



devotions

weekly devotions
for advent 2024



MORE THAN WORDS: ADVENT DEVOTIONS

By Victoria Larson and Emily Trubey-Weller

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MORE THAN WORDS: ADVENT DEVOTIONS

Victoria Larson and Emily Trubey-Weller

INTRODUCTION

More Than Words: a theme for the season

These Advent devotions explore seven gifts from God that help us navigate the season of waiting: care, faith, justice, hope, peace, joy, and love.

Some of these gifts may be familiar to you. Hope, peace, joy, and love are traditional themes for a four-week Advent observance. Other gifts – care, faith, and justice – are new to the Advent season, extending the observance for an extra three weeks in advance. The extended Advent season begins on November 10.

We receive these seven Advent gifts from God in order to put them to work for the good of all God's people. Care, faith, justice, hope, peace, joy, and love are tools that help us as we wait, preparing us and our communities to receive the gift of Christ.

Why an extended Advent season?

If you're already in the habit of observing Advent, then you may be most familiar with a four-week season. Where did the extended version come from, and why is it here in this devotional guide?

Historically, Advent was one of the latest seasons of the church year to develop. Depending on where and when you lived in the early church, the preparatory period that came before the celebration of Jesus' nativity could range in length from two weeks to three months. Some churches observed Advent as a forty-day penitential season, a corollary to Lent. This period often started on or around November 11th, the feast day of St. Martin of Tours, earning it the nickname St. Martin's Lent. Pope Gregory I (d. 604) instituted Advent as a four-week season leading up to Christmas, changing the local Roman custom of a six-week season.

Lately, some church leaders have begun advocating for a return to a longer Advent observance. As secular Christmas observances begin earlier and earlier and our December schedules overflow, it's hard to honor the simplicity and devotion that are part of Advent's character. People who observe an extended Advent season often find that their preparation for the coming of Christ feels less rushed and more meaningful than in a four-week observance.

The Advent wreath

Bring a little fire to your devotional life with your own Advent wreath! You can find Advent wreaths at almost any Christmas store, but you can easily create one at home using tea lights or votive candles, faux or foraged greenery, or whatever decoration you prefer. Place your candles in a pie plate or bundt pan for ease of arranging. Most premade Advent wreaths will hold four candles, to which you can add a few tea lights to accommodate a longer Advent observance if desired. The Advent wreath need not be a literal wreath: a circle, cluster, or row of candles will do.

Place your Advent wreath somewhere you can return to it every day, like your kitchen table. Light it when you sit down to dinner and give thanks for the meal. If you use smaller tapers or tealights, you'll probably burn through a candle over the course of seven weeks. That's okay!

In these devotions

Each week, you'll find several different ways to encounter the chosen theme, such as scripture, reflection, song, and prayer. You can explore every element or just the ones that call to you. You can do it all in one day, or return to the week's reflection with each day that passes. The best devotional resource is the one you actually use, so integrate these devotions into your spiritual practice in the way that best supports your life.

Each week's entry includes the following elements:

Sunday scripture: A selection from the scripture you may have heard in worship on Sunday

Reflection: A reflection exploring the week's theme

Weekly prompt: A few questions to take with you into meditation, journaling, or prayer

Prayer: A prayer reflecting the theme of the week

Words of wisdom: Words from sacred and secular sources to offer perspective on the week's theme

Daily scripture: Six short verses from scripture, corresponding to the remaining six days of the week, to inspire your meditation and prayer each day

MORE THAN WORDS: ADVENT DEVOTIONS

CARE: WEEK OF NOVEMBER 10, 2024

Sunday Scripture: 1 Kings 17:8-16

Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], saying, “Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there, for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.” Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said, but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Reflection: On care

Emily Trubey-Weller

I have a cat who believes he is a human baby.

Okay, that is a slight exaggeration, but he is by far the neediest animal with whom I’ve ever had the pleasure of cohabitating (and I’ve had many). He greets you at the door when you arrive and bids you farewell there when you leave. He is underfoot when you are cooking, cleaning, or caring for children. He rushes into any door when he hears it open, whether it is a bedroom, closet, or the outdoors, and moments later, he can be heard meowing loudly to be brought back to the other side. He also meows loudly to be picked up and held. Often he meows loudly for no discernable reason. In a previous home, he would hop the fence to the neighbor’s yard but require that you lift him back over. He expects more or less constant interaction. He has had the most medical issues and highest vet bills of any pet by far. He drools profusely on you if he is happy, which he often is. He is the first cat I ever had, and he went against a lot of what I was told to expect of a cat. Please keep in mind, I am a dog person, and I find this cat to be *a lot*.

