

2020

Advent Devotionals

Mount Pleasant Presbyterian Church



**Mount Pleasant
Presbyterian Church**

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Advent Devotions

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Faith Formation at Mount Pleasant Presbyterian Church

This Advent devotional booklet represents a collaboration between the Adult Faith Formation Ministry team with MPPC pastors, staff, and church members representing a wide swath of ministries and ages. Through the invitation to scripture, study, prayer, and action, may God more deeply form us into Christ's followers as we seek together to serve God in our congregation, our community, and the world.

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*Strengthen your hearts,
for the coming of the Lord is near.*

— James 5:8¹

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Advent

The word Advent derives from the Latin word meaning “to come.” Advent is a beginning — the start of the new liturgical year and a fresh opportunity to immerse ourselves in the great story of our salvation through Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem. Advent also points to an ending — the consummation of all things when Christ will return in glory to bring righteousness, justice, and peace. We begin the season of Advent with our eyes on the horizon: watching and waiting for Christ’s coming.

Advent is an annual refresher course on the nature of Christian hope. We look back across the long arc of history to understand and remember who God is and how God works in the world — mighty and merciful; ever-faithful and abounding in love; creating, redeeming, sustaining all that is. We look forward, too, straining to see the new thing God is doing — a river flowing in the desert, a fresh shoot growing from an old stump, weapons of war turned into instruments of peace. Thus, we learn to proclaim the gospel with confidence, trusting that the Spirit will work wonders, the promises of God will come to pass, and Jesus will continue to lead the way.²

This year the Adult Faith Formation Ministry team invites you to reflect during the season of Advent as each week we light a candle on the Advent wreath. In the ancient world, various peoples lit fires to mark the turning of the light into winter’s season and to pray for the return of the light. The church has Christianized that practice in the traditional lighting of the Advent wreath. These candles are signs of the growing light of Christ who is coming again in all fullness into the darkness of our world. Until that day, we watch and wait in holy expectation for Christ’s coming, lighting candles of hope, peace, joy, and love; and remembering the promises of God with prayer.³

Each week includes a simple liturgy that you are invited to use as you light your Advent wreath at home. You may wish to turn off the lights as your family gathers around the wreath. Different members of the family might each take a turn in the liturgical readings and prayers.

May hope, peace, joy, and love live in your hearts and minds as we celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ – Emmanuel, God With Us.

²David Gambrell, Presbyterians Today, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pt-1119-wpb/>

³https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/worship/pdfs/lighting_the_advent_wreath.pdf

Week 1 (November 29 - December 5)

Hope

Advent at Home: Liturgy for Lighting the Advent Wreath

Creeting

Watch and wait for Christ's coming! Light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love, remembering the promises of God with prayer.

Lighting

We light this candle in hope. (Light the first candle)

Scripture

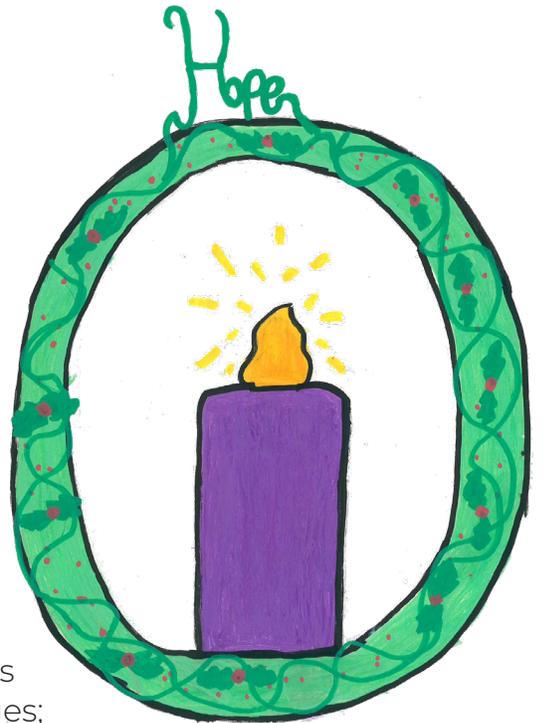
Hear God's promise of hope from Isaiah 40:31:
Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Reflect

