

hope
peace
joy
love
faith



advent

2023



WHY AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL?

Because we know.

Everyone on the Ministry Architects team knows what it's like to lead a church through Advent to Christmas. We know it's not always easy to take a breath and make space for personal reflection or spend real time with Jesus during this season.

That's why this gift is meant to be just that: a gift.
A gift meant to connect you with an experience of the Messiah.

Some leaders like to read all of these pieces in one sitting, selecting parts that could be inspiring for their community to hear, too. Others choose to invite their staff, team, or small group to join the journey, using this resource as a shared experience for the season. And many simply enjoy reading along, day-by-day.

However you choose to take this in, there's something here, every day, from the start of Advent on Sunday, December 3, through Christmas Eve. And there are reflection questions throughout, in case you're someone who appreciates a companion in your contemplations.

Ultimately, we hope you find encouragement in these pages. We hope you find a chuckle here and there and frequent reminders of the hope, peace, joy, love, and faith this season brings.

We hope you find a story or two to share - or the spark for an idea that helps you draw closer to the Holy One.

And always, we hope you're reminded you're not alone in your life of calling. And we're here for you and your community.



from:
MINISTRY
ARCHITECTS

W E L C O M E

advent

If I'm being honest— and an Advent devotional seems like a *pretty* good place to be honest— I am not a remotely patient person. At least not naturally so. Even as I write this, I'm sitting on a plane that was delayed by less than 30 minutes, and let's just say the fullness of my human depravity was on display.

My therapist has even given me a little self-coaching mantra to repeat when I'm sitting in traffic or waiting in line or telling my kids to pick up the same Legos I asked them to pick up five (and ten) minutes ago. It's not very revolutionary, but it goes like this: "Trey, sometimes inconvenient things happen to people."

What an obvious and silly thing to have to say to oneself, and yet, there I sat for five minutes too long in my dentist's waiting room last week muttering those simple words as a reminder that at no point do we find scripture talking about a fruit of the spirit called "efficiency."

Cue...Advent. It's the season literally oriented on slowing down, waiting, and noticing that...well actually, just noticing. Noticing all the things one notices when we actually take the time to slow down and notice. Noticing all the things we don't notice in our normal rush. Noticing that the people around us are living through the joys and griefs that humanity experiences every single day.

The fact is, most days I'm hoping to notice God in some kind of road-to-Damascus-epiphany. It's quick, clear, and efficient (there's that word again.) But Advent is a slow, patient revelation that often looks more like the road to Emmaus— a long walk that doesn't bring clarity until you've sat down to break bread and realize that God was there all along.

That's my prayer this Advent: that we all slow down a bit, take the long walk, block time for the quiet spaces, eat the long meal, and notice what is often overlooked, that God is closer than we thought. Immanuel, God with us.

Trey Wince
PRESIDENT
MINISTRY ARCHITECTS



advent

HOPE

What are you hoping for in life right now?

What are you trusting God with and are expectant of response?

Who in your life helps you remember that hope is a stance we can hold at all times?

Where do you need to infuse tangible reminders of hope today?

God?

You are our hope. You are the One who teaches us how to *wait with hope, think with hope, speak with hope, believe with hope, and love with hope.*

Actions, reactions, interactions, all can happen with hope. When inconvenience strikes or discomfort appears, when anxiety rises or fears creep in, when joy seems sparse or grief overwhelms, we are not without hope.

**For You are our hope.
And we are never without You.**

day 1



This past spring, due to the generous efforts of my husband in building a 4 x 20' raised bed, I realized a long-time dream to grow cut flowers. This is including what has become my favorite: Zinnias.

After lurking a few months in a Zinnia lovers Facebook group, I gained the confidence to grow seedlings, as well as to directly sow seeds. From a few tiny seeds, we enjoyed an abundance of gorgeous flowers. Surprisingly, near the end of October, they were still going strong in Idaho, though any day an inevitable freeze would signal the end of the season. But similar to many flowers, what I've learned about Zinnias is the ease with which you can save the seeds. While sad to see the end of these beauties, knowing each flower contains multiple seeds brings hope for next season.

Have you ever looked at a seed - I mean *really* looked at it? Whatever shape, size, or color, most are pretty unimpressive and definitely look lifeless. Yet each is a picture of hope, containing the potential for life, for beauty, for something that will eventually bring joy and wonder.

We focus on hope this first week of Advent. Sometimes when we say "I hope," we really mean, "I wish that could happen, but I don't think it will." But in the Bible, the word takes on a different tone. It signifies a confidence, a trust, an expectation that something promised *will* happen. It has to do with the unseen and the future.

This week I encourage you to invest some quiet moments to hold a seed in your hand - even if it is a bean from your pantry - and ponder Paul's thanksgiving and prayer in **Ephesians 1:15-23**.

verses 17-19: *"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."*

As you ponder this life-giving prayer, I encourage you to invite the Holy Spirit to reveal those places in your life, your heart, your ministry that need to experience the cycle of a seed. They may look unimpressive and lifeless right now. They may be places of discouragement, where your hope may have dimmed. Or, perhaps, they are places of misplaced and fleeting hope in popularity, power, or money that need to be redirected to the only one worthy of hope - Jesus. As you quiet your heart, invite the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of your heart to see what God sees when he views the places you are bringing to him. Ask to gain an inkling of understanding of the wisdom, revelation, and power He is offering you through Jesus to fulfill that which he has called you to.

Like seeds, those areas may require a time of "wintering over" before they can be planted and harvested. But if they are Holy Spirit empowered seeds, you can have the confidence, the trust, the expectation that in God's time, he will accomplish his promised harvest through you, his willing servant.

Whatever your calling, may the eyes of your heart be enlightened to deeply know and experience the hope to which he has called you in this Advent season.

Melinda Kingman



day 2

My daughter is officially in the "How much longer?" every two minutes on a long car ride phase. She's also in the "Mom! Did you know that TOMORROW is your birthday!" phase (and as much as I love a good birthday cake, I'm not quite ready to turn a year older on a weekly basis.)

