



INTRODUCTION

The word “Advent” means “coming.”

In Advent, we hold space for the ache of longing for all that is yet to come, but we do it in a very particular way, looking back to remember that because Immanuel came, all our waiting now is different than it might be otherwise. We wait still, sometimes with wailing, but we wait as those to whom God Himself has already come.

These weeks encapsulate the essence of this epic story that is miraculously, undeservedly ours.

Into our despair: hope.

Into our cacophony of chaos: peace.

Into our grief: joy.

Into our loneliness and fear: love.

Into our darkness: light.

Into our emptiness, into the ache of our longing: God who comes as a child, to be with us, to fill our gaping voids with His presence, to redeem what has been marred, to bind up our wounds through His own willingness to be wounded.

And what could be more wonderful, more sacred, more miraculous, than this?

Our prayer is that as we journey together through this season, we would encounter Immanuel anew.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3

Begin by dimming the lights if possible. Note the meaning of the Advent wreath tradition. Evergreens remind us of everlasting life even in the midst of winter. The circular shape of the wreath reminds us of God's never-ending love and His provision of eternal life. Red holly berries remind us of Jesus's blood that was shed for us.

Light the first purple candle.

Say:

"In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind. And the light shines on in the darkness, but the darkness has not mastered it" (John 1:4-5, NET).

Read:

The first candle symbolizes HOPE. It is also referred to as the Prophet's Candle. It reminds us of how the Old Testament prophets awaited the Messiah's arrival and spoke God's messages to the people about Him. The candle is purple to represent royalty, fasting, and repentance.

Read Scripture:

"The people walking in darkness see a bright light; light shines on those who live in a land of deep darkness.

You have enlarged the nation; you give them great joy. They rejoice in your presence as harvesters rejoice; as warriors celebrate when they divide up the plunder.

For their oppressive yoke and the club that strikes their shoulders, the cudgel the oppressor uses on them, you have shattered, as in the day of Midian's defeat. Indeed every boot that marches and shakes the earth and every garment dragged through blood is used as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us"
(Isaiah 9:2-6, NET).

Reflect:

What would it have been like to wait for the Messiah for hundreds of years and many generations? One definition of hope is “to expect with confidence.” We live after the fulfillment of the Messiah’s coming, but what is something we still hope for today? How can our hope in the fulfillment of God’s promises help us endure today’s challenges?

Prepare:

The theme of our readings this week is that in our longing, as we sit in sin and darkness, our hope is in Immanuel alone, and we look toward Him with expectation.

Pray:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, today we remember the hope You gave the world when You promised to send a Messiah so long ago. Thank You that we have seen the fulfillment of Your promises through the Light that came into our world when Jesus was born. May we remember what a privilege it is to know You. Even as we experience darkness, help us to look to and hope in You alone. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4

Isaiah 64:1-4 (ESV)

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.”

“That you would rend the heavens and come down”—that’s what we all want, what it has always been about. We want God to show up for us. We are desperately longing for Him. We long for His presence, not only because we need Him and we need His help in our daily lives, but because we love Him. We long for Him as we might long to see a dear friend or spouse.

“The mountains quake”—our God is mighty. He is the source of life. We can often get stuck using the same words repeatedly to describe God, so that our words become familiar and we are blind to their impact. Saying something is “miraculous” may seem at times rote. What word do you use when the moment you’ve been longingly awaiting has finally arrived and it turns out to be even better than you dreamed? Awesome? Magical? Breathtaking? Unprecedented?

“No eye has seen a God besides You”—our God is truly unique, and there are no others like Him. He is without equal, and unrivaled in His might, His spark, His action. We have a God who is not a far-off fantasy. He acts!

For these reasons and many more, we can hope in our Lord as we recall the incredible story which actually rent the heavens and upon which we take intentional time to reflect during this season.

Application:

Where do you really need God to show up in your life right now? What situation, relationship, or environment sorely longs for His presence? What barriers do you long for God to break through? What have you painfully lamented while awaiting His action? If our Lord truly is a God of action, how has He already been doing things we have not seen? As a God who “acts for those who wait,” what might He do next?

Prayer:

Lord, we long for You to show up. We long for Your presence and for the spark of Your life. We long for the action that You take. We ask You to give us eyes to see what You are already doing and to see what we have not dreamed. There is no one like You. Holy is Your name. We wait on You. Amen.

Author:

Adam Rapp has served as an elder since 2019.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5

Isaiah 40:1-5 (ESV)

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”

The physical imagery of this passage is remarkable. Long before Handel's Messiah (definitely worth a listen!), these words brought tremendous encouragement to God's people, producing hope and the anticipation of the Lord's redemption despite their sin. Israel's Messiah was long-awaited, and Isaiah envisions the grand preparations for His arrival, a welcome equal in magnitude for the occasion. But God's kingdom would come unexpectedly. When the Messiah did arrive, John the Baptist was not the wilderness voice they expected, but Jesus perfectly matched Isaiah's description of the suffering servant in chapter 53. Although Israel did experience temporary restoration following their exile and captivity, this prophecy speaks of a future time when God's Messiah will restore all things, including salvation for all nations.

We trust in Jesus as the Messiah who not only suffered and completed the work of redemption for us, but also as the King who will arrive in glory. As His kingdom expands, we wait in hopeful anticipation of His return. The imagery is also for us, and though living by faith involves seasons of wandering in the wilderness and spiritual dryness in the desert, we continue to trust His promise. I love that God's Word tells us to prepare during these circumstances and describes the Lord emerging from these barren places. There is comfort in knowing that Jesus spent much time in the wilderness too. We long for the rough places to be smooth and the uneven ground to become level, for a world that is just and free from suffering. But even in our longing, something is different; we have been reborn, and through our union with Christ we experience comfort knowing that He is making us like Himself, allowing us to join His story of transformation throughout the world. He will fulfill His promise. We will see His glory and be with Him forever.

Application:

What gives you comfort during the challenging seasons when it seems the Lord is distant? In what ways are you preparing the highway of your heart and seeking God's presence daily?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for keeping Your promise to remove sin and provide salvation for Your people. Fill us with gratitude for Your mercy and grace and keep us walking in Your truth by the power of Your Spirit, that we may see Your glory. Amen.

Author:

Stephen Poteet has served as a City Group leader and in Scarlet City Kids.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6

Joel 2:12-13 (NET)

“‘Yet even now,’ the Lord says, ‘return to me with all your heart—with fasting, weeping, and mourning.

Tear your hearts, not just your garments.’

Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and boundless in loyal love—often relenting from calamitous punishment.”

As we enter this Advent season, I can almost hear the urgency in the words of the prophet Joel: Hear this! Listen to me! Wake up! Feel something. The day of the Lord is near.

This past year, for the first time in my walk with Christ, I felt that I had stopped hearing God's invitation to come to Him. I panicked as I tried old ways of "tearing my garments" to feel something during my time with God—Scripture reading, Bible studies, serving, even prayer. Every well of spiritual comfort was dry. Why had He hidden Himself from me? Would this obscure darkness last forever? It was as described in Joel 1:12: "all the fruit trees have dried up, and the people's joy has dried up with them."

During that time, there were few things that could stir my heart for my First Love. This quote from St. John of the Cross was one of the few. It was the dawning of a new way forward. "Persons who refuse to go out at night in search for the Beloved and to divest and mortify their will, but rather seek the Beloved in their own bed and comfort, as did the bride (Song of Solomon 3:1), will not succeed in finding him. As this soul declares, she found him when she departed in darkness and with longings of love."