Hope is the feeling of expectation and a desire for something to happen. This year has been such a trying time in the world with pandemic, social unrest, contentious elections, storms, fires, earthquakes, and personal challenges; hope can be difficult to find. However, it is in times like these that we need hope the most. The good news is that those who hope in the Lord will be renewed in strength. In this season of Advent, we wait with great expectation for the living hope promised to us through the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Prayer

God of hope, into our darkness come! (individual prayers may be offered...) Amen.



May you experience God's hope this week.

Hope

Scripture

Isaiah 9:2

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.

Matthew 4:12-16

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.'

Devotional

"A Recycled Word of Hope"

You have likely heard or read the words of Isaiah 9:2 many times, more often than not softly illuminated by candlelight in a darkened Christmas Eve sanctuary. But has it ever occurred to you that the prophet's words may be likened to the discarded newspapers, soda cans, and plastic milk containers that you cart out to the curb for your recycling pickup?

In the 2020 "Year With the Bible" journey here at MPPC, the participants have come to know the gospel writer Matthew as an enthusiastic recycler of Old Testament texts. In Matthew 4: 12-16, he recycled Isaiah 9:2 to describe the beginning of Jesus's ministry after Jesus had fended off the temptations that the devil had dangled in front of him during his forty days and forty nights in the wilderness.

When Matthew was in recycling mode, he often attached the tag line, "this was to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet." When we read that prophecy is being fulfilled, we may gain a deeper appreciation of what is meant if we view the ancient words as being "filled full," visualizing the words of the prophet as a bowl into which God pours new meanings applicable to contemporary situations.

Theologian Delores Williams testifies to how this happens when she writes of her African-American ancestors being brought to America in slave ships named John the Baptist, Mary, Justice, and Jesus.

The names of those ships and the biblical stories associated with the names became bowls into which God poured liberation, even as the white masters who read Scripture to those whom they were enslaving intended it to reinforce subjugation and oppression. In the biblical story, the enslaved saw Jesus with his hands tied behind his back as their hands had been tied behind their backs and saw him whipped as they had been whipped and saw him nailed to the cross though he had done nothing wrong and they also received the amazing good news that God had raised Jesus up forever. In this recycling of the biblical story into their own situation, they found their hope that in God's resurrecting light, nothing, not slavery, not oppression, nothing could hold them down and keep them in darkness.⁴

What could be more hopeful in our own day than this...that God's good and gracious Word is recycled from generation to generation to bring light to people who sit in darkness? What could be more hopeful than the prophetic word of Isaiah being recycled by Matthew to initiate Jesus's ministry of light and love and recycled once again into Advent 2020 to fuel our present and pressing work for justice and peace?

Can you think of anything more hopeful? I cannot.

~ Rev. Lib McGregor Simmons, Parish Associate

⁴Delores S. Williams, "Reimagining Truth: Traversing the Feminist Christian Backlash," *The Other Side* 30, No. 3 (May-June, 1994), 53. Quoted by Barbara K. Lundblad in *Transforming the Stone: Preaching Through Resistance to Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 25-26.

Prayer

Our God in heaven, we are in awe that you sent your son to live among us as a common human, with all the struggles, conflicts, and troubles that we all experience. His birth so long ago began the new covenant that you would establish with all people. As we prepare to celebrate his birth once again, let us do so confident and certain in the hope given to us through his resurrection from the dead, and a promised future inheritance that will not perish. You are the hope in our messy world.

This Advent, help us slow down, listen to your voice, and focus on what is really important. Help us to see that you are with us, and inspire us to give freely of our time, talents, and resources to comfort those in need, to ease hunger and homelessness, and to defeat injustice.

