

2018 Advent Devotional



Cover Artwork by Abigail Tauriainen (6th grade)

Abigail T

**We hope you will join us for our
Christmas Eve Services.
Monday, December 24**

4:00 pm

Family Service

**Geared specifically for children and young families
We will use glow sticks instead of candles**

6:00 pm

**Contemporary Candlelight Service
Modern worship music and carols**

8:00 pm

**Traditional Candlelight Service
Lessons and carols**

9:30 pm

**Traditional Candlelight Communion Service
Lessons and carols with Communion**

Dear friend,

Welcome to this Advent devotional! This booklet is a gift to you from the people of Castleton United Methodist Church. Several of our members have written daily reflections on faith and Scripture for the entire month of December. We pray that these short devotions will help you to draw closer to God in this Advent season.

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, Advent has been celebrated as a season of waiting and expectation for the coming of Jesus Christ to rescue and save us. It is a time of reflection and prayer, hope and peace. It is our hope that these 31 writings, from people of all ages and walks of life, will guide and aid you in this throughout the coming weeks.

May the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be upon you in this season.

Jonathan D. Cruz
Director of Adult Discipleship
Castleton United Methodist Church

#morehope

WEEK ONE

DECEMBER 1 - NEVER OVERCOME

Read John 1:1-5

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

I remember moving into that tiny apartment by myself. I was nearly 28, and all my earlier life plans had fallen apart before my eyes. I sat among the boxes, pretty sure that I had been left to the emptiness. I was pretty sure the departures included God leaving me too. That kind of defeat can leave us without hope.

But in this scripture, John opens his story of Jesus with the idea that he’s no ordinary person. There has never been a time we’ve been without Him, and there will never be a time He will ever leave us. He’s been far more involved in everything than we imagine.

In the grand and cosmic creation of the world, Christ was there. If something was to breathe and if something was to sparkle, Christ was the means by which that came into being. He’s always been here. And no dark thing that has happened has been able to overcome His light.

It is easy to believe that the world and even our lives are coasting on their own. We can be quick to interpret the events of our lives and the world as an indication that we are without a Savior. We might wonder if our Savior has packed up and gone home to the Father. We might wonder if the work of Christ was confined to that time in the Bible and, now, we’re left to our own devices.

But the Gospel of John opens with a strong and resounding, “No.” No, you are never defeated. No, you are never without Christ and the work of His grace. No, there is nothing that can overcome His light. This is the reality of your world. Christ’s fingerprints are all over you and your world... still. My defeat and despair turned to hope in that little apartment. Christ’s presence revealed himself and provided for me in ways beyond my imagination. Wherever and however you find yourself this Christmas season, be reminded. We have an “always Savior.” He has always been

involved. And whatever you face, the darkness will not overcome Him. His light is near. With him, there is always hope.

Prayer: Christ, Son of God, shine your light in the dark, empty parts of our hearts, lives, and world. Remind us you are still creatively at work. Help us claim the hope of your love. In your name we pray, Amen.

Written by Rev. Jen S. Gibbs

DECEMBER 2 - THE PHONE CALL

Read Romans 15:4-13

“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.”

On the night of December 2, 2015, I was awakened by my phone ringing; I generally do not answer past 9 pm, so I let it go to voicemail--the person calling was persistent so I picked up my phone and saw that it was my son-in-law from St. Louis. I answered. Kevin told me that our 16-year-old grandson, Andrew David Keithley, had been killed in a car accident. I tried to answer Kevin. However I was unable to speak and handed the phone to my wife. My first thought was it was a dream; this could not be true. My wife, Suzanne, had a brief conversation with Kevin and then we sat in stunned silence. We had a short conversation and then we began to piece together our thoughts and prepare for the journey to St. Louis. The sorrow and grief were overwhelming; the tears would not stop. I had just returned from St. Louis the previous week having had dinner with Andrew and his younger brother, Luke, and sister, Delaney. What an enjoyable time we had that evening as I listened to Andrew's plans for the future and his excitement about being a part of the Christian organization "Young Life". One of Andrew's favorite drinks is a root beer float. Andrew had finished his float with dinner and asked if he could have another. "Yes, you can" was my reply...he finished that one. I then asked if he would like another – I will never forget him smiling and saying "Grandpa really"! Andrew finished the 3rd root beer float. Delaney began to giggle, and I asked what was so humorous. Delaney said, "Grandpa, Andrew just set a record drinking three root beer floats". As I write this, the tears flow remembering this special last evening with Andrew. As the patriarch of our family I knew that I had to comfort my wife, my daughters and especially my son, David, who had just lost his oldest son, Andrew. At this time, looking to the future with "Hope" was very difficult. Trying to talk with God and to put Andrew's

death in perspective seemed insurmountable. Then a thought entered my mind (perhaps it was the Holy Spirit whispering to me) “God gave his only Son for all of us.” I now knew that God was leading me to begin a process with my family to show “Hope” for the future. That “Hope” was supported by prayers from the church, pastors, staff, friends, and past and present business associates. The many prayers, cards and words of support were amazing. At Andrew’s viewing, I was shocked to see Castleton UMC friends entering the church. They had driven from Indianapolis to be with us and support us. I was filled with joy and peace to see the love these people were giving us. My “Hope” for the future and what I knew I must do for our family was complete. There is now a scholarship in Andrew’s name which is awarded at his high school annually. Thanks to God, our daughter, Elizabeth, and our entire family, we banded together to form the scholarship.

Prayer: *May the God of “Hope” and God’s Son, Jesus Christ, fill us with confidence for the future. I lift prayers of praise and thanksgiving to God for the Holy Bible which teaches each of us to trust in Him, who provides everlasting “Hope”, joy and peace. In Jesus’ precious name I pray, Amen.*

Written by Gary L. Keithley

DECEMBER 3 - THE FAMILY OF CHRIST

Read John 1:6-8, 19-28

“There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.”

I have enjoyed researching family genealogy for the past several years. I have been able to find pictures of all but one of my great-great-grandparents. I have also discovered that there are several Methodist pastors in my family lineage, even circuit riders in the early Methodist Church in Indiana. I enjoy learning stories of people my grandparents and parents knew during their lifetimes. But, I also know many people who do not have a family legacy. Many of the children that I work with have DNA tests to see who their “real” father is. The good news is that this legacy of family bloodline does not matter to God. Those that come before us do give us physical life, but true life in Christ does not come from our bloodline. We are not Christians because our parents were Christians. Belief in Christ’s Holiness, his life, his death on the cross for the sins of

the world, and his Resurrection is what really matters. It is that faith that compels us to strive to understand Christ's message and how we are to live. Like John the Baptist in our scripture reading, there are others that come before us to share their faith and help lead us in the way to God and Jesus Christ. Jesus is the light and His believers are our true family in this life. I know that it is my call to share the legacy of faith to my grandchildren and to others, as my ancestors and friends in faith have done for me. Our hope is that we can indeed have faith in Jesus Christ through our own personal journey, not through our bloodline! I have hope for the generations to come that they will learn from those of us who have come before them that Jesus Christ is the light!