This Advent season, what if God has a new invitation for you? To return, as you are. To return, without presenting all of the ways you are or are not measuring up. Rather, letting the weight of expectations fall off. To simply depart for Him in darkness, driven by the hopeful anticipation He has come, running to Him with longings of love.

After all, it is His covenant-keeping character that will meet us where we find Him.

Application:

What emotions does the word “return” elicit in your heart? What invitation do you sense from God during this Advent season?

Prayer:

Lord, I seek You like the bride departing in darkness. Again, You ask for my whole heart, so I answer by running to You with longing and with joy. I know I will find You as You've always been: merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and boundless in loyal love. Amen.

Author:

Anna Roth leads the Hospitality Ministry and serves as a City Group leader with her husband, Blake.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7

Psalm 130 (NIV)

“Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you. I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.”

The psalmist is crying “out of the depths,” from a place of guilt, expressing feelings of shame, and acknowledging his sin before a Holy God. Instead of turning to self, the psalmist boldly turns to God, confident of His forgiveness. When we know and admit our need for forgiveness, we can have this same assurance in our turning to God.

This psalm helps correct any misconception of a God who sits, waiting to come down on us, harshly pointing a finger—in fact, it’s quite the opposite! When we look closely at the Hebrew translation in verse 3, the literal meaning is that God does not keep His eye on our sin. Yes, the sin is there, but God does not watch that record of our sins. Then in verse 6, the word for “watchmen” uses the same root word used in verse 3. When we watch for God in the same way the watchmen expectantly wait to see the first sign of the sunrise, what we will find is a merciful God. Do you see the connection? Verse 3 reminds us that God does not fix His eye on our sins, but that when we fix our eyes on God (verse 6) we will see forgiveness. We will find God eager to forgive, ready to flood us with His grace and redeem us from the pit.

Application:

Knowing that God is not fixing His eyes on the record of your sins, what kind of freedom does that give you in approaching Him? Are there areas where you are in doubt of God's willingness or eagerness to give you His mercy?

Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank You that when we are feeling the weight of our brokenness, we can always turn to You, we can share all our feelings with You, and You always hear us. Thank You that You are always ready and waiting to give us forgiveness when we need it. Help us to fix our eyes on You, our one true hope. Amen.

Author:

Jamie Rapp and her family have been members at Scarlet City Church for 10 years.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8

2 Chronicles 20:5-12 (MSG)

“Then Jehoshaphat took a position before the assembled people of Judah and Jerusalem at The Temple of God in front of the new courtyard and said, ‘O God, God of our ancestors, are you not God in heaven above and ruler of all kingdoms below? You hold all power and might in your fist—no one stands a chance against you! And didn’t you make the natives of this land leave as you brought your people Israel in, turning it over permanently to your people Israel, the descendants of Abraham your friend? They have lived here and built a holy house of worship to honor you, saying, ‘When the worst happens—whether war or flood or disease or famine—and we take our place before this Temple (we know you are personally present in this place!) and pray out our pain and trouble, we know that you will listen and give victory.’ And now it’s happened: men from Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir have shown up. You didn’t let Israel touch them when we got here at first—we detoured around them and didn’t lay a hand on them. And now they’ve come to kick us out of the country you gave us. O dear God, won’t you take care of them? We’re helpless before this vandal horde ready to attack us. We don’t know what to do; we’re looking to you.”

A parent holds a child whose body has been attacked by disease that doctors cannot identify. A betrayed spouse tries to find a way forward when everything has changed. A community lingers in confusion and anger after yet another unprovoked, violent attack. Finding answers or justice feels like trying to boil the ocean. Maybe nothing can be done.

It's easy to read the scripture passage and feel emotionally removed from the ancient reality of what drove Jehosaphat and God's people to seek Him with focused intensity. But in some of the more personal circumstances described in the paragraph just above, we begin to feel the kind of visceral, life-or-death desperation that may have gripped them. Jehosaphat had returned to honoring God. This was the promised land he and God's people were inhabiting. The present aggressors had been spared, and not by accident but by God's instructions. Did none of that matter? How could the Israelites now apparently be left to fend for themselves?

There is no clever way to avoid trouble in this life. At some point, darkness falls on our world like a shade being drawn, no matter who we are. Everything in us cries out for help. We seek some kind of lever to move heaven and earth. Hope seems elusive.

But, what if a new star suddenly appeared in the dark sky of our desperation?

Application:

How has desperation been used in your life? Is it a foe or an unexpected friend?

Prayer:

God, You are both Sovereign and Shepherd, and You are wild. Help me to seek You and experience true hope this Advent season. Amen.

Author:

Justin Arnot is a part of the Roth City Group.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

Prayer of Examen

An “examen” prayer is simply a prayer in which we play back our day or week with God, inviting the light of the Holy Spirit to illuminate what’s good and true, so that we might see a little bit more like God sees our lives. You might even allow the Advent candle to remind you of this; we tend to see our days under the shadow of our own perceptions about ourselves and God and others. But when we invite God, God casts the light of hope, peace, joy and love for us to see more truly.

This week, we’re doing this particularly through the lens of hope. First, allow yourself to be drawn into God’s loving and attentive presence, without any hurry to “begin.” This is where we begin. Then, simply invite God to take you back through your week, and notice:

Where did you notice any hope in your week? What gave you hope or stirred some hope in you—whether that was Scripture or a conversation with a friend or a passing thought that you had? What was that hope?

What was it like for you to think about and reflect on hope this week? Where did you find it difficult or heavy, or perhaps, comforting and encouraging? What does hope feel like for you?

What is it like for you to talk with God about your hopes? How does God respond to them and the way you experience the invitation to hope?

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10

Light the first two purple candles.

Say:

“In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind. And the light shines on in the darkness, but the darkness has not mastered it”
(John 1:4-5, NET).

Read:

The second candle symbolizes PEACE. Scripture is clear in the prophecies about Jesus’ coming as Immanuel, “God with Us,” that His coming ushers in new and desperately-needed peace.

Read Scripture:

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means “God with us”)
(Matthew 1:23, NET).

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this”
(Isaiah 9:6-7, NET).

Reflect:

What might God's people have envisioned when they pictured a "Prince of Peace" in their time? What might we picture now? Where do you feel a need for peace in your life?

Prepare:

The theme of our readings this week is that the very presence of Immanuel brings peace, even in tremendous chaos.

Pray:

Prince of Peace, we need You. So much of our lives feels chaotic and out of control, and we want to understand what it means for You to bring peace into every space where You are present. Please deepen our awareness of Your presence with us, and allow us to experience peace because You are with us, whether You calm the storm or allow it to continue raging. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11

Micah 5:2-5 (ESV)

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace.”

The Christmas season is often a time of chaos, both good and bad. Some instances might be trivial, others might be quite damaging, but all of it is draining. It taps our resources physically, financially, emotionally, and spiritually. The only way we can survive in the rushing river of chaos, let alone thrive, is by finding islands of peace and allowing that peace to fill us back up again before we take our next bite of fruitcake.

Micah 5 gives us three peaceful islands that we can cling to when we find ourselves drained:

Peace in my smallness

Peace in His strength

Peace in His coming

We get to rest in our smallness. As Bethlehem, we are too little to be among the clans (verse 2). Through our smallness, we see His strength. “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Corinthians 12:9). We can find peace in His strength and how much stronger it is than ours. We don’t need to have everything figured out because He has this. There is rest and peace in being children who allow the Father to fold His strong arms around us. “Under His wings, [I] will find refuge” (Psalm 91:4). We also can rest in the peace of His coming. I get to be numbered as one of His flock and get to see the Shepherd standing in the strength of the Lord (verse 4a). I am safe because of His presence. I shall dwell secure, for now He shall be great, to the ends of the earth (verse 4b).

