christmas. Right before he passed, he was witnessing to friends and family around him, and one of his best friends accepted Christ as Lord and Savior. This was the perfect picture of God bringing beauty to the pain in this difficult season.

Be encouraged that the Christmas season is not meant for perfect people who are always happy, or who seem to have it all together with no grief. This season is meant for us to truly focus on the joy that came to the world through a baby, God’s son. He brought our everlasting joy that was made complete on the cross.

“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.” (Hebrews 12:2)

PRAYER

Lord you are good. The everlasting joy made complete on the cross sustains us. Help us to live in light of this joy each and every day. Amen.

Day Six

by McKenzie Richardson

"These things I have spoken to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full." -John 15:11

My grandmother would prepare for Christmas months ahead. Money was limited but her faith and joy in Jesus was abundant. Her gifts were handmade with love, talent and thought. She had nine grandchildren and we were each given her love without prejudice, judgment, or expectation. She was a woman who owned very little other than her old treadle sewing machine, and I am sure it never occurred to her to consider if we deserved her gifts.

On Christmas morning, there, hanging around the living room, would be new flannel pajamas, every set created by her with tenderness for the child who would wear them. The button holes were cut and stitched by hand. For the girls, there would be her special tatting to compliment a pocket, a sleeve, hem, or a collar. The thing I know each of us looked forward to was the red envelopes on the tree, one for each of us, with our names on the front and a hand drawn holly leaf. Inside would be a crisp one-dollar bill. I remember putting mine under my pillow and dreaming about all the wonderful things I might purchase.

All of these memories, and yet the gift she gave me that has lasted my lifetime, is remembering the joy she had on her face as she celebrated the birth of Christ each Christmas Eve. Her faith never wavered and her joy never ceased, regardless of her circumstances. When I think of Christmas and of the birth of Jesus, it is impossible for me not to think of her and rejoice in the knowing of her.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving us your love and planting faith in our hearts. On the days when the world threatens to overwhelm us, may the joy of your birth remind us that you brought us a gift we cannot earn. Amen.

Day Seven

by Kyle Beshears

*"Oh sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him."
-Psalm 98:1*

Fun fact: it's entirely possible that "Joy to the World" was not written to celebrate Christ's incarnation. If you really pay attention to the lyrics, it's a more fitting song about his *second* coming rather than his first.

It makes sense when you think about it. We sing "let earth receive her King," but didn't Jesus first come in "the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7)? And we proclaim, "no more let sins and sorrows grow," but wasn't Jesus first "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3)?

It makes even more sense when you consider the source of inspiration that the hymn's author, Isaac Watts, drew from. In Psalm 98, the reader is invited to "sing to the LORD a new song" because our King has come to judge sin and deliver the world in love and faithfulness. But Christ only *began* to accomplish that mission on the cross and through his resurrection. The redemption Psalm 98 anticipates had been *inaugurated* but not *culminated*; it *started* but hasn't been *completed* yet.

The earth has *not yet* received her King, although we know he is *already* preparing hearts to receive him. Sins and sorrows continued to grow—they have *not yet* ceased—although we know the enemy is *already* defeated.

So, why sing "Joy to the World" at Christmas? Because Christian joy is grounded in both a *past* reality and a *future* hope. It is backward-looking to a helpless kid

born in Bethlehem and forward-looking to a heralded king enthroned in glory. "All joy reminds," said C.S. Lewis, and the joy of advent reminds us of Christ's sacrifice in the past and his promises for the future.

Read Psalm 98. Talk with your family and friends about the dual direction of joy we celebrate during this season. Why does the birth of Christ give you joy? Why does the second coming of Christ give you joy?

PRAYER

Father, thank you for your Son. Thank you that he first came to redeem us from the power of sin, and thank you again that he will come again to rescue us from the presence of sin. Let our hearts enjoy the wonderful works you have already done for us, and let us joyfully hope for your wonderful promises yet to be fulfilled. Amen.



Rice Krispy Treats

"One favorite is my mom's Rice Krispy treats. My siblings and I would almost fight over them. I come from a fairly big family and even if all eleven of my siblings weren't there you had to get them as soon as you could." -Ashley Leitch

Ingredients

- 1 cup light corn syrup
- 1 cup Sugar
- 1 cup creamy peanut butter
- 6 cups Rice Krispies
- 1 package of chocolate chips
- 1 cup of butterscotch chips

Instructions

- Place sugar and corn syrup in a saucepan, cook over medium heat stirring frequently until sugar dissolves and the mixture starts to boil.
- Remove from heat, stir in peanut butter mixing well.
- Then add Rice Krispies.
- Place in sprayed 9x13 pan. Set aside.
- Melt chocolate and butterscotch chips in a saucepan over low heat, stir constantly. Spread evenly over Rice Krispies.
- Cut when chocolate on top is firm.

Recipe credit: Ashley's Mom



A close-up photograph of a Christmas tree branch. The tree is dark green with fine needles. In the center, a dried orange slice is hanging from a silver chain. To the left, a red bell ornament with gold trim hangs from a gold chain. The background is dark with some out-of-focus lights.

Week Three
— Peace —

Week Three Service Project

Service Emphasis: Single Mothers

How to Serve:

Baby Supplies Donation

Verse:

2 Corinthians 12:8-10 - "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Supplies Needed:

Any type of baby supply- diapers, wipes, clothes (size newborn-5T), toys, etc.