This high-maintenance yet delightful creature requires lots of care. That care demands quite a bit of his human companions: time and energy, attention and affection, financial commitments, emotional labor, provision of food and medication, and willingness to change outfits multiple times daily due to drool spots. Caring for him goes far beyond just liking him, or even loving him.

Friends, we are God's needy cat. We need constant care and affection. But while I grumble about vet bills and answer the door begrudgingly to let in the cat after illicit outdoor adventures, God never minds. In fact, our loving Creator never tires of providing us with time and energy, attention and affection, all that we need to survive and thrive. Jesus goes to great lengths to care for us, to accompany us on our human journey, and to gift us with salvation.

When I am able to remember my own neediness and the ways in which I have been cared for by God on my human journey, often through the hands of others, I can respond a bit more generously to the needs of my cat. And on a really good day, I can respond a bit more generously to the very big needs of the people around me, too. The care that has been poured into me becomes an offering poured out for others.

It's possible, of course, to pour out too much. Unlike God's, our stores of caring are not endless and can be abused. The widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17 reminds us of this when she points out to Elijah that she cannot provide a meal for him; she doesn't even have enough for herself and her son. In a world where the self-care industry turns quite a profit yet often fails to provide the true rest and care that we need, I am often surprised by how genuine care for others provides care for my heart, too, even in small ways. In providing for Elijah, the widow receives God's care for herself and her son.

Weekly prompt

When has someone provided you with genuine loving care? Who or what in your life is in need of such care today, especially in a tiny way (a person, creature, creation, or project)? How do you know when your stores for care have run dry? In caring for others, have you ever cared for yourself, too?

Words of wisdom

“All praise to You, my God, this night,
For all the blessings of the light.
Keep me, O keep me, King of kings,
Beneath the shelter of Your wings.”

Thomas Ken, “All Praise to You, My God, This Night”

“Lean on me when you’re not strong.
I’ll be your friend, I’ll help you carry on...”
Bill Withers, “Lean on Me”

Prayer

God, I need your care.
Part of me wishes I didn’t,
preferring that I was fine on my own.

No bother to you, or to anyone.

God, take away my fear of troubling others,
my dread of inconveniencing you.

Show me the beauty of my dependence;
show me the breadth of your care.
Open my heart to perceive this world
as your constant, ready, joyful answer to my need:
 the people in my life,
 the food on my table,
 the sun overhead,
 the rain soaking the earth,
 (and the things I name now...).

Teach me to say with the psalmist:
You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

God, lift my hands from my own bootstraps
so that I can feel the overflow of your blessings.
Amen.

Daily scripture for the week of November 10

Monday, care for others: “Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:4)

Tuesday, care through financial giving: “[Jesus] looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.’” (Luke 21:1-4)

Wednesday, God’s care for all of creation: “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6:26)

Thursday, our care for creation: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” (Genesis 1:26, 31)

Friday, care out of being cared for: “Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.” (Matthew 10:8)

Saturday, the labor of care: “Whatever task you must do, work as if your soul depends on it, as for the Lord and not for humans...” (Colossians 3:23)

FAITH: WEEK OF NOVEMBER 17, 2024

Sunday Scripture: Psalm 16

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you."

As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble ones
in whom is all my delight.

Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names upon my lips.

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.

I bless the Lord, who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.
I keep the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.
For you do not give me up to Sheol
or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Reflection: On faith

Victoria Larson

Though I was raised in a family that attended church weekly, I let the habit lapse as soon as I got to college. It's not that I didn't like church or stopped believing in God. I just didn't want to go to

church out of a sense of obligation. I wanted to explore my faith, and never having been able to opt out of church before, that was the experience that felt the most exploratory to me!

In retrospect, I wonder if I wasn't silently daring God to do something about it: to visit me with some spiritual revelation or emotional epiphany that would move me to return to worship. But there was no such mountaintop moment. Instead, there was an actual mountaintop.

Shortly after I graduated from college, I went to France to work on a goat farm in exchange for room and board. The farm was in the southern Alps just outside a little mountain town, thirteen hairpin turns up the Puy de Tournettes (I counted). It took an hour and a half to hike down to the nearest village. For reasons I still don't fully understand, I found myself making the trek on Sundays, wending my way down to the small Romanesque church in the mountain town so that I could sit through a Catholic Mass in a language I was struggling to speak.