Application:

How might you be present to God's peace even in your Christmas chaos?

Prayer:

Lord God, You are strong and I am small. You are the Shepherd and I am the sheep. Thank You for the joyful chaos of Christmas, but please give me peace within that chaos. Thank You that I know I can dwell secure in Your peace. I pray that this peace washes over me and provides me with the energy to face all of the layers of chaos. Grant peace in my life and a calm within my spirit. Help me rest in the peace of Your presence. May Your will be my will. I love You. Amen.

Author:

Greg Lawrence has been a part of Scarlet City Church for over a year.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12

Haggai 2:4-9 (NIV)

“But now be strong, Zerubbabel,” declares the Lord.

“Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest.

Be strong, all you people of the land,” declares the Lord, “and work. For I am with you,” declares the Lord

Almighty. “This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.” This is what the Lord Almighty says:

“In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come,

and I will fill this house with glory,” says the Lord

Almighty. “The silver is mine and the gold is mine,” declares the Lord Almighty. “The glory of this present

house will be greater than the glory of the former house,” says the Lord Almighty. “And in this place I will

grant peace,” declares the Lord Almighty.”

December brings so much beauty, joy, generosity, and meaning, but it also brings feelings of overwhelm and busyness. Three of my favorite people have birthdays in the weeks leading up to Christmas, so I'm always scrambling to make their days special in the midst of the bustle. One year, my daughter's birthday came when the rest of the family was sick and she was busy with theater and midterms. I did whatever possible to help her feel special even with so many limitations. I let go of a lot of traditions and desires. There was some peace in letting go and in her understanding attitude, but I knew more peace would come when we were all healthy again and I tackled my to-do list. Peace wouldn't come all at once; it would unfold gradually.

In Haggai, God spoke to His people about rebuilding the temple after they had stopped due to opposition. He reminded them He would be with them and had made a covenant with them, and He encouraged them to be strong. He told them the new temple would be even more glorious than the old one, and in it He would bring peace. Often, prophecy has layers of meaning. God was likely referring to the temple they were rebuilding, but He also could have been alluding to Jesus (because He described Himself as the temple). Beyond that, God could have been referring to future believers who would make up His global Church, or even ultimate, eternal peace. Romans 5:1 says that "...since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is a complete, final sort of peace that we no longer have to wait for. In John 16:33, Jesus reminded His followers that although there is trouble in this world, they have peace in Him because He has overcome the world. In Christ, we have peace that cannot be taken away, but because we are living in a broken world, we await the fullness of peace that will come when all is made right.

Application:

How could you allow yourself to become more welcoming of partial peace rather than waiting for complete peace that we may not experience until He comes again?

You are a temple of the Holy Spirit. How could you join with the Spirit to nurture peace within yourself and in the Body of Christ?

Prayer:

Lord, You always keep Your promises. Strengthen our faith, our hope, our confidence and our awareness of the peace You provide and will provide. Help us cling to what Jesus's life, death and resurrection accomplished and to experience Your peace even when life feels chaotic and uncertain at times. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Author:

Elise Walter serves in Scarlet City Kids.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13

Psalm 46 (NIV)

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come and see what the Lord has done, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.’ The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

“O let me ne'er forget: that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet” (“This is My Father’s World”).

This psalm (and this old hymn) acknowledge the very real devastation and mess that we encounter in this world. Psalm 46 meets us at the “cliff edge of doom” (MSG), where life seems to be falling apart. But it doesn’t leave us there; it lifts our eyes to understand the foundational reality of our situation: God reigns.

He is the God of Heaven’s armies, the God of Jacob, the God who has been faithful throughout history and has a track record of victory, the One who spoke the universe into existence and can dissolve the Earth with a word. And this all-powerful God is not distant; we can take refuge in Him, and His help is always available to us.

I always feel called out by this passage. How does the writer know that I’m over here running around, mind racing, trying to catch the falling mountains and fix it all on my own? “Be still” (NIV), it reminds me. “Stop your striving” (NET). “Step out of the traffic” (MSG).

God is God, I am not. He is not shaken. He is a safe place to hide. “Take a long, loving look at me, your high God” (MSG). This ability to see God for who He is doesn’t happen without first being still. There is a bigger God and a bigger story unfolding than I can see when my eyes are on the earthquake. Real peace, right in the midst of disaster, is only possible when we stop and see God for who He truly is, reigning over all the impossible situations in our lives.

Application:

What are the earthquakes and crumbling mountains in your own life, and what is your tendency when life threatens to fall apart around you? Take a moment and be still. Sit in the truths about God in this passage; which is most meaningful to you?

Prayer:

Lord, would You help me still my mind and my body and know that You are God? Would You give me peace as I take refuge in You? Amen.

Author:

Melissa Reinhard leads a City Group with her husband Brad and the Nyes, and she serves on the Hospitality Team.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14

Exodus 33:14-17 (NIV)

“The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ Then Moses said to him, ‘If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?’ And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.’”

Several years ago I was working as a social worker in a neighborhood experiencing extreme poverty, chaos, and suffering. I felt annoyed at the very idea that Christmas could be a time of “peace.” My experience in the world—and the experience of those around me—felt anything but peaceful. My frustration eventually spurred me to turn toward Scripture to reconsider what peace actually means. Verse 14 in Exodus 33 speaks directly to the truth of what I learned: peace is not primarily a feeling of calm. Rather, peace is the very state of being in which we reside as Christians, because peace is what we have when God is present to us. As Christians gifted with the Holy Spirit, we have God himself dwelling within us, which means that He is always present, always with us, always near—no matter what worldly circumstances may be.

In this passage, Moses expresses concern over the mission before him. He does not want to enter the Promised Land if God is not going with them. He’s worried about what others will think, and he’s probably concerned about their ability to secure the land. God assures him that He will be going with them, and that His very presence puts a stop to the worrying, stressing, and striving inherent to the task before them. They still must go on the journey, and Moses’ mission remains, but they can now have peace, as there is nothing for Moses to prove. God Himself is present, so Moses’ and the Israelites’ circumstances do not negate the reality of God’s peace.

Application:

In what ways are you trying to prove yourself to others as you go about your “mission”? What would it look like for you to live with an awareness of the peace and presence of God?

Prayer:

God, thank You for choosing to dwell within us, and grant us Your constant presence, that we may live in a state of continual peace. Give us an increased awareness of Your presence and peace as we live out the good works You have called us to do, even as we witness chaos or endure hardship. Keep us from foolish striving and pride, and allow us instead to rest knowing You are near, You love us, and You know our names. Amen.

Author:

Tricia Koenig is part of the Jackson City Group and serves in Scarlet City Kids.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15

Numbers 6:24-26 (NET)

“The LORD bless you and protect you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”

This passage is one of the most frequent benedictions I heard from the pulpit in my church growing up. While I may not have dwelled on the specific descriptions provided in the passage, and probably never connected it to an Advent reflection, the words hold a sentimental feeling for me. Writing this devotion gives me—and hopefully you as well—the opportunity to reflect more deeply.

This passage gives such a rich description of the Lord, because it is filled with various portrayals of His interactions with His people. The words “bless” and “protect” bring me back to imagery from Psalm 23 of a sheep being protected by its shepherd. We are reminded that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who comes to bring peace to the world. This is what we celebrate during Advent. When I think about being “shined upon,” I think of illumination—a fireplace, a candle, twinkling lights—something that provides beautiful radiance in the presence of darkness. Jesus is the Light of the World and provides guidance to us in the midst of confusion, uncertainty and chaos.