“To be filled with God is to be filled with light, for God is light. To be filled with Him is to be filled with love, for God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. To be filled with God is to be filled with consolation, peace, and joy.” *Written by my 3rd great-grandfather, Reverend Walter L. Benton, Brownstown United Methodist Church, as published in the Jackson County Banner on 18 Jul 1878 (copyright Newspapers.com)*

Prayer: [Dear Lord, please help us to be a reflection of Christ as much as possible for everyone we encounter. May others find your light in our witness to them. Amen.](#)

Written by Dotsie Longworth

DECEMBER 4 - A BETTER WAY

Read Malachi 3:1-4

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.”

There is a great saying: “The only constant is change”. Yet, there are some things that do remain the same. Humanity has always desired a better way. It is part of our nature as humans to envision a future in which pain, despair, and war are distant memories. Isaiah described a time when lions would lie down with lambs, a time when we would turn our swords into plowshares.

Jeremiah described a time when the law would be written on our hearts. There seems to be a constant theme that flows through each succeeding generation. It is the theme of hope. There is a great line from the movie Starman: "You are at your very best when things are worst." No matter how bad things appear to be, there are always special people who step up to lead us forward. It brings to mind another great quote by FDR: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

So, how is it that we, imperfect, egocentric humans, who manage to make quite a mess out of life, all on our own, not taking into account the unforgiving, brutal universe in which we reside... What is it within our being that gives us the inner strength to carry us through? I am not sure I know the answer but I sense the following. I believe that as children of God we have been given a very special gift. That gift is the capacity to love. It is the Spirit of love which is imbued within us and from which we can draw peace, joy, and hope in our darkest hour.

Malachi's message is an eternal message of hope that still rings true to this day. The Creator is refining us, transforming us, leading us to where our hearts unconsciously have been calling us since the beginning of creation. He foresaw God's Spirit descending upon the Earth to guide, comfort, heal, and ultimately transform what, to human understanding, seemed an impossible task! Malachi did not see Jesus, yet he sensed his coming. We have not seen Jesus yet for some of us, who have experienced the kindness of strangers, forgiveness of a trespass, the inclusive acceptance of being loved for who we are...this is not a foundation of faith but a foundation of the dynamic reality! We can and do experience Jesus by the refining power of God's loving Spirit. This is the foundation on which my hope is placed.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we ask you for continued strength, guidance, and perseverance, to hold on to the hope you have placed in our hearts for the transformation of not only ourselves but the universe in its entirety. In your name, Jesus, we offer this prayer. Amen.

Written by John Dinwiddie

DECEMBER 5 - BEGINNING

Read Mark 1:1-8

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

I remember lying awake in my bed, staring at the ceiling fan, watching it go around and around. I was trying to count the revolutions to keep my mind from thinking about the next day. I was about to start my first day as a student at Baylor University. I was excited and nervous at the same time. I was the first person in my family to go to any university, and I did not know what lay ahead. New possibilities, new challenges, and a new direction for my life were all about to be revealed. I was at once both thrilled and terrified.

New beginnings are difficult, whether they come about through pleasant or difficult circumstances. Often, there is a bit of both to new beginnings. The Gospel of Mark is the oldest gospel in the Bible – it was the first written account to tell us about Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection. And Mark chooses to begin with these words: “The beginning of the good news...” I imagine for Mark, and the rest of Jesus’ followers, this new beginning was both an exciting and a frightening one. Jesus inaugurated a new era, and the Kingdom of God dawned. But where would that lead? What new directions would their world and their lives take? The disciples had every reason to be filled with both anticipation and apprehension.

The prophet John, who was known for baptizing people, announced this new beginning by proclaiming the coming of Jesus and a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There had been many “messiah” figures and movements before, and even after, Jesus. And for both the disciples and the readers of Mark’s Gospel, following a messiah-type person would inevitably lead to persecution and possibly even death. But still they were awaiting an anointed-one who God would send to rescue them.

New beginnings are both bursting with new possibilities and directions and also fraught with risk and anxiety. As we explore the theme of ‘hope’ this week, consider the new beginning that we celebrate in this season of Advent: Jesus brings with him a new story, a new reality – where love, forgiveness, and grace reign supreme. Also, consider the new beginning that you have personally been given in Jesus Christ: your sins are forgiven; you are loved.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for new beginnings. Thank you especially for the beginning that occurred when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Help us to embrace the new beginnings that you provide us, through your love and guidance. Amen.

Written by Jonathan D. Cruz

DECEMBER 6 - PATIENCE IN SUFFERING

Read James 5:7-10

“Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”

In April of 2017, my brother-in-law Lewis was diagnosed with Glioblastoma brain cancer. The average life expectancy for this type of cancer is 12-16 months. Lewis lived 18 months and passed away October 24.

God did not inflict Lewis with cancer, but his love and grace provided for him during his illness.

The book of James, chapter 5, verse 10, reminds me of Lewis. He never lost hope. He knew he would be healed. Lewis understood he might not be healed in his earthly body, but God would heal him in his eternal body. He lived with a grace that only God could provide. Lewis knew God was faithful and he never asked, “Why me”? He shared his love for God with many. When asked how he was dealing with his diagnosis he would reply, “By the grace of God”.

In July, after learning that the tumor was spreading, Lewis lost his eyesight in a week’s time. He never complained; his faith and hope were unwavering. August brought more changes to his body as the tumor continued to invade his brain, but again Lewis never complained. His faith was strong. In the month of September, Lewis required help in every activity. He needed help walking, eating and drinking, yet again no complaining crossed his lips. He knew God was with him. When October arrived, Lewis was in a wheelchair. His arms and legs were failing him. The words that used to come so easily to his lips had lost their way. This man, my sister’s hero, never complained. The last word Lewis spoke in this world was “Amen”. My sister, Lewis’s sister, and I were moving him onto his side so he could be more comfortable. His body was so sore and had become frail. We asked him when we were done if he felt better and he said “Amen”. No complaint of the pain he felt, just “Amen”.

What a perfect last word it was. This was a man that was being held in God's arms. Just as the prophets knew, the suffering in this world is only temporary. Our eternal life and our eternal bodies will feel no pain. In the glory of our Lord we will all be made right again.

It was a privilege to spend time with Lewis and my sister, Rhonda. The love, hope and grace that they witnessed to each person who came into their life was amazing. They showed the face of God to so many. Lewis lived an unwavering faith in God. Lewis, Rhonda, and our entire family never gave up hope.