It turns out that time is a pretty complex and confusing topic for a 4-year-old. To help, we've started making paper chains to count down to major events. Each day she tears off a chain link, and each day we count how many links are left. Sometimes she tries to stand back away from the chain while counting. On these days her counting goes something like "1...2.....12....7...." "Not quite," I say, "Let's move a little closer." I take her hand, helping her to slow down and count each link as she touches it. This slight adjustment gives her the ability to count each one with precision until she gets to the very end, screaming out, "ONLY 9 MORE DAYS LEFT!"

Of course, these paper chains are a lot like Advent calendars, a tool to help my little one make the abstract concept of time a bit more concrete. By doing so, she is clear about where we're headed, how long it is until we get there, and what we need to do to prepare.

If you've worked with us at Ministry Architects for very long, chances are we've introduced the concept of "balcony time" (see *Sustainable Youth Ministry* by Mark DeVries). "Balcony time" is a regularly carved-out time to look down and get a big-picture view on your ministry, helping us to intentionally consider how God is calling us to invest time and energy. Balcony time is not for checking things off the to-do list (though you might make a to-do list!) or responding to emails (though you might file them!). It is about looking ahead, setting goals, and identifying the steps that need to be taken to achieve them.

Is the season of Advent really so different? Advent is about taking what can seem abstract and making it concrete, preparing our hearts and minds to welcome the Savior of the World, who will usher in light and hope and beauty and joy into a desperate world.

What a beautiful and extremely abstract concept! We might not be four years old anymore, but we are still people in literal, concrete bodies. We need a plan and an established way to prepare. If you're a pastor or church staff member, I'm willing to bet you've made this plan for your church - maybe even months ago. If you're a parent, you likely invested in some kind of Advent calendar for your kiddos.

But what about yourself?

Hope springs forth in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it. May we remember that we are human, slowing down enough to ready our hearts and minds to usher in this miraculous hope!

Caroline Sell

day 3

Advent is a time of waiting. It's a time of looking ahead with a sense that God is up to something. The Old Testament prophets spoke of this unfolding work of God, and how it would culminate in the arrival of a Messiah who would rescue the people of God once and for all. But, those prophets spoke of an event that would ultimately take hundreds of years to be fulfilled. They created a spirit of expectation for the people, but with no deadline for its arrival.

The prophet Isaiah clearly described this coming King:

"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**

These words are exciting to hear and makes us even more eager to receive Him. But it leaves us longing even more for an answer to our question, "How long?"

I don't know about you, but I have a hard time waiting more than a few days for the arrival of a promised order from Amazon. Waiting is hard. Yet, waiting is what we've been asked to do.

Though the scripture is never read at this time of year (and many Christians may not even know it exists), I was once given hope during a difficult time of waiting by a single verse from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. It shows up in the fifth verse of the first chapter. The prophet is complaining to God about having to wait on a response to his prayers for peace and protection. The answer that God provided Habakkuk has been a source of hope for me since the moment I read it:

"Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told." **Habakkuk 1:5**

Wrapped within this single verse is a strong gift of hope! While we look around at the world in front of us, with its numerous problems, conflicts, injustices, and pain, God has promised to do a thing in our lifetime that will be so great, so gracious, so generous, that we would not believe the person who tried to tell us about it. I'm convinced that the unconventional way in which the LORD stepped into our world, through an unsuspecting teenage mom of all things, should make us curious about God's next move and then fill us with hope that He is still moving amongst us.

Brent Parker



day 4

1 Peter 1:13

"Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

So, yes, it's Advent again. But that is how it should be. We have a season ahead of us in which to rehearse and reenact the sacred story of *God Is on the Way! God Will Soon Be with Us in the Most Extraordinary Way!* Hope is coming; love is coming. A shining realm of peace and wholeness is, truly, coming.

We have a season in which to give our faith a workout, in which we exercise our hope muscles. Some years make that exercise more difficult than others. But it's Advent now. And, as people of faith, we are called upon to exercise our hope.

If hope isn't created for times such as these—when countries are divided, when civil war annihilates whole communities and sends refugees fleeing, when hungry children are ignored because their interests are of no interest to powerful entities, when human beings are trafficked by the thousands to be used for sex or cheap labor, when industry and wealth win over the health of the planet and all its creatures and the global community—if hope isn't created for times such as these, then why have hope at all?

So, let's try Advent once again. Let's practice a hopeful way of being in the world.

- Sing the songs.
- Ring the bells.
- Put up the decorations.
- Tell the stories.
- Give lots and lots to all sorts of worthy charities.
- Open your home to those who need welcome; pretend that each one of them is the baby Jesus, born on the road and needing help.
- Use your creative gifts: to write, bake, paint, act, make quilts, or whatever brings you joy to give to others.
- Go to church.
- Go to the neighborhood hang-out or the family party.
- Pay attention to the kids and welcome their very selves.
- Don't leave pets out in the snow.
- Don't give up prayer because life feels raw and scary.
- Don't hurry through Advent because you're not terribly good at living it; just let it live in the real life you have.
- Don't forget that God loves you.
- And please don't forget that God loves everybody else, too.

He came for us all. Together, we wait for the holy child.

Kellie Bracken

God of hope, who brought love into this world,
be the love that dwells between us.
God of hope, who brought peace into this world,
be the peace that dwells between us.
God of hope, who brought joy into this world,
be the joy that dwells between us.
God of hope, the rock we stand upon,
be the center, the focus of our lives
always, and particularly this Advent time.

advent

PEACE

Where are you experiencing peace in your life right now?

Who in your life helps you experience peace?

In what relationships or areas of your life are you praying to experience more peace during this season?

God?

You are our peace. You are the One who teaches us how to *wait with peace, think with peace, speak with peace, believe with peace, and love with peace.*

Actions, reactions, interactions, all can happen with peace. When inconvenience strikes or discomfort appears, when anxiety rises or fears creep in, when joy seems sparse or grief overwhelms, when we're just so angry, Lord, we are not without peace.