Peace is sometimes hard to appreciate unless you remember times of unrest and strife. Peace does not mean the absence of hardship. Conversely, peace involves the defeat of its opposite: injustice, suffering and turmoil. Jesus ultimately defeated these through His birth, life, death and resurrection. The road was not easy or without hardship, but we can take delight in His desire to provide ultimate love, joy and peace to us.

Application:

What comes to mind when you hear the words “peacekeeper” and “peacemaker”? Do they usually seem synonymous, or do they hold different meanings in various contexts?

What are some places in your life that feel dark this season? What might Jesus want to show you or remind you of? What do you want Him to illuminate for you?

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, thank You for being our Good Shepherd and for bringing peace in the cold, bleak darkness that we sometimes face. Thank You for providing light by illuminating the path to comfort and rest in You. Let us be reminded of who You are and of Your kindness to us. Let us remember that You are the source of true peace. Amen.

Author:

Karlie Miller and her husband Spenser are part of the O'Brien/Hohmeier City Group. She serves on the Music Team.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16

Prayer of Examen

Throughout the season of Advent, we're made especially aware of the tension between the "now" and the "not yet." God offers us peace today, and yet there is also peace we still long for. We can have peace and yet still be waiting for that peace to come into particular (maybe many) places in our lives, in our world and in ourselves.

As you allow yourself to be drawn into the presence of the God who loves you, who sees where you need peace and who offers you peace, invite the Holy Spirit to walk you back through the week with you as you reflect:

What stood out to you from your devotional readings about peace this week, whether because it resonated or produced friction for you? What was it about that passage, image or language? What do you notice about how it sits with you? Where did you need peace this week? Maybe in a relationship, in your environment, or within your own self, your heart and your thoughts. What is it like for you to invite Jesus to bring His peace into these places where you need it? How does Jesus respond?

As you look ahead, what is the peace you desire? How does Jesus respond to your desire for peace?

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17

Light the first two purple candles and the pink candle.

Say:

“In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind. And the light shines on in the darkness, but the darkness has not mastered it”
(John 1:4-5, NET).

Read:

The third candle symbolizes JOY. It is also referred to as the Shepherds' Candle. The color pink signifies rejoicing.

Read Scripture:

“Now there were shepherds nearby living out in the field, keeping guard over their flock at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were absolutely terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Listen carefully, for I proclaim to you good news that brings great joy to all the people: Today your Savior is born in the city of David. He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a vast, heavenly army appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom he is pleased!’ When the angels left them and went back to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, that the Lord has made known to us.’ So they hurried off and located Mary and Joseph, and found the baby lying in a manger. When they saw him, they related what they had been told about this child, and all who heard it were astonished at what the shepherds said.... So the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; everything was just as they had been told”
(Luke 2:8-20, NET).

Reflect:

The angel tells the shepherds not to be afraid because this good news “brings great joy to all the people.” How might joy be the opposite of fear? What part(s) of the shepherds’ experience seems the most joyful to you?

Prepare:

The theme of our readings this week is that in the broken spaces of our lives, Immanuel brings joy, both in the messy middle where we have yet to see redemption and in the certainty of future restoration.

Pray:

Almighty God, thank You for revealing Yourself to us by sending Jesus. We confess that at times the hard circumstances of our lives prevent us from experiencing joy. But we know that because of Immanuel, we have reason to rejoice. Bring joy to our broken places this Advent season as we trust in Your redeeming work even if we cannot yet see it. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-10 (NIV)

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations....

‘For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed.’

I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”

When the author talks about joy, he speaks of joy being anointed on the people around him. To anoint something is more than just placing the item in front of a person. On the contrary, it's the act of bestowing a title or gift.

The power that this joy brings is the power of healing and restoration.

The poor, the blind, and the prisoners will go on to be "oaks of righteousness" who restore the communities and souls around them.

Application:

How are you anointing those around you with joy? How does your own joy in Christ empower you to help the community around you?

Prayer:

Lord, allow us to feel Your Spirit. Use us to bring joyous power to those around us. We pray that we may be able to raise up our communities with the joy that we have in You. Amen.

Author:

Cassandra Showalter is a part of the Nye/Reinhard City Group.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19

Psalm 16 (ESV)

“Preserve 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 saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight. The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips. The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

It's mid-December; Christmas is fast approaching, but there is probably much on your mind to be accomplished. For many, this may be the last full work week of the year. There are last gifts to be purchased, final school events to attend, and celebrations to come. There is time with family, friends, and co-workers, but we are also thinking about those we miss. There are moments of never-ending go-go-go, but also unexpected moments of silence and reflection. Emotions are palpable: joy, gratitude, nostalgia, grief, even numbness.

Psalm 16 is a powerful reminder of God's presence and goodness in this season. David starts with a plea: "Preserve me, O God...." He has a need to call out to God. Throughout the Psalm he then writes about God's goodness and how He provides. David recounts how he can take refuge in God, how he delights in his friends who love the Lord, how he has a beautiful inheritance, and how the Lord gives counsel. Then he shares: "I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken." He is looking to God, and declaring to the Lord: Because of Your kindness, provision, and love, I shall be preserved and not be shaken! What great news he ends with: "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

David begins with a plea, but as he reflects on God's character he experiences wonderful and beautiful joy. In all the working, planning, attending, remembering, and reflecting you do this season, may Psalm 16 be a reminder that you can cry out to God, and at the same time may there be an opportunity for Him to press into your heart the beautiful joy that only He can provide.

Application:

What is your plea to God? After identifying this, take time to reflect on God and His character, much like David did in this Psalm. What comes to mind?

Prayer:

God, my Lord and Father, thank You for Your grace, love, and mercy, and so much more that You provide each day. Give me faith to know that You will always listen to my honest pleas. Help me to keep praying and meeting with You, in the good times, the challenging times, and everything in between. In Your presence there is fullness of joy, and in this season help me to experience this joy with family and friends, and in Your presence. Amen.

Author:

Quin Strouse co-leads the Strouse City Group and serves in Scarlet City Kids.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20

Habakkuk 3:17-19 (NIV)

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.”

Our circumstances don't always feel happy. We are in the in-between, lacking the perfection and completeness that God intended. When trouble comes, it is easy to be angry with God, questioning His goodness, and in this, the enemy wants us to pull away. Here, we see something different: the prophet leaning in.

It's important to note what comes before these verses. The headers throughout the short book of Habakkuk show us his posture toward God in this time of trouble. We see Habakkuk's Complaint and Habakkuk's Second Complaint before landing in Chapter 3 in Habakkuk's Prayer. In his pain, Habakkuk questions God, and God is patient. Habakkuk then lays his pain before the Lord in prayer and summarizes the results in verse 17: everything around him lacks life.

But in that pain, Habakkuk still finds joy. How? Worldly joy is often viewed as an emotion that comes with possessing what one desires. Does joy really come from getting what we want? In James 1:2, we are encouraged to count it joy when we meet trials, and in Romans 5:3, to rejoice in our sufferings. Why rejoice in these moments? Because we have hope. We have hope in a God who sent his Son to die for us so that we may have eternal life in Him. Like Habakkuk, we have joy in God our Savior.

In verse 19, Habakkuk expresses his reason for joy in suffering. This reason actually comes from the words of David in Psalm 18:32-33: "It is God who arms me with strength and keeps my way secure. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he causes me to stand on the heights." In those moments where we forget joy, we can mirror Habakkuk and lean on Scripture to remember why we can rejoice.

Application:

What flowerless fig trees are in your life right now? Ask God to join you in those spaces.