God did heal Lewis.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please provide us with hope, grace, and peace during our times of suffering. Please lift us and hold us close. You are a faithful God, and as the prophets before us we trust in you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Written by Reashea Reed

DECEMBER 7 - A SURE AND CERTAIN HOPE

Read Isaiah 11:1-10

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

What does it mean to Hope? Hope is defined as a desire for a certain thing to happen. Over the course of my lifetime, I have hoped for many things. Sometimes my hopes have been trivial. I have hoped that a parking spot next to the door would magically appear when I was running late for work. I have hoped for an A on an exam knowing I didn't study as diligently as I should have. Sometimes my hopes have been personal. I have hoped, when going to the dentist, that I didn't have a cavity (I hate dentists). I have hoped for a friend to call when I am lonely or depressed. Sometimes my hopes have even been noble. I have hoped for less violence in our city and in the world. I have hoped that those oppressed might find justice. In each of these cases I wanted something to happen, but my hope had no foundation for fulfillment. I either hadn't done anything, or enough, to enable my hope to be realized or my hope was out of my grasp. When it comes to matters of life and death, are we left with just hope? Or can we be assured that we can have hope that is sure and certain and will not fail?

There is a hymn that says, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’

blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid Rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand." Isaiah 11 assures us that there is One on whom and in whom we can place our hope. There is one, Isaiah says, who is coming, one on whom the spirit of the Lord will rest, one who possesses the qualities of wisdom and understanding, righteousness and faithfulness. The one who is coming will bring peace and justice to all nations, one who will fulfill all our hopes. Who is the one, the shoot from the stump of Jesse? It is Jesus, the Christ.

Bishop Desmond Tutu said, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." There are times in our lives when our world seems very dark. But, in this Advent season, remember that we light a candle called Hope. And the Hope candle, together with the candles of Love, Joy, and Peace, surround a candle that is central to them all – and that is the candle of Christ.

Prayer: Lord, help me live as a candle of hope to others who are suffering. Help me to remember that, because of the life of your Son, my hope for a better world – for justice, for an end to suffering, for peace, for understanding – will be realized as you promised years ago. Help me to work in your kingdom today and look forward to the certainty of your kingdom to come. Amen.

Written by Denise Robinson

DECEMBER 8 - LECTIO DIVINA: ISAIAH

For today's devotion, you will experience an ancient practice called Lectio Divina, or Sacred Reading. This special method of reading Scripture originated with the Benedictine monks in the 6th century C.E.

This practice begins with approaching the Scripture without any agenda or presuppositions of your own. You are reading and encountering the text as if for the first time. You are not here to get information or to look for inspiration, but rather to commune with God.

This Spiritual practice takes place in four steps:

1. Lectio – Read the passage of Scripture slowly, repeatedly, even whispering the words aloud as you read. Slow down and savor the words you are reading. Allow the text to trigger memories and associations, even ones you may not be expecting. Read the words calmly, deliberately, and gradually. Notice what certain word or phrase rises above the rest of the

text and grabs hold of you during your reading.

2. *Meditatio* – Meditate on this passage. Ask yourself, what is the Spirit speaking to me through this text? Focus on the feelings and emotions conjured in your inner self. This text may evoke different emotions in different individuals. Allow the Scripture text to touch your inner being. Do not try to assign meaning to anything, just let it be.

3. *Oratio* – Pray. Ask the Spirit for illumination. Converse with God about the meaning of the emotions you are experiencing. This is a dialogue between you and God. Speak and listen.

4. *Contemplatio* – Contemplate. Move beyond words and intellect, and be with God. This is a time of silent reflection. Express your love for God, and allow God to be and speak in whatever way the Spirit chooses.

Your passage for today is Isaiah 35:3-7.

“Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.”

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

Prayer: [Holy God, move in me through these Holy Scriptures. Amen.](#)

#morepeace

WEEK TWO

DECEMBER 9 - WELLS OF SALVATION

Read Isaiah 2:2-4

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.”

Jalápa, Nicaragua, is a beautiful and heartbreaking place. Mango trees drop fruit into eager hands. Vibrant fabrics frame windows and market stalls. Music pulses from churches. But men are scarred by battle. Children bear evidence of hunger. Women struggle under the physical and emotional weight. In this village the damages of war have lingered for decades. Jalápa has known swords and spears. Until a short-term mission trip to Jalápa in 2001, I hadn't really seen devastation wrought by violence. I'd seen domestic poverty and the aftermath of mass shootings. But I'd never seen a population shattered by violence or known what it takes to keep living when there is little reason to hope that the next day will be any better.

Jalápa brought Isaiah's words to life for me: “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.” Jalápa showed me what it means to yearn for peace on earth.

When sin entered the world, conflict came with it. The man blamed the woman. Cain killed Abel. Nations formed and conflict became more complex and deadly. The Old Testament is filled with wars between nations and families. In the aftermath of Israel's destruction, Isaiah announces a promise from God. Tools of death will be transformed into tools of life; swords and spears, weapons of war, will be transformed into plowshares and pruning hooks, implements of production. These words may seem to us like some idealistic dream. In a world that marks the passage of time by counting from one war to the next, can we fathom such a promise? And yet that is God's message: Peace.

The word Shalom is often translated “peace,” but quiet or absence of conflict doesn't quite capture the meaning of Shalom. Shalom is wholeness,

rightness, completeness. Shalom is exactly the way God intends things to be. Isaiah's vision is not a dream; it is a promise. And the coming of the Son of God is the fulfillment of that promise. Jesus came to restore and to set right. This is the promise I return to when the news announces yet another shooting, another death, another hate crime, another war. While my sight is limited to what is in front of me, my hope is set on what is beyond me. We cling to the promise of peace and choose to live in a way that bears witness to the Truth that the Prince of Peace has come.

Prayer: Prince of Peace, reign in my heart. Grant me trust in your promise of shalom. Teach me how to live a life of peace that gives the world a glimpse of your eternal kingdom. I ask in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Written by Miranda Cruz

DECEMBER 10 - SILENT NIGHT AND MARY

Read Luke 1:26-38

“The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”

Thinking about the “Hustle and Bustle” of the Christmas season, that seemingly starts earlier and earlier every year in retail, is where we start here. Advent (the time of preparation) and Christmas can be a super-busy time and, if you let it, can become overwhelming. All the extra rehearsals, events to attend, company celebrations, meal planning, concerts/performances to attend, camels to attend to at our live nativity (true story) can wear a person down. Rush, rush, rush ...go, go, go. So, now let's slow down and focus for a moment.

Music has always been a huge part of Christmas...for me. I love nothing more than to go for a run at dusk, with some falling snow and some wonderful Christmas carols in the headphones. It is a “peace” moment for me that I look forward to each year. One song comes to mind and it is the focus of this devotion: Silent Night...written in one night by Josef Mohr from a poem he had penned earlier and set to music by Franz Gruber the next day, December 24th, 1818. Christmas Eve/Silent Night together - how ironic?!

Silent Night is the most powerful “peace” moment in any and every Christmas Eve service for me. Picture this: the candles are lit from the

Christ Candle in absolute darkness. The organ/music begins softly. Then the magic begins as we pass the Light of Christ to each other and the sanctuary begins to glow and brighten. Watching it happen from up front is most special, traditionally all while singing Silent Night. Close your eyes and picture your “Silent Night.”

What do I think was going through Mary’s head when the angel appeared to her? It must have felt like a burst of adrenaline in her entire body: Who me? What about Joseph? Pregnant and out of wedlock, me? Really -me God? Why? I am guessing this was just awkward at first for Mary.