Directions:

Donate items to the Women's Resource Center (718 Downtowner Loop W). All donations go to the Baby Boutique where women can "shop" for what they need using points earned in the parenting classes given by the WRC.

Talking Points:

Loving rather than judging

Godly fellowship—we all need a support system and community

Trusting God when overwhelmed by life's circumstances

Day One

by Jordan Dorsett

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.
O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time forth and forevermore.
-Psalm 131*

I need peace and respite from my own heart. It lies to me about who I am. Left to itself, my heart lifts me up on rickety platforms into dreadful and dangerous spaces. My heart takes me far out of reach of those who know the truth of who I am, and love me still. It binds me to that which will betray me, poisoning love and banishing trust.

I need peace and respite from my own eyes. They lie to me about what I want. Left to wander, my eyes will look bare upon the sun and blind me. My eyes ever widen, casting ravenously for some new snare. They would capture me with the sight of beautiful, licentious death.

But with a righteous heart, and eyes only for my flourishing, the Lord holds me. Like a mother to her child, he hears my hunger cries and he satisfies my soul. He coaxes my eyes to his face, and quiets me. In his arms are peace and respite. He knows me, and he tells me who I am.

I am the Lord's—today and forevermore.

PRAYER

Father of peace, Giver of rest, bring your Kingdom to bear in my home. Quiet my heart and direct my eyes to your face with your Holy Spirit. Rescue me from the altars of ambition, pride, distraction, and consumption where I so often worship. Remind me today of your Son, born into chaos to bring forth peace. In the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, amen.

Day Two

by Tim Howard

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
-Isaiah 9:6*

If you think about it, at the heart of the human experience is a quest for lasting peace. Take a minute and close your eyes; when you have them good and closed, try and think of a life where peace reigns. Visualize a life that is never without total and utter peace. Peace with yourself, with your past, with your present. Peace with your spouse (if you're married), peace with your children (if you have them), peace with your parents. Try and think of a world where you have everlasting peace with all your coworkers, clients, neighbors, and friends. Keep your eyes closed, think of this utopian world of peace for about sixty seconds, and then open your eyes. You may have found that it was impossible to imagine your life with total peace, a peace that permeates every area of life.

The truth is, ever since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, humanity has been on a constant quest to return to Eden. Eden was the last place where humans lived in total and utter peace; peace with each other, peace with nature, and most importantly, peace with God. What your soul wants more than anything in this world is peace. We want it so bad we'll settle for quasi and short-lived versions of peace. We attempt to find peace in relationships, sex, pharmaceuticals, food and drink, and escapism, just to name a few. As if these things could solve our problems and provide lasting peace.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims the coming messiah will be born a child with the

title of "Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6 is a famous passage most of us are familiar with since it is often quoted during the Christmas season. But what does Isaiah's prophecy mean?

It is important to note that the Hebrew word peace used here in this verse means wholeness or completeness. The quest for peace is, therefore, a quest for wholeness. We are designed to be in constant communion with our Creator God, but sin left us in a terrible state, separating us from him. To be expelled from Eden meant that we were expelled from that constant communion with God. Our soul's search for lasting peace is a search for that constant communion with God we were designed to have. Our soul cries out for that level of relationship and community with our Father. Romans 5:1 is so impactful to us when Paul proclaims that *"since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Our soul also desires peace in all our relationships. The peace the Prince of Peace dispenses will remedy both the vertical relationship we have with the Father and the horizontal relationships with our loved ones and neighbors.

The protestant reformer John Calvin comments on this phrase "Prince of Peace" by stating that there is no other blessing more desirable than peace for the Hebrew people. I think the same could be said of all humanity. We all desire the peaceful, quiet, and blessed life that comes through submission to the Prince of Peace.

As we celebrate the child born to us during this Christmas season, let us not forget the significance of what that birth signals. That baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger ushered in the peace we desperately wanted and didn't even realize. That baby would provide a way for sinners who lost their peace to find it again.

PRAYER

Father, we thank you for Jesus. In him, you provided a way for us to experience peace with you. Christ's sacrifice restores the peace we lost because of our sin. Help me experience the peace of Christ this holiday season in all I say and all I do. Allow me to share this peace with others this Christmas.

Day Three

by Chynna Cochran

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

Turn on the news, login to any social media platform, or start a discussion with someone and quickly we are confronted with the reality that our world lacks peace. As we look to the world, peace may feel unattainable. Even within our own hearts, homes, and relationships, it may feel as if peace is inaccessible. In saying that, let us not lose heart.

In the Scriptures, we are told to seek peace and pursue it (1 Peter 3:11), to pray for peace (Psalms 122:6), to live in peace (1 Corinthians 4:15), and to let peace rule in our hearts (Colossians 3:15). Although these instructions are beautifully worded and deeply desired, putting them into practice is not always as simple as it seems. How do we seek peace and pursue it when the people dearest to us challenge us daily? How do we continuously pray for peace when the world around us is full of chaos? Is it possible to live in peace when our world is falling apart?

In my life, the questions have looked more like this: Is it possible to experience peace as I am grieving the sudden death of my stepdad? Will the peace of God be able to infiltrate the cracks that divorce left in my heart and mind? How can I have peace concerning my children, after what they have been through?