What is your reason for joy? Write down a verse or an experience of God's faithfulness to come back to during a challenging time.

Prayer:

Lord, You are my joy. My life doesn't always feel good and I don't always feel joyful, but You are my joy. Help me to rejoice in You even in the midst of challenges. Lead me to Your word for hope. "When Your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear Your name, Lord God Almighty" (Jeremiah 15:16). Amen.

Author:

Allie Delehanty leads the Bench/Delehanty City Group, and she serves in Scarlet City Kids as part of the PreK community.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21

Isaiah 25:7-9 (NLT)

“And on this mountain he will destroy the covering which is over all people, the covering which is spread over all the nations. He will take away death for all time. The Lord God will dry tears from all faces. He will take away the shame of his people from all the earth. For the Lord has spoken. It will be said in that day, ‘See, this is our God. We have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited. Let us be glad and full of joy because he saves us.’”

The past few years I've fallen in love with winter. Fresh snow has fallen, dusk is here, and the crockpot is on. Vince Guaraldi music plays quietly, you're in your coziest layers, and the puzzle is slowly coming together. Winter is a season of quieting our minds, resting, and waiting. Winter has come, and God designed all of His creation to take time—months—to slow down and become quiet. Plants and animals stop working, stop striving and rushing around. While this time can bring a slower pace, it can also bring darkness and grief—another holiday without a loved one, another year feeling isolated, everything a reminder of daily pain.

But then, a slow thawing: a softening of the earth, the sun warming the dead ground. God is waking His creation up. He is offering a hope of things to come. Winter is not the end of the story. The bare tree sprouts a green shoot, offering a glimpse of a new life to come. The people of Israel walked through many winter seasons: deadening of their hearts, rebellion. God purified the sin from their hearts and offered a new hope. He did it again and again. Just as winter ends and spring erupts, so God's hope will blossom after the most bleak of winters.

Application:

Take a moment and remember a winter in your life. Try to pinpoint when things started to change. When did a green shoot slowly begin pushing its way through the darkness to bloom? What are some ways God began waking your heart and tuning your ears to Himself again? And if you're in the midst of a dark winter, what is one way you can offer your mind and your body rest?

Prayer:

Father, thank You for Your seasons. Thank You for offering us a hope that comes from Your promises and not our own strength, a hope that You will restore each of us to Yourself, fully and righteously. You are the Lord for whom we are waiting; let us be glad and full of joy because You save us! Amen.

Author:

Hollis Wood is a part of the Roth City Group and serves in Scarlet City Kids.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22

Psalm 126 (MSG)

“It seemed like a dream, too good to be true, when God returned Zion’s exiles. We laughed, we sang, we couldn’t believe our good fortune. We were the talk of the nations—‘God was wonderful to them!’ God was wonderful to us; we are one happy people. And now, God, do it again—bring rains to our drought-stricken lives. So those who planted their crops in despair will shout ‘Yes!’ at the harvest, so those who went off with heavy hearts will come home laughing, with armloads of blessing.”

In the early months of my foster parent journey, when despair grew like weeds, I clung to the words of this Psalm as a lifeline, each line a thread in the rope I was clutching fiercely with my two trembling hands. Even still, two and a half years in, I return to this well—parched and empty—to be filled again.

In desperate times, we look back. The first lines are heavy with remembering: God's faithfulness in the past, the way He restored the fortunes of Zion and did great things for His people. Even in the depths of the hard, the seemingly impossible, we can look back and remember God's goodness; we can choose joy and gratitude because of the ways we have seen Him work. It is a good discipline to trace the lines of God's faithfulness in our stories.

In desperate times, we ask Him to move. That next set of lines is a cry for God to show up again as faithful: "We know You can do this thing, so we're begging You to do it." It is simple, a child-like plea, and it resonates deeply as we walk the Advent road of longing and looking toward our Immanuel.

In desperate times, we look ahead. I love this last image: the one who goes into the fields weeping, sowing with tears, will return with joy at the harvest. It's the long game; no quick fixes here. Sowing is the slog, the painful toil. It is taking one step at a time when you're not sure you'll have what it takes to step again. It is planting one seed after another in turned-over soil, even when you don't know whether they will take root and grow. But the promise is clear: there will be joy at the harvest.

Application:

Where are you experiencing heaviness in the sowing? How might you allow the certainty of this promise of joy at the harvest to fill you with joy even here, even in the messy middle?

Prayer:

Lord God, this Advent season is taut with the tension between the weariness of waiting and the certainty of coming joy. Help us to stay present in the tension, to experience You in it instead of trying to flee from it. Amen.

Author:

Jenny Arnot is new to the Scarlet City Church staff team and a part of the Roth City Group. She serves as a liturgist and in Scarlet City Kids.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23

Prayer of Examen

In some traditions, the third Sunday of Advent is called “Gaudete Sunday.” Gaudete means “Rejoice!” but it may also call to mind the word “gaudy,” which is usually a kind of tasteless showiness. This is what that one pink candle is like standing out among all those purple candles or what it’s like to be asked to “Rejoice!” in the midst of a season of darkness and longing. This week simply reminds us that joy and longing can be allowed to co-exist and that we can always invite the light of joy to flicker especially in our dark nights.

Right now, whether you find yourself rejoicing or grumpy or hurting or all of the above, begin by simply letting yourself be seen in the place where you are, under God’s loving gaze. Then, after taking a minute to rest there, invite God to glance back upon your week with you:

What stood out to you from your devotional readings about joy this week, whether because it resonated or produced friction for you? What was it about that passage, image or language? What do you notice about how it sits with you?

Where could you notice small or great stirrings of joy breaking into your week? Maybe it was your own joy, or maybe it was joy being experienced by others around you. What was it like for you to encounter this—surprising, refreshing, difficult? What do you suppose it was in you that rejoiced or had a hard time rejoicing?

What kind of joy do you want to be able to have (or maybe it’s hard to think of having any joy right now)? What is it like for you to talk with God about this? How does Jesus respond?

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24

Light all the candles.

Say: "In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind. And the light shines on in the darkness, but the darkness has not mastered it"

(John 1:4-5, NET).

Read: The fourth candle symbolizes LOVE. It reminds us of how God's perfect love is embodied for us, His beloved, in Immanuel. The fifth candle represents LIGHT and PURITY. It is also referred to as Christ's Candle.

Read Scripture:

"By this the love of God is revealed in us: that God has sent his one and only Son into the world so that we may live through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins..... We love because he loved us first"

(1 John 4:9-10, 19, NET).

Reflect:

God came near to His fickle people in the person of Jesus; His love became flesh and bones. The birth of our Savior was a major milestone in God's ultimate rescue plan. How does Jesus' birth, and then later His suffering and death, demonstrate His great love for us?

Pray:

Father, Son and Spirit, You are love. You have poured out love for us abundantly, and we don't deserve it. We praise You for Your perfect love. Thank You for going to such extreme lengths to draw near to humanity. Give us a greater understanding of Your love. Help us to live like people who are lavishly loved and pour out that love to others. Amen.

The Twelve Days of Christmas

In the Twelve Days of Christmas, we walk together from that stable in Bethlehem down the road to the celebration of Epiphany, when we remember the coming of the Magi. In these twelve days, we reflect together on the implications of Immanuel's coming and His Kingdom.