These would be common thoughts for me and maybe all of us I suppose. I would have been a “hot mess” overthinking, overanalyzing, crying, just a wreck. Not Mary. I picture her taking a deep breath, gathering herself and then doing something quite amazing: She cleared her heart and mind to ALLOW the Holy Spirit in completely and then responded with the most powerful “peace” moment in the Bible, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” - Luke 1:38

Can we all calm our minds and hearts for a while this Christmas season? When you look back after some time, what will change within you as the Holy Spirit keeps working in and through all of us? What will change your heart this Advent season?

Deep breath

Prayer: [Dear God, help us to understand the peace of Christmas. Allow us to take a deep breath, calm our mind this Christmas Eve and carry your Spirit of peace through all our future days, knowing that “Nothing is impossible with God.”](#)

Silent night, holy night!
 All is calm, all is bright
 Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child
 Holy Infant so tender and mild
 Sleep in heavenly peace
 Sleep in heavenly peace
 Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
 let it be with me according to your word.
 Amen.

Written by Tom Ellefson

DECEMBER 11 - TRUST

Read Psalm 25:1-10

"In you, Lord my God, I put my trust."

Ever since I was little and used to say my "now I lay me down to sleeps", I have put my trust in God. Back then it was a simple trust. I was told that God was watching over me and that he listened to my prayers, and I believed. As I grew up, my faith didn't grow with me.

My family were basically "Chreasters" - Christmas and Easter church attenders. My parents had been raised in the church and loved God. Yet it was like being a Christian was a fact, and it didn't need to be discussed. My faith was based on my belief that he loved me without knowing WHY. When someone would ask me why I believed in God, I would hem and haw and get defensive because, in truth, I didn't have a clue. I just KNEW that I believed.

It took a stint with the Jehovah's Witnesses for me to actually read the bible. I learned about grace, about Jesus and so much more! It was an unusual time in my life but one of real importance. Reading scripture and studying the bible with others helped me to know the God I had been praying to all those years. My faith and trust in God became deeper because it was backed up by knowledge! How great was that!

In this passage from Psalms, King David speaks of trust, forgiveness, guidance, mercy, protection and more in just a few verses. He asks God to forgive his foolish and childish ways. I love verse 5 where he says, "Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long."

God is our hope, and we can trust him to love and care for us all day long. We can believe and trust with the innocence of a child as I did for many years or gain knowledge and move forward in our faith. We can then find that trust validated by verses in the bible like the prayer of David in this Psalm.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, let us continue to seek a deeper trust in you. Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.

Written by Cindy Dinwiddie

DECEMBER 12 - PEACE

Read Psalm 23

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”

Music. It has always been there for me. No matter what. Music is where I go when I need to calm down. Whenever I get ready to perform in front of an audience, my nerves start to kick in. I get anxious, and I start doubting myself. The second I start to play my instrument or I start to sing, my nerves all vanish. When I'm performing, the music is all I think about and all of my stress and worries fall away. Music brings me calmness and always brings me peace.

This is similar to the way that the Lord guides us through our lives. Whenever we feel burdened or stressed, He is there. When I am nervous to perform, He shakes away my fears when I start to sing. In life, we all have worries and doubts. Maybe you're worried about an upcoming test, or maybe you're stressed about the outcome of recent job interview. Whatever it is that you're stressed about, the Lord is always there to make it disappear. He will overcome any obstacles that block our path in life. In life, the performance jitters are our stress and worries, and the Lord is the music. He is always there to guide us and bring us peace, even if we have doubts.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for being there for us. When our minds are burdened with stress and worries, You are there to wash them all away. You are the music in our lives. Thank you for overcoming our troubles and always loving us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Written by Addie Coons (age 13)

DECEMBER 13 - COMPACTED TOGETHER

Read Psalm 122

“I rejoiced with those who said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD.”

Our feet are standing
in your gates, Jerusalem.
Jerusalem is built like a city
that is closely compacted together.
That is where the tribes go up—
the tribes of the LORD—
to praise the name of the LORD
according to the statute given to Israel.

There stand the thrones for judgment,
the thrones of the house of David.
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May those who love you be secure.
May there be peace within your walls
and security within your citadels.”
For the sake of my family and friends,
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your prosperity.”

As a boy, nothing was more important to me than being part of a team. Being on a baseball or basketball team, wearing the team colors, playing a position - being part of a group that all wants the same thing. Unified in our goals and supporting each other no matter what. This sense of belonging gave me such a wonderful feeling, an almost tangible sense of inner peace. Have you ever felt something like that?

Why did that make me so happy? I think it's part of our human nature to need each other. Even if some of us need more space than others. And even if we like our privacy, at some point, in some way, we're going to need other humans. Not just to function and survive, but to be in community with. To come alongside. To share a common purpose. To be present with, in the moments of our lives.

The writer here describes Jerusalem as being “closely compacted together”. How cool is that? Actually, the Hebrew root words refer to “a fellow, a comrade, somebody very close to you.” So, it turns out we are all in this together. That's the way it's supposed to be. If everyone understood this beautiful truth, what a world it would be. Is it naive to think of “peace on earth” being so simple? Maybe. But I still believe with all my heart that any hope of peace begins with me and my neighbor being “compacted together”. Does that mean we all need to look or act the same, subscribe to the same doctrines or styles of worship? Obviously not. Thanks be to God, we are all created in His image but free to be ourselves and “play our own position”. And to celebrate being on the same team.

Prayer: [God of peace and reconciliation, of love and grace, bind us together as members of your team, of your Kingdom. Equip us for the holy work of supporting one another, celebrating our uniqueness and living in community. Living in peace and spreading Your peace to a world in need. Amen.](#)

Written by Jason Acquisto

DECEMBER 14 - HOLD FAST

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”

Our scripture text comes from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, an early church community Paul formed and that was encountering suffering and persecution in Paul’s absence. Separated from the Thessalonians and unable to return to them, Paul sent Timothy with instructions to strengthen the community. This text appears at the end of the letter. In the closing, Paul tries to reinforce all that he had written earlier by rattling off a round of imperatives in rapid succession:

rejoice always,
pray without ceasing
give thanks in all circumstances
do not quench the Spirit
do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything
hold fast to what is good
abstain from evil

Let’s be realistic. Following these instructions would not have been easy for the persecuted Thessalonians in the ancient world and is not any easier for us to follow today. When things are not going the way we want or when bad things happen, our first reaction is probably not to rejoice or give thanks. We are much more likely to get angry, complain, become sad, or experience various other often unpleasant feelings. Acknowledging frustration, hurt, and disappointment in difficult times is ok. In fact, it is probably very healthy. Besides, God can take it! However, God doesn’t want us to stay there. When we find the strength to do the things in this list – even in the midst of struggle and pain – something amazing can happen. Our perspective can change and we can stop feeling like our circumstances are controlling us. We can be freed somehow from the weight and burden that robs our energy and sense of wellbeing. We can experience a deep, unending peace . . . God’s peace. This is the writer’s hope – that we refuse to quench the Spirit even in our darkest times and allow ourselves to be transformed by hope. We follow the instructions not

to earn our righteousness or sanctification but because it is a byproduct of our faithfulness and willingness to live with confidence in the promise of God's peace.