All of these questions have been presented to God, either in quiet prayer or loud wailing. It has been far from easy, yet his peace has been the source to carry me through. My only responsibility has been to get into the simple habit

of praying about what worries me, thanking God for what good I do see, and trusting he is faithful to his own Word. If Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, suffered and died to become our peace (Colossians 2:14), we can rely on him. Regardless of circumstance, he is faithful. Therefore, the secret to obtaining peace is relying on Christ.

When life throws unexpected trials our way, Jesus is there and He is ready to carry us through. The pressure is not on us. Does this mean that it will always be easy, even in the midst of pain or suffering? Not exactly. It does mean that as we learn to trust in our Savior, we will experience inward peace that the world cannot take away. He is our peace. Therefore, no matter what is going on around us, we can lean into him and lay our burdens at his feet.

Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace. His life, death, and resurrection made a way for us to have peace with the Father, peace within, and peace with other believers. Peace is not the absence of trial and tribulation, but rather the steadfast assurance that all things will work together for our good. As we surrender everything to Christ Jesus, we have this assurance.

PRAYER

Father God, thank you for sending Jesus to die on our behalf. Thank you for making a way for us to have peace with you, within, and with others. Right now, we lay down all of our cares at your feet and trust that you will guard our hearts with your peace. Amen.

Day Four

by Brian Argo

*"I came from the Father and have come into the world,
and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father."
-John 16:28*

Years ago my family and I found ourselves desperately homesick while Sarah and I were missionaries in language school. We'd been in Costa Rica for two months when we shifted into the Advent season. One typical thing that happens with missionaries in the field is that they get very homesick during holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, especially toward the start of their first term.

That Advent, three things made it different from previous ones. First, we focused on giving thanks every day. To mark this, we each lit a candle each day for something for which we were thankful. Second, we read aloud every day some story that illustrated the gospel. In this case, we read *Keeping Holiday* by Starr Meade. Last, we focused less on giving gifts. We focused on fewer gifts that had more meaning, but we also spent more time reflecting on what a wonderful thing Christ did by leaving his home to be with us so that he might take us home with him someday. We did this by reading the birth narratives in the gospels and singing songs together.

Regardless of where you spend the Advent season, it has potential to stir a homesickness within us. We often try to satisfy that longing with more activities and lavish gifts. But what if you actually stopped everything so that you could remember that Christ left home for you? What if, instead of watching your traditional Christmas go-to films, you read something together as a family that illustrated the gospel? All I know is that, when we were most homesick, Christ met us and comforted us by stirring a new longing: not to be back in the United States, but ultimately to be home with him.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, please stir within us a longing to be home with you. For we know that you alone can and will sustain us until we go to be with you forever.

"Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." -1 Thessalonians 4:17

Day Five

by Rushing Watson

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." -John 14:27

The unfortunate reality of my life is that I often look for peace in circumstantial situations. When my work is going well, I find peace. When the relationships in my life are thriving, I find peace. When the leader in the political office who aligns best with my morals and beliefs is in power, I find peace. When my 401k balance is in line with my retirement goals, I find peace. The only problem with finding peace in circumstantial situations is that when they fail, instead of peace, I find chaos and confusion. When conflict arises at work or home, when our country's economy falls into recession, when our culture turns from post-Christian to anti-gospel... I no longer can find peace.

But I must be able to find this peace, so I search and search and search in the circumstances of life only to be let down each and every time.

BUT thanks be to God that the gospel does not call us to find peace in circumstances of this life, but instead in a person. That person is the Prince of Peace. Prophesied of in the Old Testament, longed for by Israel, born in Bethlehem at the very time of peace and prosperity in Rome—true Peace took on flesh and dwelt among us.

The peace that Jesus brings is not the peace the world brings. The world brings peace through circumstances, which means that peace can be taken away. But when it comes to the peace Christ brings, it's not the 'clean up the outside of your life' peace, it's the 'transform your heart' peace. Which is why just a few chapters later in John 16:33, Jesus says:

"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."

Not you *may* have tribulation, but you *will*. The peace that Jesus brings has nothing to do with our circumstances, rather even in the worst circumstances this world can throw at us, Christ still offers the promise of peace in himself.

This season we will be ruled by one of two offers for peace: the peace the world offers or the peace Jesus offers. May we accept the eternal offer that can never be taken away and rest in the Prince of Peace. The very Prince of Peace who was born to bring peace to our hearts and who died to accomplish that peace as he overcame the world.

PRAYER

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. Father, may I fix my eyes on your Son who does not offer circumstantial peace but eternal peace. May I rest in and allow that peace offer to rule my life this advent season. Amen.

Day Six

by Mary Bunch

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." -2 Corinthians 12:9

"It is well with my soul..."

As I write this devotion, a familiar hymn starts to play through the speakers and fills the vacancy of my environment's background noise. As I hear the words "It is well with my soul" repeat, I brace myself for the wave of emotions I feel swelling. Eight months ago, this same song was sung at my husband's memorial service. Upon hearing those words, I ponder: Is it well with my soul?

On some days, I wake up and seem to be doing okay. My family and I have already had to face our "firsts" without him: Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Easter, birthdays, walks on the beach, church on Sunday. These firsts have come and gone while his chair remains empty; no more big footprints beside mine in the sand.

Reflecting on his absence sometimes leads to days when I wake up and feel the swell. On those days, the waves of grief force your heart to fight a painful storm, and it feels like your heart will never stop hurting.

But God is so faithful.