That was the beginning of my return to church. Despite the strangeness of the language and the Catholic rites and the place itself, the familiar rhythms of the liturgy resonated with something within me. Those reverberations drew me back to the practices of faith that I had learned when I was a child, inviting me to encounter them anew as an adult. Over the months and years that followed, those practices of faith offered a container for my doubts and questions, for my awe and understanding, for my wonder and my wondering.

It turned out that faith wasn't to be found at the mountaintop—at least, not for me. Instead, it only became sensible to me when I came down from the mountaintop, leaving behind my expectations of a vivid moment of sudden certainty. It was only then that I could perceive faith as something that could be practiced.

Over time, I've released my idea that faith is a kind of certainty, and I now wonder about it (and at it) as a gift from God that can be nurtured slowly and intentionally. These days, I experience faith in the timeworn patterns of the liturgy, shaped by many hands and spoken by countless tongues. I feel it in the practice of prayer, especially in the mornings that I come to it by habit rather than by inclination. I feel it in the times when I *don't* feel it and have to trust my worship community to carry me through a dry season until the time comes when I can carry faith for someone else.

To be honest, I still hope for a mountaintop moment—and if you've had one for yourself, then I rejoice! But I think, now, that my heart has opened wider to receive such a moment because of what I'd experienced away from the mountaintop: the slow, steady cultivation of a relationship between God, Christ's church, and me, a gift I've learned to call "faith."

Weekly prompt

When has something required your faithfulness? Think of a skill you had to learn, a hobby that took practice, or a relationship that required the commitment of meeting regularly in order to blossom. When was it easy to be faithful and when was it difficult? When has someone showed such faithful dedication to you, and how might this faithfulness inform your own spirituality?

Words of wisdom

“Faithfulness in little things is a big thing.”

St. John Chrysostom

“Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Prayer

God, give me faith.

Give me faith big enough to hold my doubts and questions.

Give me faith beautiful enough to draw me back when I forget you.

Give me faith bold enough to bolster whoever might be struggling,

faith brave enough to sit quietly beside them in their pain,

faith so bountiful that it is enough for us both.

And if that faith is not what you've measured out for me today,

then lead me to the people and places that have it.

Amen.

Alternatively or additionally: Choose a regular time this week to practice praying a prayer of the Bible or of your tradition. For example: the Lord's Prayer, the Jesus Prayer, the doxology, or one of the psalms.

Daily scripture for the week of November 17

Monday, God's faithfulness: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Tuesday, faith as a gift: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Wednesday, faith in community: "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." (Romans 12:3-5)

Thursday, God's faithfulness to creation: "Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds." (Psalm 36:5)

Friday, faith in God: "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth." (Psalm 46:10)

Saturday, Christ's faith working in us: "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." (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)

JUSTICE: WEEK OF NOVEMBER 24, 2024

Sunday Scripture: John 18:33-37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Reflection: On justice

Emily Trubey-Weller

That’s not fair!

Reading this well-worn phrase is likely accompanied by your own gut response. Perhaps it’s a sense of righteous indignation as you remember a time when your sibling seemed to garner more favor from your parents than you. Maybe it’s exasperation as you recall the many times your own children cried out for justice over a perceived slight. It might bring up smoldering anger as you recall the unfairness of a local politician’s decision or the hypocrisy of a self-righteous leader.

For me, it’s all of the above. I can feel the words pour out of my mouth as my brother and I stand before my parents with clenched fists. It is a phrase now uttered in my own household daily by tiny plaintiffs (my children). These are words I’ve now cried out to friends and colleagues more than once as county leaders with an agenda took back promises and gutted our local health department.

“That’s not fair!” might not seem so far away from “that’s not just!” Common definitions of justice center around an idea of fairness. Justice is getting what you deserve, whether good or ill. Justice is keeping your word. It means balancing the scales, everything distributed evenly. To bring about justice, wrongdoers need to make up for their actions, and with interest. You’re only eligible for forgiveness if you have first made up for your mistakes, and grace isn’t considered wise.

But with Jesus, justice takes on a different flavor. As we read in John 18, rather than stand up in righteous indignation at his sham of a trial, crying “That’s not fair!”, Jesus submits to it. In subjecting himself to an unjust trial, torture, and execution, Jesus is “lay[ing] down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15). In his very public death, Jesus demonstrates love for friends and enemies

alike. Justice as Jesus metes it out is not based on definitions of right and wrong. It doesn't seek a strict fairness or demand that people pay what they owe.