That first Christmas you gave us the gift of hope wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Thank you, loving Father, for your immeasurable gift. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

~ Mac Thigpen, Music Ministries



Artwork by Wheeler Brown, 12 years old.

This week... Explore what God's Word says about Hope:

Jeremiah 29:11

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
'Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.'
The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Matthew 1:21-23

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

Romans 8:18-25

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Peace

Advent at Home: Liturgy for Lighting the Advent Wreath

Creeting

Watch and wait for Christ's coming! Light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love, remembering the promises of God with prayer.

Lighting

We light this candle in hope.
(Light the first candle)

We light this candle for peace.
(Light the second candle)

Scripture

Hear God's promise of peace from
Luke 1:78-79:

*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.*

*May you
experience
God's peace
this week.*

Reflect

"May the peace of Christ Jesus be with you." We say this every Sunday in worship, but what do we mean by these words? Peace can have many meanings. It can be a feeling of calmness or a serene sense of comfort. Sometimes during Advent, we can get overwhelmed with things to do and with expectations to "make Christmas perfect," that we can easily miss the peace of the season. How can you take time this year to let go of busyness and make room for peace?

Prayer

God of hope, into our darkness come!
(individual prayers may be offered...) Amen.



Peace

Scripture

Psalm 122

A Song of Ascents; of David.

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem — built as a city that is bound firmly together.

To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers."

For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you."

For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

John 14:27

[Jesus answered,] "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Devotional

"Peace Within the Walls"

As the tour bus entered the ancient city of Bethlehem, we passed easily out of Israeli land and into Palestinian-controlled territory. Our seminary travel seminar group enjoyed a wonderful afternoon touring the Church of the Nativity, taking turns gazing down the small, heavily ornamented hole over a cave where, tradition says, Jesus once laid in a lowly manger. Afterward, we shopped for Christmas gifts at an antiques store known for its olive wood carvings. Laden with our treasures, we made our way back to the bus, which was parked in the shadow of the wall — a massive concrete barrier, rising twenty feet in the air, topped with barbed wire, and punctuated with towers that housed heavily armed guards. From where we sat, the wall literally blocked the sun. When our bus arrived at the gate to request passage back into Israel, our tour guide, a Palestinian Christian named Sofian, was forced off the bus. Our Palestinian driver was, too. As tourist pilgrims, we were allowed to sit comfortably in our air-conditioned seats while our two guides were searched and questioned in a special holding facility deep within the wall. After a twenty-minute interrogation and search, Sofian and our driver were finally permitted to board our bus again, and we made our way through the wall, back into the old city of Jerusalem.

The physical distance between that gate and the old walls of Jerusalem is less than six miles, but the spiritual distance is much, much greater. It is more like the long distance that the Jewish pilgrims of old would have walked, as they traveled together up to the Temple Mount. As a "song of ascents," Psalm 122 would have been sung regularly along the way. They were walking to Jerusalem in search of many things: the joy of being close to God, the comforting fellowship of a faith community, and a desperate hope for justice in a broken world. But perhaps the best word for what they sought was PEACE. They wanted to know peace in their hearts, in their families, in their nation, and in their world. And so, in a call and response format — with a leader and a group, singing back and forth — they would sing together... "Seek the peace of Jerusalem... Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!" A few more steps, and the song would continue. "Peace be within your walls," they would shout. "For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, 'Peace be within you!'"

Continued on to next page.

Devotional Continued

As we continue to walk our own pilgrimage through Advent, as we prepare our hearts and homes to once again greet the Prince of Peace, we seek the same thing. We know that peace is what we desperately need – not a forced, fear-based, military kind of peace, but a true and lasting spiritual peace – a feeling that we are truly safe under the wings of God, free to be the best versions of ourselves. Even as we walk in the shadows of the many walls that divide us, we are still hoping, praying, and singing for a heavenly peace that passes our understanding but still guards our hearts.