He promises us an eye in the storm where He is in control so that we do not have to bear the weight of pain all on our shoulders alone. He provides the strength and the peace to keep going, to keep showing up, even during the most difficult, challenging, heart-wrenching days. Trusting in God and his all-sufficient grace that I have seen over and over again makes it well with my soul.

For the first time in two and a half weeks, my husband was strong enough to enjoy the view of the sky with beautiful clouds and towering trees outside his window of the hospital. Walking each morning around the hospital brought me peace as I prayed, listened to sermons, and texted updates and prayer requests. I was still recovering from the acute illness that both my husband and I had, but his health became critical, requiring intensive care for more than fourteen days. During this time, in my own weakness, God provided the strength and encouragement I needed to minister and care for my husband.

As my husband's condition improved, a nurse asked him to think about and state a goal. He responded, "To go home." Both of our minds were focused on home! That was our plan.

God gave us those precious days together as we waited for the moment of approval for my husband to be discharged to the rehabilitation center. When the time finally came, we were both weary, and we thanked God for His mercy and grace, grateful to feel like we were moving closer to the peace of home.

My husband had only been admitted into the rehabilitation center for eight hours before being readmitted to the hospital. I woke up to a phone call from the rehabilitation center delivering the extremely unexpected and shocking news. For the next forty-eight hours, my husband and the hospital's medical team fought for his life.

In God's all-sufficient grace, he gave our family time to be together at his bedside. The pain and sorrow were, and are, intertwined with a peace that only comes from God. God promises no more pain, no more sorrow, no more tears, and I know that promise of peace has been fulfilled for my husband now that he is home with Jesus. And this assurance of trusting in Jesus and his gift of grace gives me peace like a river.

God has been and continues to be gracious through friends, family, and church family; through prayers when I did not have the strength to pray but only utter, "your grace is all we need. Your peace is our home."

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, You are good, and your ways are perfect. You are in control, and that brings us peace. Thank you for being our eye in the storm and our home filled with everlasting peace. Thank you, Jesus. Your grace is enough. You are what makes the depths of our souls well. Amen.

Day Seven

by Neal Ledbetter

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." -Isaiah 9:6

I love everything about the Christmas season! But that hasn't always been the case. My parents divorced when I was a child so for the earliest part of my life Christmas wasn't something I looked forward to. It was just another vivid reminder that things weren't as they were supposed to be in my family. My mom died in December 2012 and for several years after, Christmas was a reminder of her absence. My dad died in April 2018, disassociated from Christmas. But residual grief remains as certain milestone moments pass. That first Christmas without him was felt most deeply as it was our daughter's first Christmas and I couldn't share pictures or moments of that experience with him.

For many this time of year isn't a reminder of love, joy, hope, and peace but a reminder of loss and pain. But that's why we need the truth of the Word and the hope of the songs we sing.

In Isaiah 9:6, we read several titles given to the promised Messiah, Jesus. In each of those titles we learn something about his character and nature. Each of those titles serve as God's promise to the Southern tribe of Judah to provide them hope and peace in the midst of dark circumstances. In the immediate context of Isaiah 9, God's people were surrounded by war, their enemies were at the gate, and death and destruction ruled the day (Is 8:22). Full of fear, worry, and anxiety, Judah frantically looked for hope in the horizontal solutions of the surrounding nations.

In that context, God offered his people a better way! Rather than look to the surrounding nations for peace, protection, and provision, God urged his people to trust him and look to the peace, protection, and rule of the promised King that he would send. In that promised King, Judah would find the answer to all their chaos AND in that promised King we will find the answer to all our soul-deep longings for peace.

Peace in the Old Testament means *wholeness*. Therefore, to say Jesus is the “Prince of Peace” is to say peace is his nature and character and wholeness is what he lived and died to accomplish. He is perfectly whole, perfectly complete. He is perfectly one with God, perfectly one within himself, and perfectly at peace with others. And these are exactly the three distinct forms of peace he offers to each of us: peace with God (Rom 5:1-2), peace within (Is 26:3-4; Col 3:15-16; John 14:27), and peace with others (Eph 2:13-15). And his peace, in all its forms, is for the right here, right now everyday reality of our lives that, quite frankly, feel more like chaos, brokenness, and darkness.

Though our current circumstances may feel like darkness, death, and chaos, the good news of the promised Prince of Peace is that our circumstances will not be that way forever. This is not how it all ends nor is it as good as it gets! As we look to Isaiah 9:7, we get what might be the best news of all... “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.” Jesus offers and secures peace with God, peace within, and peace between us, and according to Isaiah 9:7, it will be endless, limitless, forever peace!

This is the promised reality of our King Jesus. Therefore, when we face trials, tribulations, and grief in this world we do so as those governed by the peace of Christ (Col 3:15-16, 1 Thess 4:13). When we face trouble in this world, we do so as those who know Jesus has overcome this world and is our peace (John 16:33, Eph 2:13-15). And when we are faced with dark and discouraging circumstances we do so knowing how the story ends and with the promise of Jesus’ forever peace (Rev 21:4).

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, to be our peace and to give us peace. Though all the world appears to be crumbling into chaos around us, though all the world tempts us during this season to believe that wisdom, strength, comfort, and peace comes through horizontal solutions, may we preach to ourselves and proclaim from the rooftops the “the gospel of peace” in Jesus Christ (Eph 6:15)!