**For You are our peace.
And we are never without You.**

day 5

Luke 2:10

"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

When was the last time you imagined an angel?

Throughout scripture, angels appear in moments of uncertainty, doubt, and anxiety. Usually, they begin their interactions with the words, "Fear not." (Because, apparently, they're terrifying to behold.) And their common message is always that God has a plan, and we should trust that God can be trusted and the plan is good. In the midst of messy or uncertain circumstances, right in the middle of our lives, our relationships, and our world... God has a plan. And we can trust.

When was the last time you closed your eyes, visualized your mess (be it literal or relational or a depiction of the mess you might feel inside) and set God in the picture? Or saw the word trust as a part of it all? Or heard an angel to the side saying, "Fear not"?

In the traditional Christmas story, it's angels who bring the message of comfort and joy. And they tell the shepherds that it isn't just any baby born in the nearby stable; it was THE baby. THE One of comfort and joy. And that message, and the messengers of the messiah, allowed the shepherds to embrace a peace unlike any other while they were surrounded by chaos, mess, and uncertainty.

Can you imagine?

As we live into this advent season, remember that the good news, the great joy, the peace for all people that passes all understanding, isn't just a story that exists in our imaginations. It's trustworthy and true.

Annette Sofstrom

Lord,

When we can't figure it out, help us find peace in the promise that You have a plan.

When we can't stop the chaos, help us trust that You are with us.

When we can't sleep at night, help us find rest in the fact that You hold us in your hand.

When relationships don't make sense, hear our prayers.

When we don't know what to do, help us look to You as our guide.

And when it just doesn't make sense, when the hurt is too great, or the mess is just too big, wrap us in Your comfort and joy. That we might know peace.

day 6

I'm not sure anyone I know would call me "peaceful."

Probably not any other form of the word. Kind? Totally. Forgiving, even? I hope so. But calm, at peace, or relaxed? Goodness no. When I hear messages of the value of stillness in the presence of God, I sometimes wonder if that's something I may never fully experience. My brain is always running like a motor, even in my happiest or calmest of moments. So what does that mean for the arrival of the Prince of Peace and what He has to share?

For some of us at certain times, God's offer of peace can almost read like a challenge. "Do you feel peaceful today? If you loved me, you would. Do you feel anxious? Maybe you're not actually in relationship with Jesus." As silly as that might sound written out, I think those doubts arise sometimes for those of us on the anxious side of the spectrum or for those who are navigating a difficult season.

Over time, I'm learning to receive God's gift of peace as one that, as Paul writes in **Philippians 4**, "transcends all understanding." My brain doesn't have to be quiet in order for me to sit with God. My headspace doesn't have to be tranquil and thought-free in order for God's mysterious Christmas gift of peace to guard my heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

So as we reflect on this gift of peace that is liturgically on its way this Christmas, let's remember that Jesus himself didn't actually bring peace in the ways that his people expected. Instead, he brings inner peace that God will heal our broken world and come again. He brings us the *shalom* of a slice of heaven during our time on earth.

What if, this year, we eagerly accepted God's gift of peace without qualifiers? Because that's how he's offering it. What if we chose to experience contentment in the assurance that in the form of a baby, we have a promise: that we can trust in the Lord with all our heart? (**Proverbs 3:5**)

Would I call myself peaceful? Probably not. Do I sit in stillness? Diagnosably not. But am I trusting? Absolutely. Especially in my God, as I *anxiously* await his arrival this Advent season.

Katie Hong



day 7

My daughter is three years old and tends to find herself, quite often in absolute panic moments. She can't find a toy. She got a drop of water on her shirt. She doesn't want to eat her broccoli, etc. You get the idea. Her little heart finds itself in a quick state of chaos when things don't go her way. If I'm being honest, I can relate.

I can easily find myself angry with God or the people around me when things don't go my way. I can become impatient when things don't line up the way I'd like them to. Although I might not throw a big tantrum outwardly, in my weak moments, I can certainly throw one inwardly.

This is why the Apostle Paul reminds us to
"Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." **2 Corinthians 10:5**

Stopping our thoughts before they run us over like a truck allows us to place them before the Lord. When we sit with Him in that place of peace, we can be reminded that His love carries us and that although we can't see the bigger picture- He can.

"Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul." **Psalm 143:8**

One thing I tell my daughter often is to trust the one who loves her. I want her to know that she can trust my words and that my heart is for her. So, I'll say it to you, trust the one who loves you. I have experienced so much more peace in my life when I choose to stop my chaotic thoughts and simply trust the one who loves me.

God's love for you and me always creates a safe place of peace and serenity. It never disrupts our lives with disorder and chaos. Be reminded that whatever you're facing, you don't need to panic. The Lord has it under control.

Heather Quiroz

Lord,

You are my resting place. I don't need to worry or fear because in you I have peace. Forgive me when I throw a fit and forget that I can trust you. Be my peace, joy and delight every day I pray, in Jesus name, Amen

day 8

It would be a different kind of holiday and we were looking forward to it. There were no more Y chromosomes residing at Casa Caro since Steve moved to long-term care earlier that fall and the boy cat in the house had traversed the rainbow bridge earlier than that. It would be "just us girls" and we three women were down for all of it: looking at lights, Christmas Eve worship, a great holiday meal, movies we'd been saving to watch, PRESENTS, stockings. Peace on earth, and good will in our house in Katy, TX.

And then, three days before Christmas Day, I got my first pink line. A cruel fate since I had gone nearly three years of testing negative. Instead, right before my practically perfect Christmas? I got the gift of COVID.

Quarantining yourself seems like an okay idea... until you remember you're alone and sick and there's no one else to take the dogs out or get the garbage to the curb or pick up the Paxlovid, the miracle drug that will save you from dying right there on your couch.