We will pause periodically on this road to sit with these simple yet profound truths:

Immanuel has come!
(Christmas Day)

Because Immanuel has come, we can rest from our striving and rejoice.
(Days two through four)

The coming of Immanuel ushers in the Kingdom of God, and our citizenship in this Kingdom shapes both our identity and our calling.
(Days five and seven)

Our rootedness in Immanuel's Kingdom enables us to look to the future with eager anticipation.
(Days eight through eleven)

Christmas is here, but it's not over. Stay with us on this journey.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25

Luke 2:1-7 (NIV)

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”

Luke 2:1-7 (see also Matthew 1:18-2:23) is the classic Christmas story: God became human in Jesus—the birth of a Savior as a man, the Messiah who would come to take away the sins of the world. This Christmas we should celebrate the greatest gift mankind has ever received. God the Father sending Jesus to reconcile you to Himself is the ultimate grace given.

This story is also embedded in human history. Luke provides the names of people, places, events, and dates so we can have assurance that the Bible's claims about Jesus are true. God provides evidence for our faith in Christ, so this passage is much more than simply the Christmas story about Jesus' birth.

Most of us come to saving faith in Christ because of personal circumstances that help us realize our need for healing, acceptance, significance, purpose, and—most importantly—our need for forgiveness. Most people then justify their emotional decision with facts and logic. God has designed you this way, with a void in your heart that can only be filled by Him.

This passage is also fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy about the birth of the Messiah (Isaiah 7:14, 9:6; Micah 5:2, to name a few). There are more than 300 prophecies about Jesus the Messiah in the Old Testament. We can have confidence in our faith.

This Christmas, reflect on how much God loves you. He sent Jesus to be your Savior. There is no greater gift on Christmas that you could ever receive. This is our celebration.

Application:

This Christmas day, what stands out to you as you reflect on the precious gift of a Savior born to us?

If you haven't yet filled the void in your heart with the love of Christ, will you ask Jesus for forgiveness of your sins and be reconciled to Him today? God so loves you that He sent His only Son for you.

Prayer:

Praise to You, God, for the gift of Jesus. Thank You that He chose to leave the perfection of Heaven to be born a man—all so He could live among us and demonstrate Your love for us. We ask Your Holy Spirit to remind us of the real reason for Christmas. Amen.

Author:

Steve Tamburello leads a City Group with his wife Ellen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 26

Luke 2:25-32 (MSG)

“In Jerusalem at the time, there was a man, Simeon by name, a good man, a man who lived in the prayerful expectancy of help for Israel. And the Holy Spirit was on him. The Holy Spirit had shown him that he would see the Messiah of God before he died. Led by the Spirit, he entered the Temple. As the parents of the child Jesus brought him in to carry out the rituals of the Law, Simeon took him into his arms and blessed God:

‘God, you can now release your servant;
release me in peace as you promised.

With my own eyes I’ve seen your salvation;
it’s now out in the open for everyone to see:
A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations,
and of glory for your people Israel!”

The Christmas story is full of waiting. The people of Israel had been waiting for a word from God for 400 years. The occupation of God's place by the godless Romans had to flavor their waiting with a bit of resentment and discouragement. For some, like Simeon, there must have been an urgent expectancy for God to show up.

Think of the agonizing years—decades even—where Zachariah and Elizabeth waited for a child. And as she began to approach the end of her childbearing years, that hope must have faded and eventually died all together.

There would have been excitement and hopeful anticipation as Elizabeth and Mary had that same nine-month wait while the miracle of the babies forming in their wombs came to fruition. Week after week, through the growing discomfort, the fatigue, the worry about the coming delivery, they patiently waited.

This brings us back to Simeon, who Luke tells us was looking (or waiting) for the consolation of Israel. Obviously a man of faith, Simeon was expectantly awaiting the coming Messiah. He was hoping for God to show up. Tired of the silence, Simeon yearned for a closer connection to the God of Abraham. Can you picture Simeon, advanced in years, maybe a little feeble, ordinary tasks becoming more difficult with age? Can you imagine the joy that accompanied this release from waiting? Can you sense the freedom and peace Simeon must have felt realizing that his wait was over? "God, you can now release your servant...in peace...."

Application:

Do you long for God to show up in your life, your neighborhood, your nation, your world? Do you long for a more intimate connection to the God of the universe? Can you rest like Simeon knowing that the Messiah has come?

Prayer:

Lord, we don't have to wait any longer. Thank You for our rest from waiting. Thank You for the privilege and freedom to enjoy Your presence with us. Thank You for moving into our neighborhoods. Thank You for moving into our lives. Help us to appreciate and experience Your desire to be with us. Amen.

Author:

Andy Hunt leads a City Group with his wife Patty and serves in Scarlet City Kids.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 27

Zephaniah 3:14-17 (NIV)

“Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, ‘Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.’”

God, the Mighty Warrior, sings!

God sings. He is so delighted with His finished work of salvation that He sings.

God, who created music, is surrounded by singing angels (Revelation 5:8-10). We are exhorted over and over throughout Scripture to sing and make music to God to express to Him our love and adoration, to honor Him with song. But Zephaniah 3:17 is unique in the whole Bible in that it is the only place where God Himself sings.

In Zephaniah, we are told that God who is the Great King, who is the Mighty Warrior, will accomplish His purpose in fulfilling His promise of redemption and salvation of His people (all His people, Jews and Gentiles alike; see Zephaniah 3:9,10), and His response to this is a SONG.

Zephaniah alludes to another time God pronounces something "very good." In the creation account (Genesis 1), God sees that His creation is very good, before it was marred by sin. Sin entered the world, and God began the redemption of His people and His creation. Zephaniah tells us that once the story ends, God again will delight in us, rejoicing over us with singing, because He has finished His great work.

Cease striving and know that He is God. Listen to Him sing over you, rejoicing in His perfect work of grace, provided by His son Immanuel, who is truly with us.

Application:

Have you allowed God to begin His good work in you, not striving to attain it but resting in the fact that it is His to do? What do you imagine this song will be like? How then should you live, since God's delight is in you?

Prayer:

Lord God, Immanuel, the Mighty Warrior who saves, allow me to cease striving and know who You are. Teach me to bask in Your love and delight as You accomplish Your redeeming work in this world and in me. Thank You for Immanuel, for Jesus coming as a human to fulfill Your great work of salvation. Amen.

Author:

Ellen Tamburello leads a City Group with her husband Steve.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 28

Psalm 131 (The Passion)

“Lord, my heart is meek before you. I don’t consider myself better than others. I’m content to not pursue matters that are over my head—such as your complex mysteries and wonders—that I’m not yet ready to understand. I am humbled and quieted in your presence. Like a contented child who rests on its mother’s lap, I’m your resting child and my soul is content in you. O people of God, your time has come to quietly trust, waiting upon the Lord now and forever.”

The Christmas season is such a unique time, filled with decorating, parties, shopping, cooking, presents, family and friends, and many traditions, and oh, yes, Jesus. For many of us, it can be exhausting. But maybe by now things have quieted down. The rush and preparations are over. It is still the season, but without a lot of the pressure.

Enter Psalm 131 (one of my favorites). Verse 1 sets the tone of contentment by letting us acknowledge our limitations and squelching unrealistic expectations. This is always a good reminder for me when ambitions crowd out sound judgment. Verse 2 is my go-to, though. In most of the other translations, the words “weaned child” are used. When I think of a nursing child in its mother’s lap, I envision rooting, squirming, fussing, even agitation and impatience to get fed. What a contrast to the weaned child. This child is climbing up into a mother’s lap just to be with her. This child is not looking to get something, but simply wants to be there and enjoy her presence. True contentment. True rest.

When was the last time you “sat in your Father’s lap,” just to be with Him and enjoy His presence? Not to ask for something or even demand something of Him, but just to rest? Immanuel’s coming means that we can rest—truly rest—in the lap of God.