Christmas Morning Cinnamon Rolls

*"We always have a huge breakfast
Christmas morning—bacon, eggs,
breakfast casserole, pancakes, muffins,
biscuits... it's a lot." -Dallas Schmidt*

Ingredients

Dough


- 1 cup warm milk
- 1 tablespoon instant dry yeast
- 2 tablespoons white granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3 tablespoons salted butter softened
- 1 large egg
- 3 cups all-purpose flour

Filling

- 1/2 cup salted butter melted
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons ground cinnamon

Glaze

- 4 ounces cream cheese softened
- 1/4 cup salted butter softened
- 1 to 1 1/2 cups powdered sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 to 2 tablespoons milk

A close-up photograph of several cinnamon rolls on a metal baking sheet. The rolls are golden-brown with a visible swirl of cinnamon filling. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wooden table or a dark wall. A wooden rolling pin is visible in the bottom right corner.

Instructions

In the bowl of a stand mixer, combine warm milk, yeast, sugar, salt, butter, and eggs. Add in flour. Using a dough hook, turn the on to a low speed.

Once the flour starts to incorporate into the dough, increase the speed to a medium range. Add more flour as necessary so that the dough pulls away from the sides of the bowl. The dough mixture should be tacky, but not stick to your hands. It should be soft. Add more or less flour until the dough reaches the desired consistency. The amount of flour you add in bread making is always an approximation and you should go by feel.

Transfer the dough to a lightly greased mixing bowl. Cover with a towel and let rise until double in size, about 1 hour.

Lightly grease a baking sheet or 9x13 pan. Punch down the dough and roll into a 12inch by 18inch rectangle.

Brush the dough with 1/2 cup melted butter. In a small bowl, combine the brown sugar and cinnamon. Sprinkle on top of the melted butter. Roll up tightly lengthwise so you have one long roll. Use plain dental floss or a sharp knife to cut the dough into 12 one-inch slices.

Place the slices onto a lightly 9x13 pan. Cover and let rise 30 to 45 minutes.

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Bake the rolls for about 14 minutes, until just kissed with brown on top.

While the cinnamon rolls are baking, make the cream cheese glaze by using a hand mixer to whip together cream cheese and butter in a bowl until light and fluffy. Whip in powdered sugar and vanilla extract. Add enough milk to achieve a drizzle-like consistency.

Frost the rolls while still warm. Serve immediately or cool and store. Stays good for 4 to 5 days

Recipe Credit: thestayathomechef.com

Week Four

Love



Week Four Service Project

Service Emphasis: Your Community

How to Serve:

Pick up trash in a littered area

Verse:

Galatians 6:2 - "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Supplies Needed:

Disposable gloves

Trash bags

Directions:

Find an area of Mobile or Baldwin County that is littered and pick up all the trash.

Talking Points:

Humility (not being above picking up trash)

Love for your community

Seeing a need and being part of the solution

Day One

by Rick Pierce

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." -1 John 4:7-12

Many words come to mind during the Advent season, some pointing to God and others dealing with more of the earthly matters that come with the season. However, *love* is not one at the top of our lists usually. Looking at the top Christmas hymns I see: joy, praise, holy, baby, etc., but not one of the top 20 hymns have the word *love* in the title or for that matter, in the song itself. So, what does love have to do with Christmas?

Love is such a confusing word in our language today. Just stop and ask yourself how many ways you and others use that one word to describe things in our lives. We "love" a sports team, our pets, someone's clothes, car, haircut, an actor, a musician, our friends and family, God, even a TV show or our favorite food. John 3:16 tells us "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." How is it possible that the same word we use to understand the actions of God, can be used to describe our feelings about a particularly good slice of pizza?

A large problem is that the English language has one word for love, but the language of Jesus and the New Testament had multiple words to describe

feelings we lump together as “love.” God’s love is agape, and agape love is a little different. It is not a feeling; it’s a motivation for action that we are free to choose or reject. Agape is a sacrificial love that voluntarily suffers inconvenience, discomfort, and even death for the benefit of another without expecting anything in return.

And so the agape love of God was given, shown to us, in the form of a tiny baby, as Paul explains, “he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7). This is Advent love: “not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

But what are we called to do now in response to the first Advent as we wait upon the second? The answer is simple. We are to do what Christ does. We love.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” -Matthew 22:37-39

Therefore, this Advent, let us ask how we can love God and our neighbor more fully, so that we might fulfill the call of Jesus Christ. What are some real and practical ways you and your family can show the love of God throughout Advent and the rest of the year?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for your love for us. Let us continue to love each other, since love comes from you. Everyone who loves is born of you and experiences a relationship with you. Lord, we know that we love you because you love us and because God is love—and we can’t know you if we don’t love. You showed us your love for us by sending your only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved you God, but that you loved us and sent us your Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage we have done to you and others. Lord, since you loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other. We pray that your love, God, will dwell deeply within us, and your love becomes complete in us—perfect love!

Day Two

by Wyatt Jones

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

When thinking about love, the adjective *unconditional* immediately comes to mind.

Describing God's love as unconditional does a fantastic job at helping us to distinguish between Christ-like love and the type of love the world often offers. My first experience with the world's lesser-than version of love happened at a middle school summer camp. The church that I attended did not have many others my age, so I found myself to be the only student from my church attending a summer camp.