Did you hear that sound? It was the screeching halt of special baking, watching White Christmas, Mom's little country church, the specially baked ham, driving through the rich people's neighborhood, PRESENTS. All of it shutdown.

I was bummed. It was already hard with Steve not there. My mom and sister coming WAS my planned distraction, my guarantee to not be lonely. But the fever, cough, headache, and feeling puny were the only things that were moving onto the couch with me.

But as always happens, God showed up. And it was a different kind of holiday.

Christmas Eve turned out so special. I worshiped online with our youngest at her church, hundreds of miles away. This is something that wouldn't have happened if I didn't have COVID. I croaked carols, lit candles, shared liturgy, heard from Luke - all while snuggled under my Christmas blankie. About 8pm, there was a knock at the front door and the neighbor kids had left me arroz con leche to make me feel better.

Christmas Day dawned, and it was back to the couch for me. My BFF and I jumped online to watch Elf together. Again, there was a knock at the front door and a different set of neighbors had delivered a holiday meal plate. 3-4 hours go by and guess what? Another knock at the front door. This time, a homemade carrot cake was there being held up by two grinning neighbor boys.

So, what's my point? God shows up, in the beauty and the grace, the sad, sick, and lonely. God shows up.

I think... in the different is God's best work. Maybe it's because we're out of step and so we're paying better attention. But God shows up.

Be watching for the different; God's right there in it.

Stephanie Caro

The church was filled with parents, family members, and anticipation as the sea of preschoolers took the stage. The annual Christmas pageant was about to begin. My little girl would be an angel, a prized role for every four-year-old. The teacher told me my daughter would be in the center of the angels because of her height, but what would happen next told me there was a far greater reason for her placement. The angels had been practicing their line for weeks,

*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." **Luke 2:14***

When it was time for the angels to have their moment in the spotlight, there was silence. Stagefright appeared to have taken hold of the angels as they started at the left side of the stage. There was an awkward silence as the audience shifted in their seats, and parents willed their children to open their mouths and share their lines. Then, there was a small voice. It was my daughter in a rather loud whisper, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to those on whom his favor rests." Go on, you can do it."

This encouragement continued for every little angel. The audience that should have heard Luke 2:14 recited eight times heard it at least sixteen. And with each prompting from a preschooler, the audience also became part of the show, repeating the words along with the little angels through laughter and applause until every angel shared their lines.

When Jesus was born, the angels played the important role of messenger. They foretold of his coming. They announced his birth to strangers in a field, keeping watch over their sheep. They brought this "good news" to the shepherds, encouraging them to go and see for themselves. The angels announced, magnified, and celebrated the birth of Jesus, all the while worshipping him. I can imagine the air filling with their voices as they sang of his majesty and the peace he would bring humanity.

Angels. Created beings who worship the Lord, praise him and tell others. People have been recorded as being afraid of angels and in awe of them. There is a fine line between the two.

And yet, we can take the posture of the messenger angels. Worshipping, praising, and glorifying God, and telling others. The angels had "Good news of great joy that would be for all people." **Luke 2:10**

The words of the angels to the shepherds were so compelling that they stopped what they were doing and hurried off to see if this good news was true. The angel's final words to the shepherds were the ones that that great company of preschoolers, their families, and friends recited again and again, as they rejoiced and praised God together. And it may be the verse we need to repeat, too. For it's a beautiful reminder of who Jesus is, what he has done for us, and how we can celebrate.

May the majesty of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, compel you this season to glorify him, rejoice, and go and tell others.

Kerri-Ann Hayes



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JOY

Where are you experiencing joy in your life right now?

Who helps you delight in the wonder and surroundings of the season?

When has vulnerability and courage impacted your experience of joy?

Where are you struggling to experience joy in this season?

God?

You are our joy. You are the One who teaches us how to *live with joy, wake with joy, work with joy, walk with joy, and love with joy.*

Actions, reactions, interactions, all can happen with joy. When tough times arise, when disappointments won't relent, or when life's just really not going our way and sitting in sorrow or self-pity seems to keep happening, Lord, remind us that we are not without joy.

**For You are our joy.
And we are never without You.**

day 10

"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them." **Luke 2:20**

During the football (soccer) season, my daughter and I spend our Saturday afternoons at Selhurst Park in South London watching our local Premier League team, Crystal Palace. Fans of Ted Lasso will recognise the stadium as the Nelson Road stadium, home of AFC Richmond.

Last season had some difficult moments. As fans, we hadn't experienced much joy watching our club. By late March the club hadn't won for 3 months, we had recently changed managers and, unless they started winning, it looked as though we might suffer the same fate as AFC Richmond and get relegated to the league below.

Then it happened. We were in a 1-1 tie with a team we really needed to beat. Time was running out and our star player had gotten injured. With seconds left on the clock - we scored! 25,000 people erupted in celebration! Singing, dancing, clapping, hugging random strangers sitting around you. It was an outpouring of unbridled joy.

Then, my daughter turned to me with a face full of pure joy and said, "Daddy, can it be like this every week?"

Life for the Shepherds described in Luke's gospel wouldn't have been easy. Shepherding was a difficult job, paid very little, and made for harder living, under Roman occupation. I can imagine joy was in short supply.

I wonder if the Shepherds felt like we did after the goal had been scored that first Christmas night. I wonder what it felt like after their lives had been wonderfully interrupted by the angels and they were sent on their way to see the Messiah?

I wonder if they spent their evening singing, dancing, and hugging random strangers in the Bethlehem streets as they told everybody the good news after their encounter with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus?

I wonder if when they got back to the hillside, and they sat back down around the fire, if they turned to each other and said, 'can it be like this every week?'.

Like the Shepherds, we too live in a world in which life can feel tough and where good news stories can be hard to come by.

Just as the birth of the Messiah was proclaimed to the Shepherds, each year at Christmas it is announced to us once again. We get to journey with the Shepherds to the crib and fix our eyes on Jesus. We get to experience the same joy the Shepherds did that very first Christmas night.