Rather, with Jesus, justice is acting in love, even in the most unfair situations.

This justice has a deeper dimension than our common understanding, which relies heavily on fairness. Justice in the way of Jesus is contextual. It demands a consideration of the circumstances before judgment is made. It requires sacrifice for the wellbeing of others. It forgives even when forgiveness is not deserved. Instead of dividing things equally, where everyone receives the same, Jesus' justice is equitable, with everyone receiving what they need. This justice is much harder to comprehend. It asks much more of us than fairness ever would.

Indeed, "That's not fair!" Our God is not fair. Our God is loving above all. And the justice that Jesus embodies is God's love acted out.

Weekly prompt

Can you think of a time when your wrongdoing was treated not with fairness, but with love? How did that work out? Have you ever held forgiveness back until you felt someone deserved it? Reflect on that experience. Where can you see a need for equity rather than equality in the world?

Words of wisdom

"There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea.

There's a kindness in God's justice,
which is more than liberty."

Frederick William Faber, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy"

"The Gospel takes away our right forever, to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor."

Dorothy Day

Prayer

God, I want the world to be just.
But it seems impossible:
systems are so entrenched,
and the status quo has so much inertia,
and we can't even agree on what justice *is*.

God,
when I hit the brick walls and roadblocks,
turn me around.
Show me the distance you've brought me.
Remind me that my longing for justice
began with gifts I could never earn:
your grace,
your forgiveness,
your love.

Suffuse my striving, God,
with the wideness of your mercy,
with the kindness of your justice,
with the limitless love
of your Christ.
Amen.

Daily scripture for the week of November 24

Monday, a just ruler: “The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me: ‘One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.’” (2 Samuel 23:3-4)

Tuesday, God prefers justice: “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” (Proverbs 21:3)

Wednesday, God guards justice: “For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones.” (Proverbs 2:6-8)

Thursday, ignoring justice: “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:23-24)

Friday, justice over fairness: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well, and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. 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. (Matthew 5:38-45)

Saturday, love and justice: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:12-13)

HOPE: WEEK OF DECEMBER 1

Sunday scripture: Luke 21:25-31

[Jesus said,] “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Then he told [the disciples] a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

Reflection: On hope

Victoria Larson

When I was little, my mom—who was and is a prolific gardener—let me claim a small corner of the yard for a garden of my very own. I chose to plant herbs because I read a lot of fantasy novels and cultivated aspirations of having a backyard apothecary. A nursery near our house stocked an absurd variety of herbs, and every year, I experienced an elated anguish as I narrowed down the options to what would fit in my little plot. I planted chocolate mint and tricolor sage, silver-edged thyme and lemon balm, Thai basil and bronze fennel, a riot of colors and textures and tastes. The garden delighted me as I tended it, tracking the progress of what had grown and what had not, what had bolted and what was about to blossom.

But one delight came entirely unforeseen. One January, I walked out to my little garden to see how it was doing after a winter storm and found the pineapple sage in full bloom, cardinal-red flowers brilliant against the snow.

I don’t know why the pineapple sage bloomed that January. It never did again. But I do know that it has given me unending sympathy for the disciples, because it has taught me that when Jesus says that they will know when a particular moment has arrived because of what the plants are doing...

...it could happen *anytime*. The plants could do anything.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ point stands: signs precede the coming of God’s reign, and one can discern them if one is paying attention. The sudden blooming of the pineapple sage in January was only sudden to me: if I had visited my garden regularly that winter, I would have seen the signs of a plant getting ready to flower. I would have known what was coming, would have eagerly awaited it, would have visited the garden with a sense of growing anticipation. When the pineapple sage bloomed, I

would have said, “Finally!” I would have rejoiced all the harder because I’d witnessed its slow, impossible growth telling me day after day that yes, this flower will bloom in the winter.

There’s a German Advent carol, one of my all-time favorites, called “Maria Walks Amid the Thorn.” In the carol, Mary wanders through a tangle of bare thorns that have not grown leaves in years, but she’s not alone. A little child nestles beneath her heart, slowly growing in her womb. As Mary and her child walk through the thicket, roses burst into bloom in their wake, a carmine constellation of life and color, scent and softness in the midst of dead and thorny wood.