This experience stands out to me because it was the first instance in which I remember being unknown. The other campers had come with groups and already had established friends with shared experiences, someone to partner with in activities, and plenty of others to choose to sit beside at a meal. I found that few were interested in extending their time or love beyond those that made them feel comfortable. Since that summer camp, I have had similar moments in which I felt a longing unfulfilled by the version of conditional love offered by the world. I have also had times in which I did not reach beyond my own convenience, assuming there is seemingly nothing to gain from sacrificing my time to have a loving conversation with a stranger. Unfortunately, the strong desire to belong and to feel loved is often left lacking because of the world's twisted perspective of love.

Advent is a time of preparation and meditation of the birth of Jesus Christ, our Messiah, who without error embodies unconditional love. John explains

this love through illuminating God's action in John 3:16, which says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." This verse perfectly expresses love that is inconvenienced.

Jesus went beyond merely stepping outside a friend group, he came from heaven to earth and put on a body of flesh. He did not dwell among people that would boost his social status, but instead spent time with people cast aside by society. This is the kind of love we desperately desire as people.

One of the more ironic stories in the Bible comes out of John 8: 1-11. After spending time at the Mount of Olives, Jesus made his way into the temple. Suddenly the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They were trying to get Jesus to contradict the law of Moses; however, Jesus, in a clever way says, "you who are without sin cast the first stone." Eventually, everyone who accused the woman walked away because of the sin in their life. At that time, it would have been socially acceptable for Jesus to stone the woman. He was literally without sin and fully justified to cast the stone, and although he was justified, he chose not to. Jesus rejected an activity with the socially prominent for the sake of a woman who just had every bit of social status stripped away from her. His love was inconvenienced, and his love was unconditional.

In this season, we celebrate the coming of our Messiah, the one who perfectly embodies unconditional and inconvenienced love. He knew us entirely before he even came to the earth—all our mistakes, every sinful thought, every bad action, and every imperfection. Yet, the Word still "became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14). Eventually, Jesus shows his unconditional love for us undeniably on the cross where, "while we were still sinners, he sacrificed His life for us" (Rom 5:8).

May his love encourage you today. You do not have to be perfectly together to be loved perfectly by God, for his love is not like the love of this world—it is unconditional.

PRAYER

Lord, it is often hard to believe that you love us, imperfect people. Help us to have joy knowing that your love is not like the world's rather, it is unconditional. Remind us that our value is found in being created and loved by you Lord. Thank you for showing your love for us through sending your son to us to bear your awful wrath against our sin on the cross. Thank you for defeating sin and death in the glorious resurrection. It is through the name of Jesus we pray these things. Amen.

Day Three

by Joshua Farmer

"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." -1 John 3:16

Describing love can be difficult but we know it when we see it, especially when we are the recipients.

When I was a freshman in college, I experienced love and felt its warm embrace from the Glasscock family. My parents divorced when I was 12 and by the time I was 14, my relationship with my dad was fractured and nearly non-existent. By the time I was 17, I was living on my own when my mom moved in with her boyfriend. I was good friends with the Glasscock's son, Jason. They included me in their family meals and would often stop by my house to invite me out to eat with them. For Christmas of 1999, I felt like part of their family as they included me in their family Christmas. They took me shopping and bought me clothes and new shoes (I really like shoes). Unwrapping gifts with their family is something I'll never forget.

When we receive love like this, it fills our hearts with cheer and makes us feel special. We all want to be loved and experience belonging. When we are loved, it should generate a desire to reciprocate and replicate that love to others. Unfortunately, many times we are so consumed with ourselves we can be in danger of never really putting forth the effort to love others. We can become hoarders of love because of the way it makes us feel.

Confession time: My wife, Paige, and I enjoy watching the Bachelorette. It's an incredible social experiment I find fascinating. As one might suspect, most of the relationships don't work out. I have an idea as to why that is. Towards the end of every season, the bachelorette narrows down her choices of who she wants to marry. As the Bachelorette meets the families of the guys she is

dating, the families inevitably ask, "Why my son?" Almost all the responses are centered on how she feels from being in the relationship. "Your son makes me feel great." "I've never felt like this before." "I want to feel like this forever."

All the focus is on how the individual is made to feel, not how she wants to enrich the other person's life and love and serve them well.

Love is serving and sacrificing. Christ loved us when he gave up his rightful place as king to serve us by sacrificing himself so that we might have life. We have been loved extravagantly! Out of an overflow of appreciation for that love, we should, in turn, look to love others selflessly and sacrificially so that they may experience the great love of Christ.

Who has God brought into your life that needs to experience this kind of love? As we focus on the coming of Christ, let us meditate on His example of love and seek to love as he has loved us.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for loving me. Thank you for giving me the perfect example of love that I can model to those you've put in my life. Help me to see who you've brought into my life that I can love as you've loved me.

Day Four

by Dallas Schmidt

*"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."
-1 John 4:10*

The Quest Study Bible defines *love* as “wanting good to come to another person; being concerned and willing to work for another person’s benefit.” When I think about what love is and how I have experienced it, I feel happy. I have genuinely had wonderful examples of love in my life—from my family to friends to people I hardly know. One of my greatest examples of love is the way my husband responded when I was unexpectedly diagnosed with a life-changing disease. Love is selfless and means putting yourself completely aside for someone else. It also means loving someone always, no matter what unplanned surprises come.