But unlike the Shepherds, we don't have to ask ourselves 'can it be like this every week?'. Because in Advent, we don't just get to look back and celebrate what has been. We also get to look forward to the promise of what is to come, Christ's return, and a time when we won't have to ask 'can it be like this every week?', because it will be.

Mike Rutt

day 11

In the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, it's easy to get caught up in the rush, stress, and to-do lists. Yet when we pause and reflect on the true meaning of Advent, we discover that joy is at the heart of it all.

I've come to appreciate Brene Brown's wisdom on vulnerability and courage and think it can help us find that joy in a deeper, more meaningful way.

Joy is not just about happiness; it's about embracing vulnerability. In Advent, we prepare our hearts for the birth of Jesus, which required an incredible act of vulnerability from both Mary and Joseph. Mary had to embrace the vulnerability of saying "yes" to God's plan, not knowing the full journey that lay ahead. Joseph had to trust God's plan and marry a woman with a divine secret. This vulnerability was the gateway to the incredible joy of welcoming the Messiah.

In Brown's words, "Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome." Advent teaches us that true joy often comes when we surrender control and allow God to work in our lives. Like Mary and Joseph, we can find joy in embracing vulnerability and trust in God's plan.

Furthermore, Brown emphasizes the importance of gratitude as a path to joy. In the midst of Advent's preparations, we can choose gratitude for the gift of God's Son. Each step we take in preparing for Christmas, each moment of waiting, can be an opportunity to cultivate gratitude. It's in these moments of gratitude that we find a deeper, more lasting joy.

Advent invites us to slow down, embrace vulnerability, and practice gratitude. As we journey through this season, may we echo the words of the psalmist,

"You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound." (**Psalms 4:7**)

In vulnerability, trust, and gratitude, we discover the true joy of Advent - the joy of Christ's coming into our lives and hearts.

Travis Chavis

day 12

It's Advent. A time of expectation. But maybe that's the wrong word. Maybe we need to let go of our expectations and instead turn to expectancy.

Pastor Jim, a retired Southern preacher, explained the difference to me last year.

When my daughter was in elementary school (he said in a soft drawl), every year she would bring us her Christmas list. She'd gone through the Sears catalog and turned down the corners of every page where there was something she was remotely interested in. The list was long and well thought out.

I don't know what it's like in your house on Christmas morning. (He smiled like he knew already.) Your family probably waits politely as each person carefully unwraps their present, expresses their gratitude, and then waits for the next person to take their turn. But in my family, it was like a biblical swarm of locusts came up to our Christmas tree and tore everything open in 60 seconds.

One Christmas morning I noticed my daughter was carefully, patiently lining up all her gifts in a row. She looked down at them, and her head tilted to the left like she was doing a calculation. And I realized she was figuring out which things on her list had been left out. Her eyes rolled up a little as she thought about it. I watched her as she decided that she was disappointed, but she would have to make do. That's what comes of expectations.

Then one year in junior high, it was getting close to Christmas, and we asked her where her Christmas list was. She smiled and said, "Not this year. I figured it out. You and Mama always give me something good for Christmas. Always. So I decided this year I would rather be surprised."

That's what Pastor Jim calls expectancy. It's eager anticipation without a checklist.

What if we use Advent as a reminder of a more joyful way of living? Instead of bringing our Father a punch list, we look at Him and trust Him. What if we say, "Daddy, I know you always give me good things, and I think I'd like to be surprised."?

What if parents moved from expectations to expectancy for their children - eager to be surprised by what God is nurturing in this little human being?

What if we freed our best friends from the expectations of what they will provide us, and instead trusted them to do something wonderful, and with great expectancy, waited to be surprised?

This Advent, I pray that our spirits will be filled with joy long before the gifts arrive - in fact, long before we even know what they are.

*"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." **Romans 15:13***

Jeff Dunn-Rankin

day 13

Luke 2:10-11

"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.'"

WHAT DOES JOY LOOK LIKE?

Joy is trusting when you want to doubt.

Isaiah 26:4 says, "Trust in the Lord forever for the Lord God is a rock forever".

As followers of Jesus, we aren't pressured to do it all for everyone. We trust Jesus to do the heavy lifting. The key is trust.

Joy is receiving what you want to reject.
We find joy in making room for people in need.

Joy is celebrating when you want to fear.

What's the first thing angels say to mortals? It's standard protocol! "Fear not!" Can't you just hear God instructing the angels, "Ok, let's go over this again.... Most of the people that I tell you to speak to will be scared out of their wits! So, let's practice the greeting one more time." Then the angels would all say in union, "Fear not!".

WHY CAN WE BE JOYFUL?

Jesus will take care of us no matter what happens. He is Immanuel, "God with us". No matter what you go through you can whisper this simple truth: "Jesus is with me." He is with you in your greatest victories and your most humiliating defeats. Jesus is with you at all time in all things. That's something to be joyful about!

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE JOY TODAY?

Joy is a choice! We have a choice. God gives us a joy that is unconquerable. We can choose to live in an attitude of resentment, anger, and fear or we can choose to pursue the joy of Christ.

Encourage: Write a note to someone who is experiencing fear and worry. Let them know you are praying that God will give them courage and joy.

Evaluate: Make an inventory of the things that bring you joy.

Express: Make some time and space to share a meal or fun experience with those around.

This is a busy season.
Don't miss the joy of sharing the
experience of Christmas with others.

Kellie Bracken

day 14

I have been thinking about joy a lot. It keeps coming up in conversations. I have been assigned to either write about it or speak about it on many different occasions. In these trying and fractured times, it seems God's created ones are looking for something to give them hope, and they are wondering how to integrate joy into everyday living.

Even so, it still seems there is widespread confusion about the difference between happiness and joy. In the wider culture, they are interchanged liberally, ignoring the rich theological distinction between the two.

Webster's dictionary defines it as "a feeling of great pleasure or happiness that comes from success, good fortune, or a sense of well-being."