Advent hope is like this: a force that resists the way things are by imagining what they might be. Advent hope doesn’t listen when it’s told that tender herbs don’t bloom in January or that the briar patch is as good as dead. Advent hope attends to the signs of God’s work unfolding everywhere, anywhere, even in the most unlikely of situations. Advent hope believes, as Mary did, that nothing is impossible with God.

Weekly prompt

What do you see blooming this week—a plant in an unexpected place, a friendship, a new project or hobby? Can you find hope for the future in its blossoming? How do you cultivate Christian hope when nothing seems to blossom?

Words of wisdom

“Maria walks amid the thorn,
Kyrie eleison,
Maria walks amid the thorn,
Which seven years no leaf has borne.
Jesus and Maria.”

Traditional carol, “Maria Walks Amid the Thorn”

“Let your hopes, not your hurts, shape your future.”

Robert H. Schuller

Prayer

God,
plant within me
a hope for impossible things.

But do not let me use it
to escape from my grief
or that of others.

And do not let me use it
to lull myself into passivity.

Instead, bring it to flower
when I am in the places
where it is most needed
and least likely.

Let the hope in impossible things
be a rose in the winter,
a hot spring in bitter cold,
the presence of Christ
growing within me.

Amen.

Daily scripture for the week of December 1

Monday, hope in the midst of trials: “Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer.” (Romans 12:12)

Tuesday, hope in the company of all the saints: “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.” (Ephesians 1:17-19)

Wednesday, hope in Christ’s faithfulness: “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.” (Hebrews 10:23)

Thursday, hope in the Lord: “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.” (Psalm 130:5)

Friday, hope in God’s second Advent: “...he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:4)

Saturday, the Spirit’s gift of hope: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

PEACE: WEEK OF DECEMBER 8

Sunday scripture: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth,

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Reflection: On peace

Emily Trubey-Weller

It is hard to think of something I long for more than peace.

Our world is in desperate need of peace. In just the past few years, we’ve seen the rug of economic stability pulled out from under many people by invasion and greed. We’ve seen homes in many places flattened by bombings and made unsafe by turmoil. We have seen tens of thousands of lives lost to retaliation and hate. We have seen war lead to mass famine and to millions becoming refugees. We are told not to look away, but I cannot always bear to watch, especially when it seems like there is so little I can do.

My city is in desperate need of peace, too. Hardly a week goes by without news of another young person lost to gun violence, often within blocks of my church. I’ve participated in prayer walks for elementary school kids lost to drive-by shootings and firearms accidents in their homes. I’ve counseled people who return to houses characterized by domestic violence. I’ve sat in school cafeterias and heard children speak with great longing about getting their own guns.

In much smaller ways, but no less real, my life is in desperate need of peace. I am a parent of three small children who are often just as loud and intense and needy as I always suspected my children

might be. My spouse and I both work full-time jobs and manage our own businesses on the side, so there's always something to interrupt a rare peaceful moment, not to mention the stress that often torpedoes restful time.

So I long for peace: peace in our world, peace in my town, peace in my home, peace in my heart. And as I long for peace, who does scripture introduce this week? John the Baptist. Smelly camel's hair and crunchy locusts. Wild shouting and railing at the powers that be. Chilly baptismal river dunks.

Does John the Baptist evoke a peaceful image for you? He certainly doesn't for me.

It may seem counterintuitive to approach this wild prophet on a week when we are considering peace. The work of a prophet seems to be inherently *not* peaceful. Prophets are called to the work of stirring things up and disrupting the status quo. Prophets' work involves tearing down, calling out, and upending the powers that be.

The words from the prophet Isaiah embedded in this week's passage from Luke about John describe the preparatory work John has been sent to do. It's no small task: straightening roads, filling valleys, and leveling mountains. It's a big job. Leveling mountains is work that requires either dynamite and serious construction equipment or millennia of erosion.

Even if it is not *peaceful*, a prophet's work prepares the way for peace. To create a truly peaceful home, city, or world demands incredible effort. It would certainly require tearing down many current systems, calling out corruption and greed, and upending much of the status quo. When we consider the hard work involved, preparing for peace is certainly prophetic work. It's the tough work for which a tough character like John is well suited. God works through prophets like John in scripture and throughout human history to prepare the way for Jesus and to make peace a possibility for all people.

I pray that God will use us for the hard work of peace, too.

Weekly prompt

Where do you long for peace to arrive? Think of some examples of contemporary prophets whose hard work brought about change that fostered peace. What do you admire about them? What is difficult to understand?

Words of wisdom

“Come now, O Prince of Peace,
make us one body.
Come, O Lord Jesus,
reconcile your people.”