Application:

What kind of child are you as you approach your Father? Why not try this breath prayer now and maybe throughout your day to “rest” in the midst of whatever is going on?

Envision being in God’s lap. Take a deep breath in, and exhale: “I am Your resting child.” Take another deep breath and then exhale: “My soul is content in You.” Take a third breath and exhale: “Now is my time to quietly trust.”

Prayer:

Father, thank You that Your arms are wide open to receive me, Your child. May I find true rest and contentment as I climb up into Your lap, knowing that just being with You is enough. Amen.

Author:

Patty Hunt helps facilitate a City Group and serves in Scarlet City Kids.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 29

John 1:9-13 (NET)

“The true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was created by him, but the world did not recognize him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not receive him. But to all who have received him—those who believe in his name—he has given the right to become God’s children—children not born by human parents or by human desire or a husband’s decision, but by God.”

In our culture, the Christmas season is full of light. In the midst of the literal darkest days of the year, the insides and outsides of homes and businesses, neighborhood streets, and even our trees and bushes are filled with all types of light. I am here for ALL of it. Even for those who may not follow Jesus, there is something about light that brings comfort, hope, beauty, and joy, even when everything around us is dark.

In our passage, and time and time again in Scripture, Jesus is referred to as the Light. As incredibly layered as this biblical metaphor is, I also find such sweetness in its simplicity—Jesus has chosen to enter into our darkness to bring comfort, hope, beauty, and joy. Even in our darkest seasons—be they emotional, circumstantial, even spiritual—we are invited to turn our gaze to the One who has come and to remember His heart for His creation.

Over the next days and weeks the Christmas lights will start to come down, even though we aren't quite out of the woods with the dark dreariness (ahem, February in Ohio). As much as I grieve the loss of these bright, tangible beacons of beauty each January, I am reminded that we need not depend on them to brighten up our dark world. God has chosen to enter into the darkness and be with us in Christ Jesus, Immanuel, in all seasons of life. May we be a people who rest in the light and love of God and be an illuminating presence to the world around us.

Application:

In what areas of your life might you be experiencing darkness? Invite the Lord to sit with you there and be open to how He may want to bring light into those spaces. As you think about Jesus' identity as light, and your identity as citizens of His Kingdom, how might God be inviting you to reflect this Kingdom Light to those around you?

Prayer:

Lord, we know there is no depth of darkness Your Light cannot reach, no corner of creation You will fail to redeem. Even when it seems the darkness is closing in, help us to turn our gaze toward the Light and remind us to Whom we belong. As we move through the spaces where You place us, may we be reflections of Your light and ambassadors of Your Kingdom. Amen.

Author:

Janelle Jackson serves on staff as the Worship Gathering Director and leads a City Group with her husband Danny.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 30

Prayer of Examen

Advent is typically a season of looking for the light to come in the middle of a dark and cold season. As Christmas approached and arrived, you might have allowed yourself to feel that light approaching—the light of God’s love for you and for the world, coming into the world—or if not, you might allow yourself to feel its warmth and illumination now, as you reflect on how God has been with you through your week.

What stood out to you from your devotional readings this week, whether it resonated strongly or produced friction for you? What was it about that passage, image or language? What do you notice about how it sits with you?

Where in your week did you find yourself able to settle into being a citizen of Immanuel’s Kingdom: deeply loved, released to rest and rejoice, able to sit in your identity and calling? Or, where would you have liked to have experienced this?

Invite the Holy Spirit to draw you back into that moment, and ask God if there’s anything more for you to receive there.

What is it like for you to talk with Jesus about how you experience God’s love and your own identity as a part of this Kingdom? How does Jesus respond to you and to what you’re feeling?

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 31

Philippians 2:12-15 (ESV)

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”

A theme in Philippians is encouragement to continue to progress in faith. It is important to point out that reading verse 12 without the important context before and after can lead to false or partial interpretations of what Paul is communicating. Consumed by itself, verse 12 sounds more like a call to works as the way to salvation. But this could not be further from the truth of what Paul is saying. These words are far more about Christ's work than our work. Verses 13-15 are heavy in pointing to the sacrifice that Jesus made and how that is how we have been redeemed. Verses 1-12 also are focused on the grace of God through Jesus.

The message that we are supposed to get from these verses, and from Philippians in general, is one of encouragement to keep investing in our relationship with God. Paul is imploring us to continue to have faith. Faith is active, not passive. At times, I have been guilty of letting Christ pursue me without actively engaging with Him. The change in my demeanor when I slip into that pattern is profound. I very quickly find myself becoming selfish and irritable. I start to grumble and complain more often and I fail to reflect Christ's light to the outside world. Jesus calls us to two things in Matthew 22:36-40: love God and love others. To do both we have to consistently pursue Jesus as He pursues us. Living into our identity as children of God opens our eyes and hearts to those around us and places us in situations where we get to witness the Spirit at work in the lives of others.

Application:

What rhythms are important when it comes to your relationship with God? Where do you turn when you inevitably fall short? How can you rest more completely in your identity as a child of God?

Prayer:

Lord, You know me better than I know myself. Continue to teach me how to be an active participant in my relationship with You. Help me to have grace and forgiveness for myself when I fall short. Keep me focused on what is truly important as You sanctify me. Remind me constantly that it is You who work in me. Give me genuine faith, and help me to walk in my new identity as Your child. Amen.

Author:

Mike Schon is a member of the Bench/Delehanty City Group and serves in Scarlet City Kids.

MONDAY, JANUARY 1

Isaiah 43:18–21 (ESV)

“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.”

In 2006 I wrote an Advent devotional for Christmas Eve. There I shared a story about a Christmas Eve service in 2000 that briefly transformed the very long and dark time I was experiencing into one of hope for the future. It came unexpectedly and unsought for, and was so different from the expected sentimentality that so often obscures the true meaning of the season. Though there would be more darkness in the years to come, in that moment I was given a deep assurance that God was with me and that somehow things would be all right. God was doing a “new thing” in me through many years of mental anguish and suffering.

I often reflect upon that experience when I think of the ways life’s journey seems like one through the wilderness of fear and uncertainty. The gift God gives us is one of Himself, the living water that Jesus promised to the woman at the well in John 4. This gift may not quickly transform our external circumstances, but it can allow us to view them with a sense of detachment, because we have a source of eternal life that gives us hope in spite of our current situation (whether good or bad).

The new year often brings expectation of new beginnings; we turn away from old things of the past and embrace new hopes for the future. Whatever this occasion brings for you, may the “spring of water welling up to eternal life” be like “rivers in the desert” for you, a source of strength and hope for whatever is to come.

Application:

Where in your life have you felt the need for a new beginning? Find a quiet time for prayer and thoughtful consideration of what needs to change and what needs to be strengthened. Ask Jesus for a drink of living water.

Does someone you know need a word, act of encouragement or caring concern from you? Pray over how you might be able to offer that to this person.

Prayer:

Lord, You are the God of new beginnings. Only in You may we begin along a path of enduring change into the likeness of Your Son, Jesus. Show me how to daily draw on You as the source of life and love for the tasks and circumstances I face each day. Sustain me, my Lord, for the journey ahead, and lead me in life everlasting in this world and the next. Amen.

Author:

Paul Dubuc is one of the elders at Scarlet City Church. He is a part of the O'Brien/Hohmeier City Group.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 2

Colossians 3:1-4 (ESV)

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

This passage is one that has been quoted to me several times in my life. It is a passage that focuses on the contrast between the old self and new self. I'm not sure I have ever stopped to think about the context of this on a deeper level. When I read these words in the past, I often heard them as another set of rules to fall short of, and I interpreted the words as having a stern tone. My new self hears a loving and patient tone. The words are important and powerful, but that change in tone makes all the difference. We are called to set our minds on things that are above, to keep our head and heart focused on Jesus and His perfect desires as opposed to our earthly desires. It goes on in verse 4 to talk about Christ being our life, our way, and our reminder that perfection can only be attained through Jesus.