Today, as I think of all of you, I join my voice with these pilgrims of old. As you face whatever you must face in this holy season, may “Peace be within your walls.” To whomever is groaning under the weight of injustice, may “Peace be within your walls.” Wherever hope is lagging, where God’s love is needed most, may “Peace be within your walls.”

“For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’” Amen.

~ Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum, Pastor & Head of Staff

Prayer

Eternal Father, through your Son Jesus Christ you offer everyone the gift of peace. Surpassing all understanding, this peace makes friends out of enemies and frees our hearts from fear. You call us to dwell in your peace and share it with the world.

This Advent comes at the end of a hard year. Sickness has separated us, while strife has divided us. By chance or by choice, so often our days feel like torrents of rage and worry roaring around us. With that terrible noise filling our ears, we have sometimes not listened for Christ’s quiet peace.

God of peace, through Isaiah you told us we can be as wolves and lambs living together—at peace with ourselves and with one another—if we just follow the lead of a small child. As we prepare in Advent to celebrate the coming of that wonderful child, help us leave room in our hearts for the all-conquering peace Christ brings with him.

In Jesus’s precious name we pray. Amen.



~ Andrew DeHoll, Christian Education Sessional Committee

This week...Explore what God's Word says about Peace:

Isaiah 9:6-7

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 11:6-10

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Luke 24:36

While they were talking about [how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread], Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 3:16

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Activities

Share the hope, peace, joy, and love of this

We wait for Jesus, the HOPE that he brings as the Light of the world.

Share Hope:

- ◇ “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:5). Enjoy dinner by candlelight and talk about things that felt “dark” this year. What do we hope for? Why do we think of and use candles at Advent and Christmas? What do we mean when we say Jesus is the “Light of the world?”
- ◇ Take a walk with your family or friends and look for ways the earth is getting ready for winter’s season of rest. How do we get ready for the Savior’s coming?
- ◇ Decorate a family Christmas box or jar to keep on a table. Collect small change during Advent. One idea is to deposit a coin for every small act of grace or gratitude. Just before Christmas give the collection as a gift to a charity or to someone in need.

May the PEACE of Christ be with you and among you.

Share Peace:

- ◇ “Interview” a grandparent or an older friend: ask how they celebrated Christmas and what this season means to them. Invite them to tell you about a special Christmas memory. Talk about the angel’s announcement to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people!” [Luke 2:14] How does Jesus’ coming help us feel peace?
- ◇ Make a prayer garland with red and green construction paper. Cut strips to link. On each strip, write the name of someone or something you will pray for (family, friends, your church, those who are ill, those for whom Christmas may not be a very happy time or who need to be blessed with peace.) Use glue or staples to link your prayer chain together. Hang the chain where it will remind you to pray.

& Actions

Advent Season with one another and the world.

JOY to the World, the Lord has come!

Share Your Joy:

- ◇ Jesus came unexpectedly as a surprise gift from God to us. Make a surprise plate of cookies for a neighbor who is not expecting them.
- ◇ Ask children to cut pictures from magazines representing things that bring them great joy. Then talk about how the shepherds might have felt when the angels showed up suddenly with news of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.
- ◇ Conversation Starters: Prepare questions on small strips to put in a jar. At a meal or family time, let each person draw out a strip and give an answer.
Examples of questions:
 - ◇ *Name 2 people who made you joyful today and why.*
 - ◇ *The best way to brighten someone's day is to _____.*
 - ◇ *If everyone is kind and fair, the world would be _____.*
 - ◇ *How can you be kind to animals or take care of God's creation?*
 - ◇ *Name a way you could give God joy.*

LOVE one another as Christ loves you.