Geonyong Lee, “Ososo ososo, pyonghwa eui imgum”

“...A negative peace... is the absence of tension... a positive peace... is the presence of justice.”
Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963

Prayer

God, give me room to lay this down:
I've longed for a peace built on platitudes.
I've cultivated silence because I needed the quiet.
I've looked with suspicion on those who speak out,
wondering whether they're just stirring the pot.

I've wanted peace that's tamed,
well-behaved, housebroken.

But you give me John the Baptist instead.

Okay, God.

Lead me down to the Jordan River.
Remind me that baptism is no spa bath.
Bring me up gasping from water
chilly and cold, shocking,
enervating.
Cause the prophet's words to reverberate in me,
shaking out the placations,
stirring up the desire for true peace.

There are hills to bring low in this world, God,
and there are valleys to lift up.
God, hand me my shovel.

Amen.

Daily scripture for the week of December 8

Monday, exiles return home in peace: “For they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies, but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne. For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.” (Baruch 5:6-7)

Tuesday, God’s law brings peace: “Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble.” (Psalm 119:165)

Wednesday, peacemakers: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

Thursday, peaceful hearts: “Do not be anxious 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.” (Philippians 4:6-7)

Friday, peace at Jesus’ birth: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’” (Luke 2:13-14)

Saturday, peace as Jesus departs: “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.” (John 14:27)

JOY: WEEK OF DECEMBER 15, 2024

Sunday scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the judgements against you;
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
“Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he 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.”
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.

Reflection: On joy

Victoria Larson

I'm working on a doctoral degree in theology, the latest turn in my vocational path toward teaching at a seminary or divinity school. It's a five-year program, and as I'm writing this, I have just finished the second (and last) year of coursework.

I almost missed the milestone. The end of April was a fog of frantically-written final papers, urgent grading for one class, rushing deadlines for a separate writing project, and preparing for a retreat I was leading the weekend after the semester ended. The end of coursework blurred into the rush of oncoming projects, and I barely clocked it when I turned in my last paper for my last class for my last degree.

But on the evening of that day, a sweet friend turned up at my front door holding a bottle of champagne and a bouquet of flowers. "Congratulations," they told me. "You did a big thing!"

I stopped. *Oh*, I thought. *Oh wow, I did!*

My graduation date seems impossibly far off in the future, especially given all the work that still lies ahead of me. But it's breaking into my present in the form of milestones, like finishing coursework. My friend's invitation to joy broke me free of the ever-pressing cycle of deadlines for a moment, reminding me that the work itself is not the point, and grounding me again in the bigger picture of God's call.

That's the power of Advent joy: to capture a vision of the future and bring it into the present. The prophets do it over and over again—notice Zephaniah's words this Sunday! Even though the liberation, the homecoming, the redemption, and the salvation the prophets describe lie in the future, they invite their communities to experience joy *now*. The future is so certain, the prophets seem to say, that we might as well get this party started.

Anticipatory joy can be a form of resistance and an agent of transformation. Think of Fannie Lou Hamer, a civil rights activist. In June of 1963, while returning from a voting education workshop, she was arrested alongside several other activists for sitting in the white section of the Greyhound bus. The police officers in Winona, Mississippi beat her severely and shunted her back in a cell with Euvester Simpson, a fellow activist. After her pain subsided somewhat, Hamer began quietly singing songs of freedom. Simpson learned that "Walk With Me, Lord" was one of Fannie Lou Hamer's favorites, but from that night on, it sounded different when she sang it. "I realized it was no longer a dirge-like song that was pleading and begging Jesus to walk with her," said Simpson. "It had changed to an invitation for Him to come and join her on this journey and be her friend as she traveled through this life speaking her truth, demanding freedom, justice, and respect for all people

because we are all God’s children.” Hamer’s fierce and urgent joy anticipated a better future, and that vision gave her the strength to sing songs of freedom from a jail cell.¹

Joy can be wielded irresponsibly, too. Kate Bowler, author of *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved*, captures how joy can rub shoulders with denial and victim-blaming as she writes about her diagnosis with stage IV cancer and subsequent treatment: “The hardest lessons come from the solutions people, who are already a little disappointed that I am not saving myself. There is always a nutritional supplement, Bible verse or mental process I have not adequately tried. ‘Keep smiling! Your attitude determines your destiny!’ said a stranger named Jane in an email, having heard my news somewhere, and I was immediately worn out by the tyranny of prescriptive joy.”²

Sometimes the absence of joy is just as important to acknowledge as its presence. The joy that belongs to Advent does both: by naming a future that is desperately hoped for but not yet present, it calls us to honest grief in the present and fierce jubilation as we mark the milestones on the way to God’s new creation.