Our world says joy and happiness are feelings and dependent on events or responses.

The Bible gives us a deeper understanding of framing joy not as an emotion but as an attitude. In the worst, life can give us joy as we hope for what is to come rather than dwelling on the pain and suffering of the present. A definition I have used for children is that having joy is when you are not happy but know you will be sometime in the future.

Hebrews 12:2 tells us Jesus went with joy to the cross. Substitute the word "happiness," and it would not make sense. In **Philippians 4:4**, Paul challenges us to "rejoice in the Lord always." Be happy always? Impossible!

Appropriately for this time of year, the story of the shepherds found in **Luke 2:8-20** provides an accurate picture of what it means to have joy. In those dark days of a wicked king and an oppressive Roman empire, many had lost hope of rescue and this was felt even more by the lowly shepherds. Few, if any, respected them for their position in the workforce or as persons.

It was to them that the announcement of Jesus' coming was first made. In verse 10, the angel says,

"Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."

Those with the least hope receive the gift of joy and have reason to hope. One wonders how long it took for them to fully understand what happened as they received the news, heard the angel choir, and stepped into the presence of Jesus.

May this Advent season increase your joy, no matter the circumstances of your life. Celebrate the happy times, lament the sad, and live a joyful life as you hope in the One who came and made a way forward for all God's people.

Doug Rank

advent

LOVE

Where are you experiencing deep love in your life, right now?

How do you love others well?

Is it through intentional words or actions?

Is your love tailored differently for each person, based on how you know and notice them?

What are your favorite ways to worship and wonder at the Christ-child?

Where are you struggling to love or be loved in this season?

God?

You are love. And You are the One who teaches us how to *awake* in love, *think* with love, *speak* with love, *serve* and *work* and *live* with love - approaching our whole life in ways so many have never experienced.

Actions, reactions, interactions, self-reflections, all can happen with love. When tensions emerge or frustration sets in, when despair surrounds or shame and blame try to be louder than understanding, when goodness and kindness seem sparse or hurt overwhelms, we are not without love.

For You are love.

And we are never without You.

day 15

"I love you all the days and all the nights," my three year old said as we're getting ready for bed one night. I replied, "Say that again." "I love you all the days and all the nights," he said. We snuggled, read a book, and headed to bed for the night.

As I settled in for the night, the words of my son seemed to echo God's voice throughout scripture.

In Matthew chapter 3, as Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends, and a voice from heaven speaks.

"This is my son, whom I love; with whom I am well pleased." **Matthew 3:17**

These words for Jesus before he preaches, before he teaches, before he performs miracles, before he is challenged by anyone else, before he's arrested, before he's crucified, and before he's raised. God loves Jesus regardless of what he's done. For his good days and for his bad days, God loves. Or you might say, God loves Jesus for all the days and all the nights.

As we prepare for the coming of the Christ, let these words soak in from God to you. This is my son, this is my daughter, whom I love; and with whom I am well pleased. While love is a powerful, overwhelming feeling, it can also be used as a synonym for God. In 1 John, chapter 4 the writer offers these words. God is love. And God loves you. God loved you before you performed, before you taught, before you preached, before you prayed for others, and before you've done any good works. God is love and God loves you.

That evening with my son, I couldn't help but bask in the truth and depth of those words that he uttered before drifting off to sleep. I was, and am, deeply reminded of the love of God that surpasses our understanding and exceeds our abilities to love similarly.

This advent, may you be reminded that God loves you all the days and all the nights.

Bryant Johnson

day 16

Luke 1:39-45

"At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

The very sound of Mary's voice caused Elizabeth's spirit to stir. It caused the baby in her womb to leap. It caused her heart to respond. When they saw one another, joy leapt in Elizabeth's body. There was a physical and spiritual reaction. Elizabeth acknowledged the gift in Mary and of Mary. This acknowledgement is fueled by pure love.

In that moment, Mary knew three things:

1. She wasn't alone. Someone believed her and believed in her. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"
2. This gift inside of her was real. So real, in fact, that it had made a connection with another human being.
3. Having this gift required a response of praise and worship. Mary broke into song in something we call the Magnificat. Mary lavishes all that she is in this moment in sheer gratitude for the gift growing inside of her.

This is the power of love. When we make real connections with others and acknowledge the gifts in one another it allows the other to

1. Know they are not alone.
2. Realize that who they are is a gift.
3. Remember all belongs to God and ultimately God deserves the praise and worship.

It wasn't the angel Gabriel who set this response in Mary. It was the connection between Mary and Elizabeth that confirmed, comforted, and gave her confidence in this beautiful gift inside her.

As you go about the remainder of this holiday season, I wonder who you might connect with to spread some love? Who needs to know they are not alone today? Who needs to be reminded of the gift inside of them? How are we, in the hustle and bustle of the season, finding ways to give God the praise and worship God?

Aqueelah Ligonde

day 17

Read John 1:1-9

I grew up in a faith tradition with stained glass windows and pastors who had multiple stoles for their multiple robes. We sang hymns from the hymnals, sat in pews (not chairs), and the choir proceeded in before the pastors, every week, two-by-two, just as Noah and Jesus decreed it should be.

Before those pastors and that choir, though, there were always two kids. Two kids between the ages of 8-18 would enter first, signaling the start of the service. In their red and white robes, holding gold-plated candlelighters with super long wicks, these two kids would proceed down the long center aisle of that high-ceiling sanctuary, pausing at the dark wooden prayer rail, and finishing their course up a few stairs, finally lighting the candles on the altar for their grand finale.

For years I was one of those kids. And every fall, when the acolyte coordinator put out a new calendar so that families could sign their kids up for the *next* year, my mom always knew: sign Renée up for December.

You see, the best part about being an acolyte (*besides getting to play with fire*) was Christmas Eve. All those candles, lit up in that great big room, with all the other lights turned completely off... it was magical. And from where we sat as acolytes, we got to see the whole room alight. *The whole room!!*

It was just one of the many ways my mom worked to ensure that faith in Jesus wasn't just something my sister and I knew about; my mom aimed to make sure Jesus was someone we experienced.