Following Paul's instructions does not mean that we must adopt a Pollyanna view about life or call everything good. Evil exists and bad things do happen as the last instruction in Paul's list openly acknowledges. Our job is to hold fast to what is good and avoid participating in what is evil. As one of my theology professors once said, evil is "death dealing." We must choose to act in ways that are "life giving." The instructions to the Thessalonians provide us with steps that will prepare our hearts and minds to do this.

Prayer: God, help us to refuse to quench the Spirit, and to hold fast to what is good. Amen.

Written by Rev. Brenda Freije

DECEMBER 15 - EXPERIENCING GOD'S PEACE

Read Philippians 4:4-7

“Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”

My first day of radiation treatment. Once I was positioned on the table, the radiation therapists directed me to lie still as they left me alone in the cold room, closing a thick steel door behind them. As I stared up at the machine hovering over me, I realized they left to protect their own bodies, because we’ve always been told to avoid radiation. As the machine moved over me and it began to direct radiation to my cancer cells, I felt anxious. I simply tried to remember to breathe.

Later at home as I read notes from friends offering prayers, I thought about why I did not turn to God with prayer and gratitude during that treatment? I pray daily; I read scripture and devotions that remind me to ask for God’s comfort and grace in all situations. But on that table in that room at that moment, a vulnerability and fear blocked those thoughts. I knew I needed to adjust how I approached the upcoming days.

My second day of radiation. After I was in position on the table and left alone, I closed my eyes, tried to relax, and then I felt a nudge, that needed reminder. And I thanked God for his presence in my life and the gifts he’s given me. I thanked him for the medical equipment and for the medical professionals taking care of me in so many ways. I offered prayers for them as they extended their healing touch to patients. I prayed for those in the cancer center being treated that day and enduring far worse treatments than mine. And a calmness surrounded me, a sense of peace enfolded me, and I felt God’s comfort cover me. God lifted the worries from me. During each of my daily treatments, those were my prayers in that cold room. And I felt God’s warmth each time, and it empowered me to sincerely smile and embrace a sense of serenity during that time.

If we listen for God’s reminders, offer thanksgiving, and then ask, he will readily take our burdens, he will ease our minds, and he will surround our hearts with a softness and a stillness that can allow us to live with a joyful heart, without constant and debilitating fears overwhelming us. We can share it all with him in prayer and in gratitude, and peace will come.

Concerns may not totally disappear, cures may not be effective, and heartaches might continue, but as scripture tells us, we can trust that God's love will always comfort and calm us. He is our God, our Guardian!

Prayer: Good God, thank you for your constant love and protection. We are grateful for your patience as we learn to remember to turn to you when we are worried and scared. Send us reminders to tell you what we need. Help us always to share our fears and concerns with you, knowing your comfort and your peace will be the gifts you return to us. Amen.

Written by Julie Rollins

#morejoy

WEEK THREE

DECEMBER 16 - THE JOY OF BEING SERVED

Read Zephaniah 3:14-20

“The LORD, your God, ... will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.”

Several years ago I had a ruptured disk in my back that eventually required surgery to alleviate the pain. The surgery was successful, but it took awhile for the nerve to heal and for me to get back to my “normal” life. In the meantime, I was the recipient of loving care through food, transportation to events, and many kind calls and well wishes. One very meaningful encouragement I remember as if it occurred yesterday was when I was lamenting this time of recovery and a friend shared these verses with me. God was rejoicing, renewing and exulting over me!

This passage of Scripture is titled, A Song of Joy. The Psalmist is telling the exiled people of Israel to sing, shout, rejoice and exult because the Lord is going to change their shame into praise, bring them home, make them renowned and praised by all the peoples of the earth, and restore their fortunes. Wow, what a great message of God’s care for his chosen people as they were vulnerable and suffering in humility. They did eventually return to the land God gave them and, through serving one another in the rebuilding process, they were restored (Ezra and Nehemiah).

Jesus allowed others to serve him in many ways – angels served him in the desert after he was tempted (Mark 1:13), his feet were anointed with expensive perfume, he was fed, supported and accompanied by many people during his ministry on earth. Perhaps having the mind of Christ would mean we would also be open to others’ care as well.

Although I was truly thankful for all of those wonderful people who cared for me, it was a struggle for me to come to terms with being in such a vulnerable place. When my expectation for immediate recovery as strong, independent and invincible me did not happen, I felt some shame and guilt as I felt I was imposing on others. But over the years, that time in my life proved to be one of the best experiences for serving as a pastor as I knew what it felt like to depend on others and be truly humble enough to accept their love and care.

As we anticipate the joy of the coming of the Christ child into our hearts in a new way, may we grow in faith as we accept that there are times when the greatest gift we may give to someone is the joy they experience in their servanthood to us. May we grow in our faith as God rejoices, renews and exults over us through them.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give us hearts to receive your love as you restore and make us whole through your people. Send us into your world together to share your hope, peace, joy and love in service to you and one another. May we hear and sing your songs of joy shouting, “do not fear; the Lord is in your midst”. Amen.

Written by Rev. Karen Powell

DECEMBER 17 - LECTIO DIVINA: PSALM 126

For today’s devotion, you will again experience an ancient practice called Lectio Divina, or Sacred Reading.

Remember, this practice begins with approaching the Scripture without any agenda or presuppositions of your own. You are reading and encountering the text as if for the first time. You are not here to get information or to look for inspiration, but rather to commune with God.

This Spiritual practice takes place in four steps:

1. **Lectio** – Read the passage of Scripture slowly, repeatedly, even whispering the words aloud as you read. Slow down and savor the words you are reading. Allow the text to trigger memories and associations, even ones you may not be expecting. Read the words calmly, deliberately, and gradually. Notice what certain word or phrase rises above the rest of the text and grabs hold of you during your reading.
2. **Meditatio** – Meditate on this passage. Ask yourself, what is the Spirit speaking to me through this text? Focus on the feelings and emotions conjured in your inner self. This text may evoke different emotions in different individuals. Allow the Scripture text to touch your inner being. Do not try to assign meaning to anything, just let it be.
3. **Oratio** – Pray. Ask the Spirit for illumination. Converse with God about the meaning of the emotions you are experiencing. This is a dialogue between you and God. Speak and listen.

4. Contemplatio – Contemplate. Move beyond words and intellect, and be with God. This is a time of silent reflection. Express your love for God, and allow God to be and speak in whatever way the Spirit chooses.

Your passage for today is Psalm 126.

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
 we were like those who dream.
 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
 and our tongue with shouts of joy;
 then it was said among the nations,
 “The Lord has done great things for them.”
 The Lord has done great things for us,
 and we rejoiced.
 Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
 like the watercourses in the Negeb.
 May those who sow in tears
 reap with shouts of joy.
 Those who go out weeping,
 bearing the seed for sowing,
 shall come home with shouts of joy,
 carrying their sheaves.”