Weekly prompt

When has the knowledge of a promising future brought you joy in the present? Have you ever felt someone wield joy irresponsibly when you were in pain? How does the experience of joy prepare you to recognize Jesus’ presence?

Words of wisdom

“I cannot dance, O Lord, unless Thou lead me. If Thou wilt that I leap joyfully then must Thou Thyself first dance and sing! Then will I leap for love... There will I remain and circle evermore.”
Mechtild of Magdeburg

“Woke up this morning
with my mind stayed on freedom:
Hallelu, hallelu, hallelujah!”
African American spiritual³

¹ Euvester Simpson, "Reflections on Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer," Fannie Lou Hamer's America, accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.fanniLouhamersamerica.com/fannie-lou-hamer-resource-center/personal-testimonies>

² Kate Bowler, "What to Say When You Meet the Angel of Death at a Party," *The New York Times*, January 26th, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/opinion/sunday/cancer-what-to-say.html> Accessed June 15, 2024.

³ Hear Fannie Lou Hamer sing it here: <https://youtu.be/tnfcofde5vw?si=MpYcXIDqQLDWvWkH> Accessed June 15, 2024.

Prayer

God, if prescriptive joy has a season,
I think December is it.
Christmas is rushing closer,
and the parties,
the decorations,
the songs on the radio,
the softly twinkling lights in the early darkness,
they all call and beckon: be joyful!

Sometimes I'm ready to step into the cozy glow of it all.
Other times it is too dim a delight to meet
the deep longing I feel
on these cold, clear nights,
where crystalline stars
sing eternity.

God, untangle joy from this holiday cheer.
Give me a vision of the future you hold,
where the hungry are fed,
and the exiles come home,
and enemies are reconciled,
and the earth is healed,
and the sick are made whole,
and there is no more war,
and you are here
to wipe every tear from our eyes.

Amen.

Daily scripture for the week of December 15

Monday, joy in the Lord: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” (Philippians 4:4)

Tuesday, joy in one another: “Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead, I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.” (2 John 1:12)

Wednesday, God’s joy: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:7)

Thursday, joy in God’s nearness: “Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.” (Isaiah 12:6)

Friday, joy in Jesus’ promises: “So you have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” (John 16:22)

Saturday, joy restored: “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Psalm 30:5b)

LOVE: WEEK OF DECEMBER 22, 2024

Sunday scripture: Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name;
indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Reflection: On love

Emily Trubey-Weller

Love is ridiculously big, too large a thing to sum up with one scripture passage, one devotional reflection, or one definition. We use the word *love* to describe a feeling, but the feeling is applied in infinite ways: how we feel about a child or a parent, a spouse or a pet, a favorite food or a moving piece of music, a film or a friend. Love is much more than a feeling, though; it requires something of us, a pure and all-encompassing devotion if it's true. Love is all the actions that accompany the feeling. In fact, each theme we've explored this Advent season might rightly be understood as different dimensions of love when put to work.

In this week's reading, the Magnificat bursts forth from Mary in an act of love. It is pure praise, gratitude, and devotion for all that God has done for her and her people throughout human history. Mary knows the stories of her faith, passed down to her through many generations. Because she knows them so well, she can read all the actions of God as love: mercy and liberation, feeding and nurturing, lifting up and humbling. For Mary, they echo with love, love, love. God has accomplished

all this and more out of great love for humanity at large and for Mary specifically. It is a love that is both broad and deep. It is love that acts. It is certainly all-encompassing.

Mary seeks to return love for love, and at the angel's announcement, she declares, "Here am I!" (Luke 1:38) She is the servant of God, and therefore, the servant of Love. She will carry, birth, feed, comfort, and nurture the child who is love incarnate.

That is the wildest bit of all: God's immense love, which we can't fully describe, understand, or even imagine the boundaries and contours of, is summarized in one little package: a baby. Love incarnate is unfathomable, but it can be held in our arms. Love can be nursed and comforted, kissed and changed, bathed and swaddled.

What a preposterous and beautiful gift. The entirety of divine love, held in our arms. And we are now so very close!