Share Love:

- ◇ Share love with older members of our congregation who cannot get to church, are homebound, or live in retirement communities. Contact MPPC administrative assistant Joy Cobb at jcobb@mppc.net for a name and address of a member on this list. Children could design a special Christmas card while adults might wish to write and mail cards with a special message from our church family.
- ◇ Collect a bag of non-perishable foods that are typically enjoyed at Christmas dinner (cranberry sauce, rice, boxed dressing, cans of green beans or sweet potatoes, gravies, etc).
 - ◇ Deliver to ECCO (East Cooper Community Outreach), 1145 Six Mile Rd., Mt. Pleasant, SC 29466 before Dec. 22. Items can be dropped off curbside Monday-Friday between the hours of 10:00 - 2:00.
- ◇ Gather items to be given to persons finding shelter at Tricounty Family Ministries. Socks are especially appreciated to keep feet warm as winter approaches. Contribute a new pair of white or black socks (athletic type). Also consider making a "toiletries" bag (these bags are given to incoming guests and are depleted weekly): in a large ziplock bag, put one pair of socks, toothpaste and toothbrush, a bar of soap, and deodorant. Bring your gift of love for neighbors to the "Sock Box for Tricounty Family Ministries" in church reception area by December 22 (no gift wrap needed).

Joy

Advent at Home: Liturgy for Lighting the Advent Wreath

Creeting

Watch and wait for Christ's coming! Light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love, remembering the promises of God with prayer.

Lighting

We light this candle in hope.
(Light the first candle)

We light this candle for peace.
(Light the second candle)

We light this candle in joy!
(Light the third, pink if used, candle)

Scripture

Hear God's invitation to joy from Psalm 100:1-2:
*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.*



Reflect

What comes to mind when you hear the word "joy"? One might be Psalms 100 (above). Or maybe a favorite song, like *Joy to the World!*, brings joy to your heart. For many of us, music brings joy especially during Advent. In the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, he writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!" (4:4) God provides us with great joy through the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. As we prepare and wait for Christ's coming, find what brings you joy, then repeat the sounding joy in every way you can!

Prayer

God of hope, into our darkness come! (individual prayers may be offered...) Amen.

May you experience God's joy this week.

Foy

Scripture

Isaiah 65:18

But be glad and rejoice for ever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.

Galatians 5:22-25

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Devotional

“God’s Joy!”

I remember many years ago when I worked for the Lipton Tea Company, an executive made a PowerPoint presentation on Total Quality Management. He put up a slide with the verse from Proverbs 29:18 — “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” His point was that in order for a team to be successful, it needs to share the same vision. The point he missed was that the writer of Proverbs was not talking about the people’s vision (or the team’s vision!) but about God’s vision of creation. I wonder how often we make the same mistake when reading the Bible, looking at scripture from our perspective rather than God’s.

Our two scripture readings this week are about joy, God’s Joy! Our joy comes from God. In Isaiah 65, God is talking about a new heaven and a new earth. Our joy will come from being with God and with one another in God’s new creation. In Galatians, joy is the second response to God’s indwelling Spirit. When God’s Spirit is in us and released in us we cannot help

but be filled with JOY! We have all had moments of pure joy in our lives, usually they coincide with someone we love. I still remember the pure joy in my heart when I first laid eyes on my children after they were born. What a joy!

During this season of Advent and Christmas, it makes me think about how the wise men must have felt when they found the baby Jesus after their long and dangerous journey. Matthew 2:10-11 (ESV) says:

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

They rejoiced exceedingly with JOY!

My prayer for each of you this Advent is that as you approach the Christ Child, you too may feel the joy of God’s Spirit in your heart!

~ Rev. Bart Edwards, Associate Pastor

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

During this third week of Advent, help us to feel the joy that the shepherds felt when they heard the good news from the angels. Lord, this year we especially need to feel that joy as we wonder when we can worship together again, when we can hug again, and when we can see each other’s smiling faces. Never have we needed your joy more than now. We need the joy only you can give as we have seen too much anger and resentment in the world.