Beyond verse 4, the text gives specific examples of things of the world that we should not dedicate our time and energy to. When this has been quoted to me in the past, the focus has often been on the specific pitfalls of sin associated with the old self instead of reconciling the bigger heart issue that helps us transition to the new self. My old self was focused on earthly things like money and shallow relationships. The new self realizes that only eternity matters and the free gift of God is undeserved but offered to each of us anyway. Grace, love and redemption are so powerful and hard to believe because we know we don't deserve them. When we accept Christ's sacrifice as being for us individually, it allows us to realize that death is not the end of our journeys through life. We have eternity together in praise and worship of Him, which is such a beautiful image to cling to.

Application:

How might you shift your focus so you are looking toward eternity?

Prayer:

Lord, I thank You for the reminder that eternity matters infinitely more than earthly things. I pray that You would help me to stay focused on loving You and loving people. I pray against guilt and shame in my internal dialogue as I course correct. I pray for the discipline and self control to implement new ways of staying focused on You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Author:

Mike Schon is a member of the Bench/Delehanty City Group and serves in Scarlet City Kids.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 3

Matthew 2:1-12 (CEB)

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, 'Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him.' When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote: You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel.' Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.' When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route."

While this might be a part of the Christmas story that many of us have read over and over, I find myself returning to this passage with a lot of questions. Today, I want to center our attention on the magi.

Who are the magi? Where in the East did they come from? How many of them were there? How did they know Jesus was “King of the Jews”? These questions aren’t answered explicitly in this passage. We might have good answers for them—ones that are historically and culturally accurate and studied by smart and Godly people. But today, I want to invite you to hold onto the mystery of the magi and approach this passage with wonder. Take your time. Don’t rush.

Herod and all of Jerusalem were troubled when the magi said they were there to honor the newborn king of the Jews (verse 3). The magi likely had no connection to the Jewish faith; they likely did not worship Yahweh, the one true God. Despite all this, they came to honor (some translations say “worship”) the child-King.

They brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold honored the King, frankincense (a kind of incense) recognized God’s presence, and myrrh was an herb used for embalming. Knowingly or not, the magi prophetically proclaimed Jesus as King, as God, and as one who would die. These travelers from a different land and religion presented their prophetic gifts and fell at the feet of a toddler-Jesus and worshiped Him. And then they left by divine intervention—warned to go a different way home in a dream.

Application:

As you prepare for an imaginative prayer exercise, consider: what in this story is here for you to receive or reflect on today?

Prayer:

If you've never practiced imaginative prayer before, don't worry. It's just like it sounds: using your imagination as a form of prayer.

Imagine how the magi's interaction with Jesus could have changed the trajectory of their lives. Try to picture them seeing the star in the sky, traveling from the East to Jerusalem and then Bethlehem, bowing before Jesus, and traveling home safely. Take your time as you imagine what their encounters with Jesus may have been like. Then, bring your thoughts, pictures, questions and curiosities to God and talk to Him in the same way you talk to a friend.

Author:

Anna Hohmeier helps lead the O'Brien/Hohmeier City Group and serves on the Music Team.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 4

Hosea 14:1-8 (NET)

“Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for your sin has been your downfall! Return to the Lord and repent! Say to him: ‘Completely forgive our iniquity; accept our penitential prayer, that we may offer the praise of our lips as sacrificial bulls. Assyria cannot save us; we will not ride warhorses. We will never again say, ‘Our gods,’ to what our own hands have made. For only you will show compassion to Orphan Israel! I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger will turn away from them. will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily, he will send down his roots like a cedar of Lebanon. His young shoots will grow; his splendor will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. People will reside again in his shade; they will plant and harvest grain in abundance. They will blossom like a vine, and his fame will be like the wine from Lebanon. O Ephraim, I do not want to have anything to do with idols anymore! I will answer him and care for him. I am like a luxuriant cypress tree; your fruitfulness comes from me!”

In a time when the people of God had been wayward and distant, Hosea poetically pleads for their return and ultimately points their gaze back to the joy and hope that can be found in life with God. Hosea provides an image to help the people visualize God's ongoing work of healing us, rooting us, and growing us through love. Let's dwell on this image as well. Re-read verses 5-7 and picture this tree in your mind.

Have you ever sat under a giant tree, one that may be older than your great-grandparents, sturdy and ancient, filling your whole view? Continue to imagine it: its shade a relief from the summer sun, roots so deep no wind storm could knock it over, no shortage of fruit or nuts or seeds. The Lord unveils this beautiful image of His ongoing work in us and His desire for what we can become. His love and mercy guides and strengthens our lives, forming deep roots and strong limbs.

In following Jesus, we may at times feel more like a small shrub without much to offer, or like an under-watered tree in a desert that once bore fruit but hasn't seen growth for a while—far from a "Cedar of Lebanon." But God's words encourage us that our growth is carried forward by His strength: "I will be like the dew... I will care for him... your fruitfulness comes from me!" (verses 5, 8). The power of God's grace in Jesus gives us a greater hope for our future than we could possibly imagine for ourselves.

Application:

Reflect on a small way God has grown you through this Advent season. We are assured in Philippians that God's work in us is "carried on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Is there a part of your life you are eager for the Lord to work in or grow? Have you considered laying this desire before Him?

Prayer:

Father, we find hope in the way You desire us to flourish and become all You made us to be. You have given us Your Son to be with us in our journey and to show us what Your love looks like. Allow us to seek You and trust You as You carry out Your work in us. Amen

Author:

Blake Roth leads a City Group with his wife Anna and serves on the Hospitality team.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 5

Prayer of Examen

Throughout Advent, we've been letting ourselves be guided by a story that helps us understand and make space for the seasons in our own life. Over the weeks, we waited with expectation and longing for Christ to come into our world, with hope, peace, joy and love—even though that story happened a long, long time ago—because expectation and longing are still a part of our everyday story.

As we prepare to move into a new season as a Church, we remember what this longing has been for us, how Jesus has entered into it, and how Jesus is now in our world. So as this week comes to an end, you may want to look back through any journaling you did this Advent and notice: Where has Jesus been for you? How is He with you now? And how do you want to respond?

What stood out to you from your devotional readings this week, whether it resonated strongly or produced friction for you? What stood out to you, and maybe still stands out to you, from the previous weeks and from this whole Advent journey? What is it about that passage, image or idea?

As you replay the events and places of your daily life this week, or the previous weeks, where could you notice the presence of Christ in your everyday world? Where might the Holy Spirit like to show you where Jesus was in your week, offering His presence? Where would you like to invite this presence? What is it like for you to experience Christ's presence being with you in the world? How do you experience it in your body, and what are the feelings it stirs? Finally, how would you like to respond?



“Dark and Light”

Mixed Media

2023

Bryn Reagan

The inspiration behind these two pieces is light coming out of darkness.

The first piece is made of mesh fabric scraps and three layers of grays and blacks swirling together with some light peaking through. This shows that even in darkness, there is light.

The viewer is then guided to the second piece, representing coming out of darkness into light. Even in the hard parts of life, we can still have hope.

Devotional Contributions

We are so grateful to the individuals who contributed to this year's Advent & Christmas Devotional; thank you for your willingness to generously bring your gifts, just like our friends the magi.

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