Love is also reckless. As Cory Asbury sings, it is never-ending and fights for you even when you don’t feel that you are worth fighting for. This perfect type of love can only be shown fully by God. This is not a love that we can imitate, although we try. We pale in comparison to showing the love to others that God shows to us. God loves us so much that he sent his Son to Earth as a baby to eventually die for our sins. Those sins are us breaking the rules that God gave us, but he loves us anyway and invites us to be his children even though he knows that we will make monumental mistakes.

God loved us before we ever loved him, and he loves us even when we don’t show him love. His love is never-ending and does not come with stipulations for his children. We can love someone, but when that person makes us mad, we don’t show love quite as strong as when we are happy with that person. Thankfully, God’s love doesn’t decrease when we do something that should make him angry with us.

This Advent season, I pray that you are able to recall the greatest love that you have been shown, and know that while earthly love is amazing and life-changing, the true love that God has for us is the greatest gift we could ever receive. I pray that you embrace God's love and in turn show that love to others. I also pray that, if you have not already, you give your heart to God so that you can fully experience his never-ending love.

PRAYER

Lord, help me to remember that I am first loved by you. Help me also to be able to love others as an example of you. Thank you for your constant and unwavering gift of love.

Day Five

by Kate Nettles

"And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For he has regarded the lowly state of his maidservant.... He who is mighty does great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation...." -Luke 1:46-55

I thought "love" looked picturesque. Love is in control, it is happy, it is always right.

That translated meant, "Kate is to be in control, happy, and in authority."

At times, the reality is that love looks unstaged and unkempt; it gives time to process big emotions, time to disciple through continuous problems, and most times, it's admitting that you don't know "why" or "how."

Love used to look like "doing" and saying "yes," to *being* and *waiting*.

Love on my part looks passive. It's God who is active and showing those around me what kingdom living looks like. His love reigns over every active part of life, and my love for him looks like getting to be a witness to glorify and to testify of his kindness.

When pressed, angry, and desperate, my way of loving is saying Jesus' name quietly, taking a few deep breaths, or quietly naming what I see and feel and mentally giving it to him. His love looks mysterious, as I see the situation resolve in a way that I never could have imagined.

When discontented with the strains of finances, my way of loving looks like

saying praises and thanks for the host of things we have seen him provide to this point, and asking God to forgive me for my displeasure and discontentment. His love looks like creative cooking in the kitchen, making concoctions I've never made before, and us all enjoying it. His love is the gift of preoccupation with the next *more* important thing instead of the DIY/shopping items I was hoping to buy for the month.

When having an unplanned pregnancy that is career-ending and dangerous to the baby and yourself, it's letting yourself feel all the things, and asking Him to pursue you anyway. It's asking for him to forgive you for your fear, and it looks like him sending a host of angels in the form of family, strangers, nurses, and doctors to minister to you and your family. And the provision continues as my attitude stays upbeat through the rhythm of the weekly appointments/therapies.

His love is always inviting us to grow through the struggle. It's staying on my depression medicine and asking him to take my preconceived notion of acceptable mental health. His outpouring of love gives me strength to speak honestly with others about my struggles, and testifying of how He saved me time and time again.

The theme of my life is to have God rule over me divinely, so I might testify of His mighty hand and trust Him with the next thing.

His love and favor doesn't always feel right, or beautiful, or successful. I don't always feel righteous, lighter, or float with ethereal beauty. Accepting the love of God, displayed through Jesus on the cross, and enacted daily by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, is actually accepting the hidden life of God in me, and asking him to give me as he wills in my lowly state.

PRAYER

God, thank you that Jesus' sacrifice allows us to come to you freely and boldly. Thank you for always giving and always doing, and help me to continue to see when you are at work. Help me to be yours and wait for the Holy Spirit's prompting, and please send me resources and people who will love and direct me closer to you.

Day Six

by Anthony Kidd

"Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." -1 John 4:11

The advent season is filled with busy schedules and, in the midst of our busyness, we can forget to slow down to be with the friends and family who are around us. When I find myself in a busy season (which, when I think about it, never seems to really end), I see how quickly I can get distracted by my circumstances. That is when I find myself not showing or being an example of love to those closest to me, my friends and family.

I remember just a short time ago I was running errands with my kids and we had a few things to get from one store, so we all piled up in a buggy (well they did...I got to be the buggy pusher) and started our trek up and down the aisles. As we went up and down the aisles, the kids kept pointing and asking (as most kids do) "Can we get this?!" In my frustration with having to repeat (as most parents do) "No," we ended up forgetting one thing off our list and I snapped at my kids, "Y'all made me forget what I needed!" And I immediately saw the look of disappointment on their faces.

In this passage, John encourages his readers to be an example of love to those around them. In verse 12, it reads "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." We are surrounded by opportunities to display God's love to the lost and dying world around us. It might happen at the grocery store or coffee shop. Maybe one of your family members needs to see what the love of God is. We can be that example during the advent season.

I had an opportunity to not let my frustration get the best of me, and I failed. From time to time, we've all been in circumstances where we don't respond

with love. Rather, we snap, and respond in frustration. During this advent season, you will be confronted with opportunities to display God's love to those around you. Let us all strive to follow the example of Jesus and show God's love in all of these situations.