Gracious Lord, show us again the beauty of that holy night and the joy that Mary and Joseph felt when

they first held baby Jesus. Stir up the Good News again and make it fill our hearts as we prepare to celebrate your Son’s birth. We know that only in Jesus can we find that everlasting joy. Thank you for sending your Son to be born as a baby and to become our Savior, bringing peace into the hearts of those who believe, and joy to those who find their hope in you. We pray that your true joy will touch us all and that “the good news of great joy” will be a reality in our own lives. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

~ Mona Knight, Presbyterian Women Circle

This week...Explore what God's Word says about Joy:

Psalm 16:11

[O God,] You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

Isaiah 35:8-10

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 52:7-10

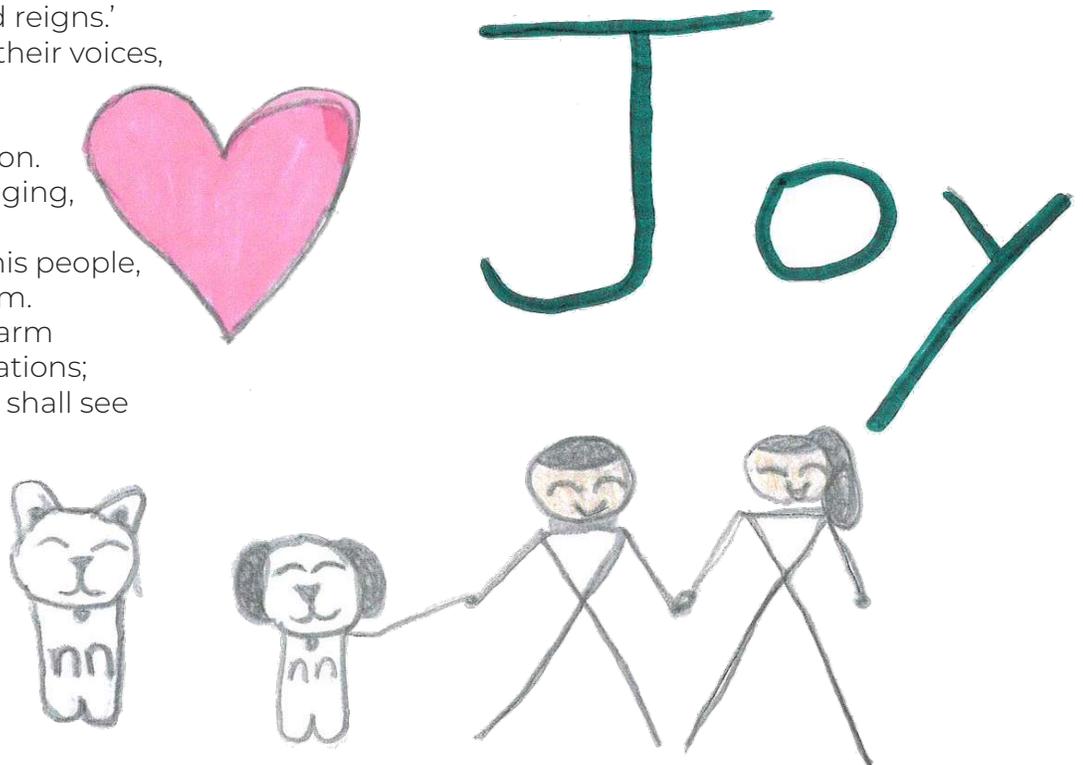
How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger
who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Luke 2:8-11

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Philippians 2:1-5

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.



Love

Advent at Home: Liturgy for Lighting the Advent Wreath

Creeting

Watch and wait for Christ's coming! Light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love, remembering the promises of God with prayer.

Lighting

We light this candle in hope.

(Light the first candle)

We light this candle for peace.

(Light the second candle)

We light this candle in joy!

(Light the third, pink if used, candle)

We light this candle with love!