Prayer: [Holy God, move in me through these Holy Scriptures. Amen.](#)

DECEMBER 18 - FINDING GOD

Read Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

“And he will say to me, “You are my Father, my God and the Rock of my salvation.”

His initials were P.D.C. He told me they stood for “Pretty Darn Cute”. I replied, “It’s more like Pretty Darn Cranky!” He would try hard not to laugh but I could see that crooked smile. He was my favorite curmudgeon. The other nurses avoided him. He was what we call “a life sucker”, because it would cost you thirty minutes just to find out all he really wanted was a ‘Boost’ coupon. I have to admit to being annoyed initially, but that first time I got him to smile, he won me over. PDC was 88 years young, had been married four times, and had a daughter he adored. He would come to his radiation treatments with a towel draped over his neck as he would stop at the gym before his appointment. Some days his ex-wife would bring him. He did not treat her very well, but she didn’t seem to mind. One day she confided to me she did not know how I could be so patient with him; he drove her nuts. I told her I found him to be my daily prayer and challenge.

He was my E.G.R. patient (extra grace required). As PDC's treatments progressed, so did his cancer. He was no longer going to the gym, having trouble eating, and never had anything good to say. I challenged him to tell me something that made him happy. He was not himself and was becoming more depressed. He started coming in early for his treatments just so he could talk. One day when it was especially busy, he asked for me and the other nurses told him I was busy. He said he would wait. So, when I had time, we talked. He talked about feeling lonely, and he knew he wouldn't be around much longer. He was afraid to be alone when he died. I reached for his hand and told him, "No one will let you to be alone when you die. You have a big piece of my heart, and you have lots of friends and family who love you. But most important of all, you always have God. God is always with you. He will never leave you. Never forget how much God loves you." He squeezed my hand and said, "Thank you for telling me that. I guess I just had to be reminded." With that, he got up and left. Later that day there was a package with a note on my desk. The package contained a beautiful bright pink hat with a note that read: I found something that made me happy today. I forgot to look for God when this cancer came. Thanks for helping me find him. XOX (signed) Pretty Darn Cute. That was the last time I would talk to PDC. He passed away a few weeks later surrounded by friends and family.

Prayer: Most Gracious Heavenly Father, it is in you we find true joy. Your unfailing love is always with us even in our darkest moments. Help us remind each other to bring joy to those who seem to have forgotten that. Thank you for never letting us be alone. Amen.

Written by Suzanne Keithley

DECEMBER 19 - IGNATIAN EXERCISE: LUKE

Ignatian Spiritual Exercises were developed in the 16th century by St. Ignatius of Loyola. St. Ignatius taught that the Holy Spirit could work through our imaginations, which are a gift from God, to draw us closer to Christ. Today's devotion will guide you through using your holy imagination to experience God's Word in a new and deeper way. Keep in mind, this exercise is most effective when you take your time, pause, and do not hurry through it.

Begin by reading 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!”

Now imagine that you are Mary. Imagine Mary’s excitement as she prepares to visit Elizabeth. What does it feel like for her to hurry to Judea, eager to see her cousin Elizabeth? Picture Mary and Elizabeth greeting each other with love and anticipation.

The baby in Elizabeth’s womb, who will be John the Baptizer, leaps and kicks when he hears Mary’s voice. Imagine what Elizabeth felt when her child leapt inside her. Feel the flutter of movement, the joy of a new mother whose long-awaited child almost seems to announce the coming of the savior Jesus through Mary.

Hear the blessing spoken over Mary and her child. Imagine the warmth in Elizabeth’s voice. Imagine Mary’s comfort and joy upon hearing her words. Mary is blessed for having believed the Lord’s promise. The promise of the Advent season is that Jesus the Christ has come and will come again – the Savior of the World. Reflect on the meaning of the promised Savior.

Pray to God and name the areas in your life where you need to experience the joy of new life.

Pray and name the promises of God that you have seen fulfilled in your life, and those promises that you are still waiting to see fulfilled.

Lastly, pray this brief prayer throughout your day today, and be reminded of what you’ve experienced in this exercise:

Prayer: “Jesus Christ, I believe that you have come and I believe that you will come again. Amen.”

DECEMBER 20 - JOY

Read 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

“Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

As followers of Jesus Christ and trusting wholeheartedly in God and His Word as our Truth, we find pure Joy in hindsight. By being in the Word at all times, we realize how small, yet incredibly important, our role in God’s plan is, and we find joy in knowing that we have been called out of His purest love for us.

My earliest memory is of a huge room, all white walls, with people standing around a bed crying. I was 21 months old when my father was involved in a horrific life changing car accident. From being a successful business man, he was left with devastating brain damage and loss of memory. Years of relearning skills and trying to recover memories resulted in both parents’ decline into substance abuse, the inability to safely care for our three siblings, and 6 years later the arrival of a special needs brother. By God’s amazing grace, we were surrounded by extended family who always provided a home, food and abundant love.

We were informed by a loving family member years later that my father had filed for a divorce a few weeks before his accident and was about to leave us to start a new venture in a neighboring country. Had this happened and his supportive extended family not stepped in, how different my life could have been.

Here is where the joy in hindsight is revealed to me: growing up in a very dysfunctional home, I was ashamed and only allowed a handful of my church youth group friends into our home and my life. This affected the way I made my choices as a young adult. By God’s grace, my Christian friends were loving guides through some very difficult times, and I knew God had an amazing plan for my life.

Today I look back at my life and am eternally grateful. This would include my father’s tragic accident and the pain and shame that followed, yet I am filled with pure joy as I have the wisdom of His Truth, as I take my own story in reference to this scripture.

I know God is using me, once broken and anxious, now filled with a passion as His beloved child, to embrace my personal experience and reach broken people through various ministries. I truly find pure Joy as I

join them in their own personal journey toward healing. We are His Church. His Kingdom is accessible as we love, serve, believe and worship together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Our Father God sits on the Throne that has been established forever through Jesus Christ, from the house of David.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, we are your hands and feet as your Church. Our mission field is your Kingdom, and your house is our refuge. How blessed we are to have your Holy Spirit guide us as we are invited to participate in building your Kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Written by Margo Ward

DECEMBER 21 - JOURNAL: LUKE

Today's devotion will be a Spiritual exercise in journaling. Writing can be a powerful tool to reflect on Scripture and its application for your life.

Read Luke 1:68-79

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who
hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

This prophecy is spoken by Zechariah, following the birth of John the Baptist. He is speaking about who John is to become. This prophecy is a word from the Holy Spirit that Zechariah is to publicly declare.

DECEMBER 22 - GIFTS

Read Luke 1:46-55

“And Mary said: “ My soul exalts the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.
For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name.”

Recently our daughter and son-in-law gave us a new granddaughter. What a blessed event for all of us! As we rejoice in the gift God has given to us, we can't help but think of the future of this child. What will she do? Where will she go? What will her life look like? We prayed for her before she was born and will continue to pray for her. We will do what we can to help bring her up in the joy of the Lord.