As Christmas draws near, pay attention to the places where love is incarnate now. We know that once Jesus entered the world, he never left us. He is present not only in the Holy Child, but in every child. He is with us in the least and lowly, like his mother Mary. He is with all people who are in need. Though we wait for him still, he is with us even now. Tend to those places where love resides, today and in the Christmas days to come, and you will tend to Jesus.

Weekly prompt

Where have you encountered love embodied in another person? As love inspired Mary's song, what music, art, or poetry does this experience bring to mind for you? Create something or reflect on someone else's creation.

Words of wisdom

"Love is born! Come share in the wonder.
Love is God now asleep in the hay.
See the glow in the eyes of His mother.
What is the name her heart is saying?
Love! Love! Love is the name she whispers.
Love! Love! Jesus, Immanuel."

Ken Bible, "Love Has Come!"

"Because of his boundless love, Jesus became what we are that he might make us to be what he is."
Irenaeus

Prayer

God of love,
let my soul magnify you.

Transform each moment of this day
into a reminder of your mercies.

Silence the tyrants
in my mind and in the world:
voices of shame and fear,
forces of violence and abuse.

I want to hear your voice.
I want to speak with your love.

You have filled up those who are hungry
for bread and for justice.
Fill them again.

You have remembered the forgotten.
Remember them again.

You have remembered your promises
to come among us and love us up close.
Arrive again.

God of love,
let my soul magnify you.

Amen.

Scripture for the week of December 22

Monday, God is love: “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 abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.” 1 John 4:7-12

Tuesday, Love is here: “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.” Luke 2:7

CHRISTMAS: DECEMBER 24 AND 25, 2024

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7

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.
You have multiplied exultation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Great will be his authority,
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 onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Reflection: On Jesus' advent

Victoria Larson

It is here at last: the Christmas season is upon us. This is the time toward which Advent has been leading us all along!

Throughout this Advent season, we have been opening the gifts God has given us: care, faith, justice, hope, peace, joy, and love. Each one is beautiful. Each one is indeed a gift. But there's a risk, especially in our can-do culture, to receive each gift as an obligation. *I must get these right, or else God will be disappointed, or Christ will judge me, or the Holy Spirit will give me up as a lost cause*, whisper our inner editors, who really love to get things right but very seldom get satisfaction.

But in this season, scripture reminds us that it is not what we do that matters in the end. It is what God has done for us.

Attend to the familiar words from Isaiah 9. The people to whom Isaiah originally addressed these words were exiles, people from Jerusalem whose city had been razed. Their conquerors sent them away to Babylon and made them settle there. For more than a generation—for seventy years—these people lived as strangers in a strange land, longing to go home, never knowing if it would be possible. The gifts we have explored this season, especially justice, peace, and hope, must have seemed very far off or only accessible in small ways.

While most of our lives differ considerably from those of Isaiah's original audience, perhaps we can still resonate with the feeling of exile. Perhaps you know the experience of losing the life you were living—to a diagnosis, to the death of a loved one, to a disappointment, to a desertion. Perhaps you are acquainted with the exiles' sense that normalcy has been taken away, maybe forever. Perhaps you are familiar with the feeling that the gifts of Advent are out of your grasp.

To all such people, Isaiah brings a prophecy. He describes the end of a war, a day when the rod of the oppressor will be broken, when the soldiers' worn-out boots and bloody uniforms will be burned, because from that day, they're useful only as fuel for the fire. Isaiah's prophecy is one wherein the gifts of Advent come unbidden: peace, joy, and justice emerge as the only possible reaction to what this day would bring.

And how would the day arrive? Would it come through a surge in military strength? Through a decisive political victory, rooted in a grassroots campaign? Would it be an act of God, even, maybe a disaster that hit the powerful but spared the exiles? Would it be through our inner editors' ultimate triumph, an internal striving that finally, *finally* gets it right?

Isaiah tells the people that the day of peace will arrive as... wait for it... a baby.

(Those of you who are wondering how you will succeed in getting all your young children to wear pants on Christmas morning may understand the ridiculousness of this prophecy.)

According to the song of Isaiah, victory doesn't come through military might or political strategy. The darkness is broken by the creation of life, not its destruction. It is defeated through the birth of a child, one who can't even hold up his own head, who can do nothing for himself and yet does everything for us.

This is the ultimate gift, the gift of Christmas: Jesus has come. God is among us, Emmanuel. You do not need to be perfect to deserve this or to make it happen. It has happened already. It is for you. This priceless, selfless love of God is already yours.

A blessed Christmas to you.

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