(Light the fourth candle)



Scripture

Hear God's word of love from Zephaniah 3:17:

*The Lord, your God, will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love.*

Reflect

Love can be shown and experienced in the smallest of ways — like a smile to a stranger, a pair of socks for someone in need, or a note to say “hello” to someone who may be lonely. Think about how God's love renews us, and reflect on God's gift of love to us in Jesus. Jesus teaches us to love God and to love one another by sharing God's love for all. What are some ways you can share love this week?

Prayer

God of hope, into our darkness come! (individual prayers may be offered...) Amen.

May you experience God's love this week.

Love

Scripture

Deuteronomy 10:17-19a

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Matt. 5:43-46a

[Jesus taught them, saying,] “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?”

Devotional

“Love, love, love! That’s what it’s all about!”⁵

It always boils down to love, doesn’t it? The world would look very different if we all kept this commandment close to our hearts: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” I marvel at the number of movies and TV shows which center around revenge and hating your enemy. I will confess that I do not gravitate toward such entertainment, so I am not sure if there is some measure of redemption for the characters in the end. I certainly hope so.

Loving comes easily for us when we encounter those people who are kind to us, help us, are known to us. Love is much more difficult to conjure toward people we encounter who are impatient with us, answer our questions brusquely, or cruelly regard our needs. However, if we are to be seen as children of our loving God, we must become like the first group – kind, helpful and including everyone as part of our sphere.

Corrie ten Boom, who spent time in a Nazi concentration camp and lost most of her family there, often lectured on forgiveness and grace. After one such lecture, a man came to shake her hand whom she recognized as one of her former prison guards. She writes, “I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart...I prayed silently...and woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands.

And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’”

Is it possible to live into a space where our enemies become our friends? Or, if we cannot go quite that far, finding the space where those who persecute us can be seen as those who need our kindness, helpfulness and inclusion? I have heard that once those we see as “other” are accepted and loved by us, we can no longer view them as other but instead embrace them as family.

I happened to see an interview with reggae icon Ziggy Marley, son of Bob Marley. Many things he said resonated with me, but nothing more than his life philosophy – “Love is my religion.” Of these days he said, “We believe in love. We know love. We have a true understanding that love is going to conquer everything. What we see going on now, love will conquer it because love is powerful. We just need enough people to give that love, share that love, be that love. We can’t lose if we are all on that team.”

During this Advent season, when we focus on a child who was the true embodiment of the word love in this world, may we find it in our hearts to love as children of God.