PRAYER

Father, we celebrate our greatest example of love; your Son, Jesus. Today, would you teach us ways that we can show your love to those who cross my path today. Open our eyes to see the world around us through the lens of love. Teach us to be the example of love so that your love can be perfected in us. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Day Seven

by Tommy Hinton

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot[a] love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother." -1 John 4:8-21

As a young man in my late teens, I thought I had a firm grasp on what it meant to show Christ to the world. I knew how to share "my story" (Sunday night door-to-door visitation time taught me well) and the "Roman Road" was as

easy for me to recite as it was for me to tell someone my home address. I was quick to avoid or leave situations that were not God-honoring and was quite proud to say, "I have never gone there before" or "I have never done that." My Bible was in hand as I sported the newest Christian "pop-culture-knock-off" t-shirt and sang along with D.C. Talk or Steven Curtis Chapman. I was at every church service I could attend and very involved in my local body of believers. I checked every box. I was a "good" kid. These were the ways the world was to know that I loved Jesus. These were the things I considered the distinguishing marks of being a Christian which separated me from the world.

However, there was a time when I was called to reevaluate all I thought set me apart and pointed others to Christ. All of those things were "good," but I had missed something. I remember one night talking to my grandparents about evangelism and living for Christ. I was telling them all the things I was doing to show the world around me how much I really LOVED Jesus but had not had the chance to have many gospel conversations with those around me. I really wanted to know why. My amazing grandmother stopped me and asked, "What are you doing to let them know that you love them too?"

On the last Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of love. This candle reminds us that God is love (1 John 4:16) This candle should lead us to other facets of truth regarding love. It reminds us that the backbone to the entire story of redemption is showing love through sacrifice. It reminds us sin rendered man incapable to come before a holy and righteous God, therefore, God came to us instead. It reminds us that Jesus came wrapped in flesh to die for the purpose of providing reconciliation to and allowing a relationship with God for all who may respond in faith. This candle should also remind us that true sacrificial love is what we should seek to mirror. THIS love is the love that is to be displayed to the world – those in and outside the Church. THIS selfless love is the distinguishing mark of a Christ follower. Love is our trademark. Much like the infringement that was surely happening with those t-shirts. (Yes... you can still wear your knock-off Christian tees!)

As we move into Christmas, be reminded of the distinguishing mark you carry as a follower of Jesus. Be reminded that we carry the seal of love placed on us by our Lord. Seek to show this love to your brothers and sisters in the faith as well as to the world around you well! Afterall...

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." -John 13:34-35

PRAYER

God, we ask that you make us a people with the distinguishing characteristic of gospel love. We confess that it is only in and through your love we are able to extend Gospel love to others. Help us to love the church and the world around us in the way that you love. Give us the unselfish, compassionate, and unconditional love as displayed by Christ. Pour it into our hearts so that we might give it away. Let the world know we are yours by our love both for fellow Christ followers and the lost. Allow this love to be the means by which we encourage those around us and the love that you use to draw others to yourself. In the name of your son Christ, I ask these things. Amen.

Reindeer Chow

"My wife Courtney pulls out all the stops during the holidays. One of the many goodies she makes is Reindeer Chow. It's just a really fun Christmas treat that our family really enjoys every year."

-Justin McGehee

Ingredients

9 cups Chex Cereal (any variety will do)
1 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips
½ cup creamy peanut butter
¼ cup butter
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1 ½ cups powdered sugar
1 cup seasonal M&Ms

Instructions

Pour cereal into a large mixing bowl. Next, prep a cookie sheet with parchment or wax paper, set aside.

Place chocolate chips, peanut butter, and butter in a large microwave-safe bowl. Cook for 1 minute and stir. If it's not completely melted, put it back in for up to 30 seconds more. Once it's melted, add vanilla and mix. Pour it over your Chex Cereal and mix with a spatula until well coated.

Take a large plastic Ziploc bag and place powdered sugar inside, then add chocolatey cereal. Close and begin to shake it up so that all the squares are evenly covered with sugar. Place the Reindeer Chow on the baking sheet and let it cool. Once you're ready to serve, add holiday M&MS or other seasonal candy and chow down!!

Recipe credit: suburbansimplicity.com



Liturgical Christian Calendar

2022 - 2023

There is beauty to be found in following the rhythm of the Christian calendar—Advent being the start of it all. Continue on with Epiphany and follow through to Ordinary Time. Bobby Gross has a wonderful devotional book titled *Living the Christian Year: Time to Inhabit the Story of God*. This book explains the foundational truths of every season of the Christian calendar and offers devotionals for every single week. Gross's book is a great way to experience the fullness of the liturgical year.

Advent

November 27, December 3, December 10, December 17

Christmas

Week One- December 25

Week Two- January 1

Epiphany

January 6

Sundays of Epiphany: January 8, January 15, January 22, January 29, February 5, February 12, February 19 (Transfiguration Sunday)

Ash Wednesday

February 22

Lent

February 26, March 5, March 12, March 19, March 26

Holy Week

Palm Sunday- April 2

Paschal Triduum:

Maundy Thursday- April 6

Good Friday- April 7

Silent Saturday- April 8

Easter

Easter Sunday- April 9

Sundays of Easter: April 16, April 23, April 30, May 7, May 14 (The Ascension of the Lord), May 21

Pentecost

Pentecost Sunday- May 28

Feast of Pentecost- June 4

Ordinary Time

Trinity Sunday- June 11

Sundays of Ordinary Time: June 18, June 25, July 2, July 9, July 16, July 23, July 30, August 6, August 13, August 20, August 27, September 3, September 10, September 17, September 24, October 1, October 8, October 15, October 22, October 29, November 5, November 12, November 19

Reign of Christ Sunday- November 26



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