I couldn't help but think about how Mary felt when she got the news of her pregnancy in all the wrong circumstances. Everyone would think the child was conceived in sin, and nobody would believe the real story. But Mary chose to embrace her gift from God, and her soul exalted the Lord. She dreamed about the future of her baby. What would He do? Where would He go? She knew in her heart that God had great plans for this baby, and she felt blessed.

I think about how often we receive gifts from God that are unexpected and unplanned. I believe that Mary teaches us how to deal with these situations. She teaches us to rejoice in God our Savior and to let our souls exalt in the Lord. She did not know what the future held, but she knew God held the future.

At this Christmas time, it is good for us remember that God came to us as a baby, as a human who can relate to us in every way. And yet divine, so that He can save us and restore us to new life in Him.

Prayer: [Dear God, help us to remember the gift of life You sent us at Christmas. You hold our future. Help us to be joyful of this new life of Jesus who in turn offers us new life in Him. Amen.](#)

Written by Beth Gilbert

#morelove

WEEK FOUR

DECEMBER 23 - THE WILLING SACRIFICE

Read Hebrews 10:5-10

“Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second.”

Those stories in the Old Testament seemed so different from the Jesus I heard about in Sunday School and from my take on life as a youngster. And what about all those animal sacrifices back then - way too bloody. All those dead bulls and goats and sheep did not seem necessary to a fourth grader. Just do what’s right I thought in my simple reasoning. God’s people, the Jews, in my mind, were on a constant trip between the farm and the temple altar because of sin. God required those sacrifices back then, so I was told, but the system did not seem quite right to me.

My Jesus spoke of love, bringing the little children to him, and curing the sick. As I got older I realized that there was way more to Jesus. He followed the will of his Father and became a sacrifice for me...for us all. I did not really understand this when I was ten years old. The old system of sacrifice was just a foreshadowing of what was to come. It was the first set aside by Jesus who established the second. His coming to this earth which we anticipate and celebrate during the season of Advent changed everything.

He did the will of his Father and took on the sin of all.

Prayer: Father God, your Son came as a willing sacrifice to take away our sins. This provision makes all believers Holy. We ask for your spirit to be with us every day and in every way as we strive to do your will. Amen.

Written by Jerry Robinson

DECEMBER 24 - IGNATIAN EXERCISE: MARK

Ignatian Spiritual Exercises were developed in the 16th century by St. Ignatius of Loyola. St. Ignatius taught that the Holy Spirit could work through our imaginations, which are a gift from God, to draw us closer to Christ. Today’s devotion will guide you through using your holy imagination to experience God’s Word in a new and deeper way. Keep in mind, this exercise is most effective when you take your time, pause, and do not hurry through it.

Begin by reading Mark 12:28-34.

“One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”
When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.”

Continue by praying for the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts as you reflect on Jesus’ words...

Picture yourself loving the Lord your God with all your heart. In what ways do you direct your heart toward God? Are there places in your heart that you keep hidden from God? Open your heart to the movement of the Holy Spirit within you. Prepare your heart to receive Jesus the Christ.

Picture yourself loving the Lord your God with all your soul. In what ways do you direct your soul toward God? Are there places in your soul that you keep hidden from God? Open your soul to the movement of the Holy Spirit within you. Prepare your soul to receive Jesus the Christ.

Picture yourself loving the Lord your God with your whole mind. In what ways do you direct your mind toward God? Are there places in your mind that you keep hidden from God? Open your mind to the movement of the Holy Spirit within you. Prepare your mind to receive Jesus the Christ.

Picture yourself loving the Lord your God with all your strength. In what ways do you direct your strength toward God? Are there parts of your life where your strength is kept away from God? Open yourself to the movement of the Holy Spirit within you, that you may love God with all your strength.

Picture yourself loving your neighbor. Who is the neighbor to whom you have shown love? Picture that person and thank God for them. Who is the neighbor who needs to receive your love? Picture that person, say their name, and ask God to give you the opportunity to show them love. Who is the neighbor that you might never meet in person? Who are the neighbors who need to know the love and compassion of God? Pray for the people and groups that the Lord brings to your mind.

Imagine loving yourself the way God loves you. What does it look like for you to show yourself the love and compassion of Jesus Christ? Which of these areas of love – heart, soul, mind, strength, neighbor, self – do you need to experience most today?

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, enliven my heart, soul, mind, and strength to love God. Prepare my whole being to receive the promised Messiah. Teach me to love my neighbor as you love them, and to love myself as you love me. Amen.*

DECEMBER 25 - BASEBALL AND THE INCARNATION

Read Romans 1:1-7

“...The Good News is about His son...I am writing to all of you in Rome who are loved by God and called to be His own Holy people.”

I am an eternal optimist. I have lived my life as a Cubs fan, and if you know anything about baseball, you understand the optimism that entails. Through many, many, losing seasons, I always tried to find the positive, the good. There was always “next year.” I knew there was something great to come, eventually. I believed that one year the joy of winning would be achieved. I loved that team despite many failures and much disappointment. Their performance never caused me to desert them or turn away from them. I believed in them. In 2016, my hope became reality. As I sat and watched into the early morning hours, the Cubs finally become world champions. I knew that all those years had been worth it, just for that one moment in time, but I also knew that even if they had not won that season, my devotion to them would remain the same.

Sometimes I think that is how God feels about us. He is the eternal optimist. He loves us despite our performance, despite our failures, despite the fact that we don’t always “win”. His love for us is not dependent on what we do. But rather because of who we are. He came to us, in the flesh, because He loved us. He loves us because we are His, and for no other reason. That is the Good News that Paul is referring to in Romans 1. And because

of His great love for us, because of Jesus, because of the incarnation, we have won. We are called holy and righteous and redeemed by the creator of the universe. We sit beside Him in heavenly places. We are His children, heirs to His Kingdom. As we remember His love for us this season, let us be confident in who we are. Let us not forget that our identity is in Him and, because He calls us His own, we have the power of the resurrection inside us to take that same love and share it with others. This is the Good News; let us be eternally optimistic in that.

Prayer: God who redeems and renews, transform us, sanctify us as we remember who we are, as we celebrate the Good News, and as we live out that love to those around us. Remind us, this season, to love well, without condition, just as you have loved us. Amen.

Written by Tandy Adams

DECEMBER 26 - NEW COMMANDMENT

Read John 13:34-35

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

It seems so easy - like following the perfect recipe for your favorite holiday dessert. A little pinch of this, a spoonful of that, is all it takes to reach the perfect outcome. But humans are not perfect and neither are our outcomes.

I grew up in a relatively rigid faith tradition of Christianity. There was a heavy emphasis placed on following “rules” and “commandments,” and on being a good “moral” person. I think it’s easy for people to become obsessed with rules because rules give us clear lines – lines of right and wrong, lines of who’s in and who’s out. The world makes more sense to us with these rules and lines. But the new command that Jesus gives pushes back against any lines that we might create or want to enforce.