Jesus was always in our home. He was in the conversations around lunch every Sunday after church and through cross-stitchings on wall hangings in our hall and in the "verse of the month" on our family calendar. He was in the brand new, 365-day devotional I got every Christmas morning, that I then read every night before falling asleep throughout my teen years. He was in VBSs and kids choir and summer church camps - oh, church camp! Where I *really* connected to Him and started to understand Christ in community.

And He was in candles. Knowing Jesus is the light wasn't just words on a page or a verse we memorized for Sunday School. We were reminded that He is the light every single time we carried him into the sanctuary with our candlelighters. And when we were playing hide-and-seek as youth during lock-ins, and we scurried through our church chapel in the dark, only to see that one candle in the front that was always lit, no matter the time of day or day of the year. And when it was Advent, and we took extra time each week in worship to light special candles hugged by an evergreen wreath, and talk about his birth.

And when, on Christmas Eve, there wasn't a single person in that giant sanctuary who was without a candle. There was no one without a light. A light that had been lit by another. To fill the whole room.

Not a Christmas Eve goes by when I don't remember a picture of that place and those people and that light. Because that's what the light of Christ does. That's what the *love* of Christ does. It gets introduced over and over and over again. And then it gets noticed and shared and stays with us and moves beyond the boundaries of what some would place and seeps into our lives in all sorts of unforgettable ways.

And it changes a whole room.
It's changed me. He's changed me.
And I pray His light and His love have changed you, too.

Renée Wilson

Lord,

For all that you are and all that we know, we're so thankful. And I pray there are many moments in these days of Christmas where we get to experience Your light, shining in life and in whole rooms and in our hearts, Jesus. The gift of our hearts, drawn to yours, over and over and over again, truly is the most matchless gift of all. Amen.

advent

FAITH

What has been one of your strongest connections with Christ this past year?

Who helps you stay grounded in your faith?

How will you intentionally spend time with God daily in the coming year?

Where are you struggling to have faith in this season?

God?

You are the One who knows our hearts, loves us fully, and delights to call us Yours. Whether this season is one of celebration or sorrow, maybe a mix of both, remind us often who You are and who we are in You.

For You are Lord.

You are Savior.

You are Immanuel, God with us.

And we are never without You.

Thanks be to God.

day 18

Amidst the twinkling lights, festive songs, and the gentle whisper of snowfall, we find ourselves in this time of hopeful anticipation and joyful expectation. In the midst of Christmas, it's easy to get lost in the external trappings, but **Hebrews 11:1** invites us to shift our gaze inward, toward faith.

Faith, as Hebrews beautifully articulates, is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. It's the quiet confidence that stirs within us, despite the busyness that surrounds us. At its core, faith is an invitation to trust in the unseen promises of God. It is the assurance that, just as God fulfilled the promise of a Savior in the past, He will fulfill His promises in our lives. This trust allows us to rest in the midst of the hustle and bustle, knowing that the true gift of Advent is not wrapped in paper but revealed in our hearts.

The beauty of faith is that it is not reserved for the theologians or the deeply devout. It's a gift offered to all, and it's accessible in the simple moments of Advent. Whether you're a lifelong believer or just beginning your spiritual journey, you can embrace faith as a source of comfort and joy. It's a whisper of hope that says, "I am with you."

As we journey through Advent, let us take moments of stillness to nurture our faith. Read the Christmas story with fresh eyes, reflecting on the incredible faith of Mary and Joseph. Seek the warmth of community and share the joy of the season with others. In the midst of the chaos, faith can be your steady anchor, reminding you that the true substance of Christmas is the love and promise of Christ.

This Advent, may our faith be the evidence of the unseen, the spark of hope in our hearts, and the source of unending joy. As we draw closer to the manger, may our faith remind us that the greatest gift of all is the Christ child, whose arrival fills us with wonder and awe.

Travis Chavis



day 19

I am a pastor, but I am also a human being. And like all human beings, I have doubted my faith at times. In the summer of 2022, I was on sabbatical. Sabbatical is supposed to be a time of rest and renewal, a time to reconnect with Jesus. But for me, that sabbatical was a time of doubt.

I don't know exactly what triggered it. Maybe it was the exhaustion of ministry. Maybe it was the pain of seeing people suffer over years of serving churches. Maybe it was just the accumulation of all the questions and doubts that I had been suppressing for years. Whatever the cause, I found myself questioning everything I thought I believed. Was there really a God? Was Jesus really the Son of God? Was the Bible really the Word of God? I was largely a Christian because I was raised that way. I never really let myself let go of God.

And so, in the summer of 2022, I let go. I just decided not to believe. I didn't go on a wild prodigal son adventure. I just let go for a while and thought about life. It was like wearing someone else's glasses. Everything seemed out of focus and disorienting. I went through a dark period of doubt and despair. I felt like I was in a tomb, spiritually speaking. I didn't know who I was or what life was anymore. It was cold, empty, dark, and lonely. It was a tomb.

Eventually I found myself sitting in a strange church while visiting another city. The worship service was fine, and the sermon was mildly interesting. It wasn't a great service. It just wasn't. It didn't feel like a mountaintop, but I was there, and I just remember thinking to myself... "I can't help it. I believe. I can't not believe."

I wish I had a flashier story to share with you. In some ways, it was an anticlimactic and abrupt end to my time of wandering and wondering.

Going through the experience of what honestly felt like a tomb of the soul and then getting an experience of resurrection in my own heart was awful. It was awful to go through, but I think I needed it. I think I needed to let myself really take doubting for a test drive. But my life without that spiritual identity was so empty. It was a tomb. In the darkness of that tomb, I saw that I believed. I can't explain it better than that. I saw my faith flickering in the shadows, and I simply decided to pick it back up again. Evidently, it would not go away.