~ Barbara Loehr-Fox, Director of Music Ministries

Prayer

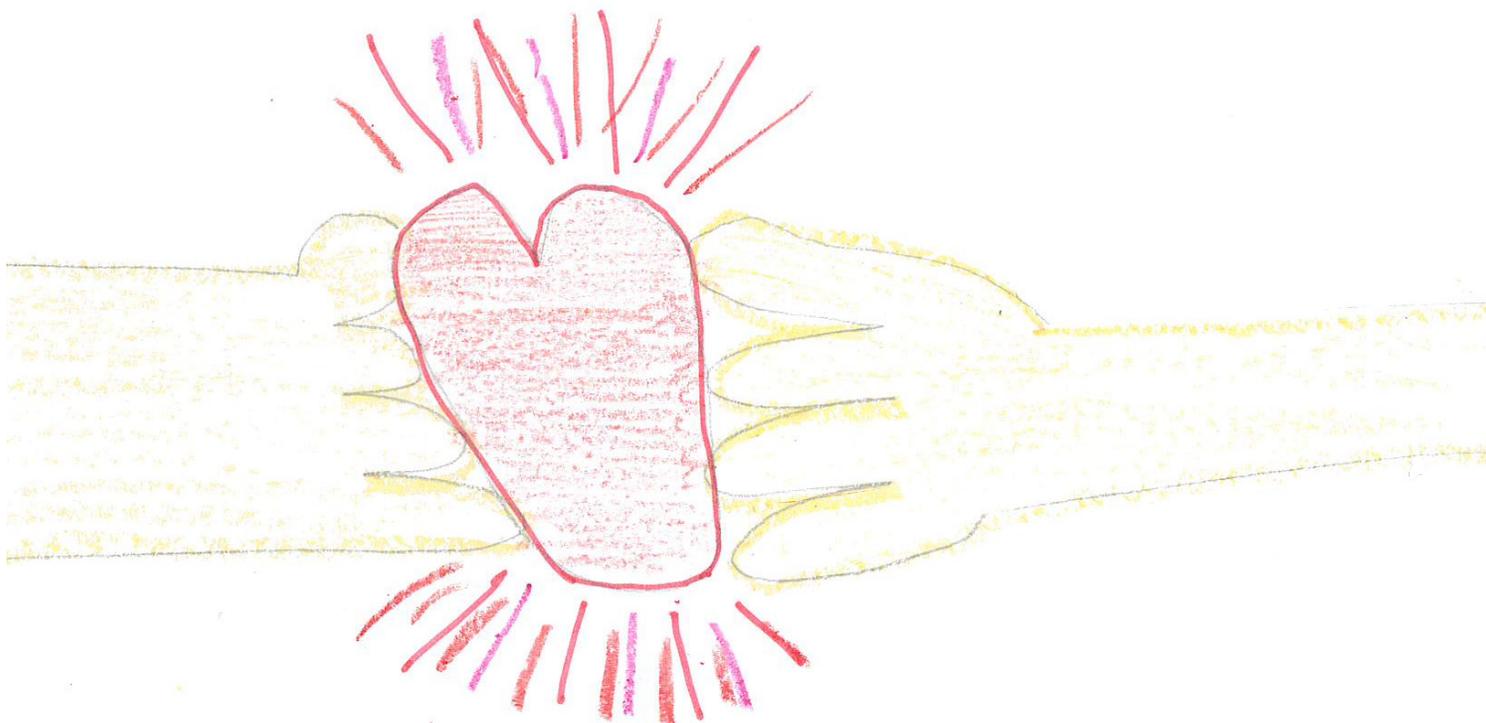
Loving God, long ago, because of your love for us,
You came to us in the person of Jesus.

Laid as a baby in a feeding trough for cattle,
Lowliest of births in a place not fit for a king,
You became one of us with only
the lowly shepherds to welcome you.

Your Kingdom would not be of this world,
but you must have hoped we'd learn to love
when we saw your face. You shined the light
of love into the dark corners of our hearts.
You taught us, showing us through your life,
how to love and take care of one another.
On the cross, the spark from the light that you gave us
was not extinguished. It still burns as an ember,
and it is with your love that it remains glowing.

Father, take this ember in our hearts today and fan it with your love
as we recall in this Advent season your time of dwelling among us.
Fan the ember so that it flares into a great light
so that we, your children, shine the light into the dark places.
Fan it so that we carry your light and love for all your children
into our homes, into our neighborhoods, and into your world.
It is in the light that your face can be seen.
Father of us all, help us to be that light.

~ Paula and Jim Custer, Hope House Ministry Team



This week...Explore what God's Word says about Love:

Psalm 13:5-6

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Matthew 25:35-40

[The king will say]...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Luke 10:25-27

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.'

Romans 8:35-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1 John 4:7-12, 16b-18

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.[...]God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

December 25

Christmas Day

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Creeting

We have watched and we have waited...

Lighting

... *in hope.* (Light the first candle)

... *for peace.* (Light the second candle)

... *in joy!* (Light the third, pink if used, candle)

... *with love.* (Light the fourth candle)

Now our redemption is near! (Light the (center white) Christ candle)

Scripture

Hear the Word of the Lord from Zechariah 2:10-13:

Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says the Lord. Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. The Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem. Be silent, all people, before the Lord; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.

Response

*Glory to God in the highest!
Alleluia! Amen.*



Artwork by Carter Limbert, 16 years old.



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