Growing up, in my understanding of Christianity, following the rules meant to be perfect. But that’s not what Jesus says at all. Jesus’ command for us is to love one another. And love is messy. Because people are messy. The lines are not always clear of what love means in a given situation. Sometimes love feels good; sometimes love means to do the hard thing. But love is our standard – and not just any definition of love, but sacrificial love. This is the love that Jesus modeled for us when he went to the cross.

There are not always clear lines for what love means, but there is a new standard: sacrifice. Love must sacrifice.

Sometimes we don't just flirt with legalism, we wine and dine it! But this isn't the faith that Jesus or the Bible calls us to live. Even against every human inclination, we are called to resist the lines we draw and to love one another, however messy that may be. And by this, people will know that we are Christians.

Prayer: *Holy God, let us be one in the Spirit and one in the Lord. We pray that all unity may one day be restored, that others may know we are Christians by our love. Amen.*

Written by Jonathan D. Cruz

DECEMBER 27 - LOVE IS PATIENT

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

My mom is my best friend. She challenges me, she helps me, she supports me, she cooks for me, and, above all, she loves me with her entire being. In my experience, there has never been a time in my life when I have done something so wrong or disobedient that my mom turned her back to me. Through all of the hardships and difficult decisions I have faced, my mom has stood by my side, guided me, and allowed me to grow. I know that I test her sometimes, and I do things that make her angry, but the love she has for me endures everything. A mother's love for her children is a Christian love.

As human beings, we falter from time to time in the way we love others. We may lose our patience or give up on those who make a mistake that we deem unforgivable. The description of love presented by our Scripture demonstrates to us that the loving connections we make with others will present us with challenges on several occasions. It is no simple thing to love without fault, as we are tested by our own mistakes and those of the people around us. 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 teaches us that we must show patience, kindness, honesty, and humility in love. It is our responsibility to show love to others who may not know what the beauty and hope of Christian love can be. God's love for us is unconditional and pure. God's

love is meant to unite and strengthen us, and we are called to love each other as God loves us.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for setting the example of what it means to love one another. Please replenish our bodies and minds with the ability to love others unconditionally in your name. Amen.

Written by Rachael Hinshaw (age 17)

DECEMBER 28 - LECTIO DIVINA: 1 CORINTHIANS

For today's devotion, you will again experience an ancient practice called Lectio Divina, or Sacred Reading.

Remember, this practice begins with approaching the Scripture without any agenda or presuppositions of your own. You are reading and encountering the text as if for the first time. You are not here to get information or to look for inspiration, but rather to commune with God.

This Spiritual practice takes place in four steps:

1. **Lectio** – Read the passage of Scripture slowly, repeatedly, even whispering the words aloud as you read. Slow down and savor the words you are reading. Allow the text to trigger memories and associations, even ones you may not be expecting. Read the words calmly, deliberately, and gradually. Notice what certain word or phrase rises above the rest of the text and grabs hold of you during your reading.
2. **Meditatio** – Meditate on this passage. Ask yourself, what is the Spirit speaking to me through this text? Focus on the feelings and emotions conjured in your inner self. This text may evoke different emotions in different individuals. Allow the Scripture text to touch your inner being. Do not try to assign meaning to anything, just let it be.
3. **Oratio** – Pray. Ask the Spirit for illumination. Converse with God about the meaning of the emotions you are experiencing. This is a dialogue between you and God. Speak and listen.
4. **Contemplatio** – Contemplate. Move beyond words and intellect, and be with God. This is a time of silent reflection. Express your love for God, and allow God to be and speak in whatever way the Spirit chooses.

Your passage for today is 1 Corinthians 1:3-9.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Prayer: *Holy God, move in me through these Holy Scriptures. Amen.*

DECEMBER 29 - OVERFLOW

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”

For my family, the Christmas season is an opportunity to gather with friends and family we may not have seen for several months or years. Before the gatherings, there is anticipation of the conversations and fellowship such as “I wonder how they like their new job or new school”, or “What ever happened with...?”, and “Do you remember when...?” The joy and excitement of catching up and spending time with people we love is life-giving.

God puts certain people in our lives to energize us, encourage us, and help us through life. When we are away from those people, life seems more difficult and can feel less fulfilling. However, when we are with or, sometimes, merely think of those individuals, a wonderful energy and love comes over us. The apostle Paul felt the same love when thinking about and writing to the followers at Thessalonica...a love so overwhelming and infectious for the people, it overflowed within him and touched those around him. Consider this Christmas season individuals who, when in their presence or when thinking about them, make your love increase and overflow.

Prayer: *May friend and family gatherings during this Christmas season be full and overflowing with love and joy. Let us be mindful and thankful the source of the love and joy is Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.*

Written by Paul Bickle

DECEMBER 30 - JOURNAL: PHILIPPIANS

Today's devotion will be a Spiritual exercise in journaling. Writing can be a powerful tool to reflect on Scripture and its application for your life.

Read Philippians 1:3-11.

"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

In this letter, the Apostle Paul is writing to the Church in the city of Philippi. What comes to mind when you read this passage of Scripture? Do you have friends and loved ones of whom you are reminded? Do you express your love to them in these kinds of real and extravagant terms? Do your prayers for them resemble this same kind of hope and encouragement that Paul has for the Christians in Philippi? How can your connection and love with other Christians be deepened?

Write down your reflections and responses to these questions.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for speaking to me in the quiet times. Help me to love and encourage others with excitement and eagerness. Amen.

DECEMBER 31 - LECTIO DIVINA: 1ST EPISTLE OF JOHN

For the final devotion, you will again experience an ancient practice called Lectio Divina, or Sacred Reading.

Remember, this practice begins with approaching the Scripture without any agenda or presuppositions of your own. You are reading and encountering the text as if for the first time. You are not here to get information or to look for inspiration, but rather to commune with God.

This Spiritual practice takes place in four steps:

1. *Lectio* – Read the passage of Scripture slowly, repeatedly, even whispering the words aloud as you read. Slow down and savor the words you are reading. Allow the text to trigger memories and associations, even ones you may not be expecting. Read the words calmly, deliberately, and gradually. Notice what certain word or phrase rises above the rest of the text and grabs hold of you during your reading.

2. *Meditatio* – Meditate on this passage. Ask yourself, what is the Spirit speaking to me through this text? Focus on the feelings and emotions conjured in your inner self. This text may evoke different emotions in different individuals. Allow the Scripture text to touch your inner being. Do not try to assign meaning to anything, just let it be.

3. *Oratio* – Pray. Ask the Spirit for illumination. Converse with God about the meaning of the emotions you are experiencing. This is a dialogue between you and God. Speak and listen.

4. *Contemplatio* – Contemplate. Move beyond words and intellect, and be with God. This is a time of silent reflection. Express your love for God, and allow God to be and speak in whatever way the Spirit chooses.

Your passage for today is 1 John 4:7-12.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

Prayer: **Holy God, move in me through these Holy Scriptures. Amen.**



Back Cover Artwork by Morgan Ellefson (1st grade)