I don't know why God allowed me to go through that experience of doubt. But I know that it made me a stronger believer. It taught me that God would still be there even when we doubt, perhaps just out of eyesight in the dark tombs where we find ourselves buried.

If you are doubting your faith, know that you are not alone. Many great people of faith (and a good number of mediocre folks of faith, like me) have doubted at some point in their lives. I don't recommend letting go of your faith, though. That was awful. Instead, use your time of doubt as an opportunity to grow closer to God. Ask God to help you understand your doubts and to strengthen your faith. Ask yourself "Can I really not believe?" I'm guessing that the Holy Spirit's hold on your heart won't let go.

If you are in a dark tomb of doubt, let me offer up a little prayer for you to test drive:

"God, I am doubting my faith. I'm not sure what I believe anymore. Please help me to understand my doubts and to strengthen my faith. I want to believe in You, but I need Your help."

Remember, God is faithful. God will never leave you or forsake you. Even in your darkest moments, God is there with you.

Rob Dyer

day 20

Luke 2:19

"But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart"

My family and I were, for several months, captivated by a Netflix series called *The Repair Shop*. A group of master artisans and craftspeople operated a shop, in the British countryside, where people would bring their most prized objects for repair. Glass workers received complex stained glass projects; clock-makers fixed old watches and timepieces; and expert carpenters worked to restore heirloom furniture.

Certainly there was so much Gospel wisdom expressed in the work of the artisans: a shared commitment to renewal, the restoration of broken things, a deep commitment to vocational calling...

However, I was most deeply struck by how the tradespeople saw the deepest value in whatever object was brought to them. They attributed value to something because of the story attached to it. The object mattered to them because it mattered deeply to someone else. They invested their own hearts into their work, knowing that it would bring so much joy when their work was returned to its owner.

Luke chapter 2 covers a wide landscape of events. From the census to the shepherds to the angels, from Jesus' birth to his presentation at the temple... it's quite the account. Amidst so much, there is one beautiful detail that this reading is meant to feature, that "...Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (**Luke 2:19**).

In this brief, editorial statement, we see a glimpse of Mary's wonder, joy, and hope in Jesus' arrival. We also receive an invitation, during this advent season: will we treasure up all these things, and will we ponder them in our hearts?

Like the craftspeople in the repair shop, Mary was willing, with the eyes of faith, to see what her child would mean to the world. Thus she serves as an example for all of us.

Shawn Bendall

May we in this season, treasure the hope and healing that Jesus brings to our hearts, our homes, and our world!

May we also ponder the realities of Jesus, and all of the promises of God that are fulfilled in him!

day 21

Read Luke 1:26-38

I don't know what may have been going on in the life of Joseph and Mary at the time the angel paid a visit to both. They may have been busy getting ready for their soon-to-be married life, or enjoying their final moments with family, or feeling nervous about a life together with someone they might have met only a handful of times. I cannot imagine what this might have been like, but it reminds me a bit of my in-laws.

My mother-in-law, Jane, and father-in-law, Kevin, were connected through some mutual friends in Korea. At the time, though, Kevin was living in Canada, and Jane was living in Korea. Through numerous letters and pictures sent back and forth, they decided to get married. The final telegrams were sent to reassure a nervous Jane that Kevin would do his very best to provide a good life. So, Jane packed up all her belongings, said good-bye to her mom and older brother, and booked a one-way ticket to Canada.

It took a lot of faith - for both Jane and Kevin - to embark on this marriage, sight unseen! I don't know if I would have gotten on that plane, let alone married someone I had only corresponded with through letters. This, though, is the very definition of faith, isn't it? One of the ways that the dictionary defines faith is that it can be a complete trust or confidence in someone or something. In addition to that definition, faith is also a strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual understanding, rather than proof. How do you have faith in something unseen? How can you have complete trust when you don't have the proof? We live in a world where proof is paramount, and faith is looked at with great skepticism.

But Mary and Joseph - Jane and Kevin - had to take a leap of faith! First, it was a leap to get married and then, for Mary and Joseph, it was this foretelling of a child who would change their lives (and ours!) forever. Could you imagine encountering an angel like Mary did and then responding with, "I am the Lord's servant... May your word to me be fulfilled." (Luke 1: 38) If I had been in Mary's shoes, I know that is not how I would have responded! I would have needed to have proof - lots of it and repeatedly.

Maybe for some of you, faith doesn't seem too out of reach. In this season, it's taking everything within me to have faith. I want the proof that it's going to be okay or that if it's not going to be okay, that I am going to be able to handle it. I bet Mary and Joseph grew up with the amazing stories of God's faithfulness and miracles, yet, they still had to take that step of faith. But the good news of this season is this - that "no word from God will ever fail."

As we have awaited the birth of Christ and contemplated on this season of waiting and wondering, we know that what God has said will come to fruition - we can trust in the promises of God. Whether in doubt, or in faith, God's promises - God's word - is for us and will never fail because that is who God is. God is a promise keeper and a way maker, no matter what.

During this season, my prayer for you is that your faith will grow in the ways that you need it and that you will experience God's promises in real and tangible ways. For Mary and Joseph, it was through an angel and their family and community that hoped with earnest longing. Maybe for you it will be through a loved one, or a neighbor, maybe your church community, or your co-workers. It may be in unexpected places or from unexpected people. It may cause you to groan and stretch. It may bring delight and joy. Whatever it may be, wherever it may come from, and however it manifests, may the prayer of your heart be, "I am the Lord's servant...may your word to me be fulfilled."

Phyllis Myung



day 22

This Advent-time
we remember Mary and Joseph,
giving thanks for their faithfulness,
courage and obedience,
stepping out into the unknown
in the strength of your Spirit,
playing their part
in the fulfillment of your plan
to bring your prodigal people
home again.

We pray that their example
might be the pattern of our lives,
that when your gentle whisper
breaks through the clamor of this world
and into our small corner,
we might be ready to listen,
and having listened, to act.

Amen

Kellie Bracken





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