



Home for Christmas

LEGACY CHURCH



2018 Advent
Devotional

Introduction

What is Advent? The word “Advent” comes from the Latin word *adventus* which means “coming”. It denotes the anticipation of someone's arrival. In Christian tradition, Advent signifies a season leading up the celebration of the birth of Christ. It is a time we observe intent on preparing our hearts and minds for the Earth's reception of its savior.

Advent is traditionally observed by Christians in the liturgical calendar that begins on the fourth Sunday preceding Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. For many, using an Advent wreath and candles can be a meaningful symbol of what is spiritually being observed. Intentional prayer, reflecting, scripture reading, and repentance are all key components of the season.

It is our prayer, as you journey with us throughout this season of Advent, that you would be reminded of what God the Father has promised and fulfilled through the person and work of Jesus Christ, so that you would find hope, peace, joy, and love in the reality that Christ has come and will come again.

Promises

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**For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.
That is why it is through him that we utter our
Amen to God for his glory. 2 Corinthians 1:20**

We've all felt the sting of a promise that wasn't kept. Whether it be in the context of a relationship, or maybe professionally, or even a financial transaction, unkept promises can leave us deflated. Sometimes we ourselves are the ones who haven't kept up our end of a promise made. Heartache and distress often follow and we can begin to lose faith in pursuits that once gave us immense joy.

A difficulty in how we relate to God is how we inevitably bring our human experience into the relationship. Where we've experienced broken promises in our human relationships, we apply a level of distrust and uncertainty when it comes to God's promises. Where we've been let down by people, we fear that we might be let down by God. This Advent season it is our prayer that we would look deeply at the promises that God has not only made but also fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Our prayer is to not only know but also to feel the faithfulness of God in the fulfillment of four specific promises.

Traditionally, the themes of Advent have focused on four main components of the Christian faith. These are hope, peace, joy, and love, each receiving specific attention over the course of the Advent calendar. It is these four that we hope you would take the time to see as promises made to you by God, fulfilled through the coming of Christ. And we want to take the time to wrestle with our disbelief, process our objections, see God's promises as they are, and accept each as we prepare our hearts this Advent season.

Pray

What broken promises have caused you to hesitate in trusting God?
Confess these hurdles to God.
Tell God that you want to experience His promises.

Hope Deferred

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Hope deferred makes the heart sick...
Proverbs 13:12a

One of the most common defense mechanism to heartache is the phrase, "I'm not getting my hopes up". At some level, we all understand that hope pulls on our heart strings. As our hope rises the risks to our heart increases. But if we keep our hopes low then maybe, just maybe, we can keep our hearts from hurting.

The Jewish people had a very specific hope in regards to their coming Messiah. They were in an advent season so to speak for hundreds of years. The Messiah to come was prophesied and He would free His people, liberating them from foreign oppressors, raising them to political power, enriching them with economic success, and establishing them as an everlasting kingdom. What a hope! Yet, they were not met with a victorious king. They were met with a helpless baby born in the stables of an overcrowded inn.

In each of our lives, there have been things hoped for and not received. Maybe it is a career in professional sports, or a promotion and a raise, or a healthy marriage, a healthy child, a healthy family. Maybe it's overcoming sickness, overcoming anxiety, overcoming depression. Each of us have hopes and the reality is that not all of those hopes are fulfilled. And as Proverbs 13:12a so simply states, it makes us heart sick.

What could be more effective in distracting us from the hope of God than memories of our own hopes deferred?

Pray

Think about the biggest hopes of your life that you feel have been deferred. Confess these hopes to God and let Him shoulder your grief. Ask Him to reveal His hopes for your life.

Hope Described

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**For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord,
from my youth. Psalm 71:5**

Hope can be a difficult thing to describe. We can feel it. We can sense it. We can even recognize it in others. But to define it is a challenge. The Psalmist describes the Lord as his hope. Paul, in Romans 8:24-25, describes the object of hope as unseen and the content of hope as salvific. The author of Hebrews, in chapter 11 verse 1, describes the function of hope as security and conviction. So how might we understand hope as God intends us to?

Hope can be described as the act of trusting in the intangible. The Psalmist puts his hope in the Lord. God is invisible as He is spirit. God is intangible in our relationship with Him. Yet the Lord is our hope. Our hope is trusting in the intangible. Paul states plainly that hope seen is not hope. What we can put our arms around or stuff our pockets with cannot be hope. Because hope is the act of trusting in the intangible. To be specific, hope is the act of trusting in the unseen God.

What is easier, to trust in the tangible security of your bank account as it sits today or to trust the potential return on investment your advisor assures will happen one day? Is it 'today' or 'one day' that is easier to grip hold of? Paul tells us that hope in what you have in your hands is not hope at all. At best it is a counterfeit security. Hope in the unseen God is the hope we are invited into. This is a hope that stirs our affections for God as we trust Him for both the 'today' and the 'one day'.

Pray Confess to God where you have laid up hopes in the tangible.
Ask God to set your eyes on His hope.

Hope Prescribed

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Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Romans 12:12

We know the description of hope. We see that hope is the act of trusting in the unseen God and His oftentimes intangible promises. We see that this hope is something practiced from the Psalmist of the Old Testament to Paul the theologian of the New Testament. We see that it seems to be an act that we as Christians are invited into. But is it only an invitation? Is it merely a suggestion? Is it optional?

No. It's not optional. It's not a suggestion. In simple enough language, Paul tells us to rejoice in hope. This is not a suggestion. It's a proclamation and a command. We are to rejoice in hope. We are to take joy in the act of trusting the unseen God and His oftentimes intangible promises. This hope, as it is presented by Paul, is as much a discipline as it is a promise. We are to actively commit ourselves to hope. We are to choose trust in God, deliberately, intentionally, and with fervor.

And yet there is fatigue. There is fear. There is hesitation. The old question of, "what if I get my hopes up?" returns to our minds. The old experiences of deferred hope reoccurs in our memories. A good experience, a good word, or a good sermon might reignite our joy in trusting God, but it seems fleeting. If I am as broken as I am, how can I of my own will choose such a bold commitment on a daily basis? Paul follows his command with encouragement, compassion, and reassurance. Times will be hard so, "be patient in tribulation". Wait. Take pause. Be patient. You will feel weak and worn so, "be constant in prayer". Speak your heart. Fill God's ears. Pray. Hope is not easy. But God is our helper.

Pray Confess to God your fears about having high hopes.
Ask God that He help you to hope.

Hope Promised

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

Hope is described as the act of trusting in the unseen God and His oftentimes intangible promises. Hope is prescribed as an act we ought to take joy in with a daily commitment, practiced with patience, and saturated in prayer. And hope is promised by the only God who can truly provide such a lofty discipline to our spirit. While we are called to be patient and constant in prayer as we commit to take joy in our trust of God, God Himself encourages, supports, and fulfills that promise in our lives.

Paul names God, "the God of hope." How incredible is it to know that it is God, Himself, who helps build our trust in Him? In the Trinitarian relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, He has practiced unfailing trust from all eternity. He does not ask something of us He is not familiar with Himself. He knows personally what He asks of us. The Son understands our struggle and our challenges. The Spirit knows the help we desperately need.

As we are called to trust in the unseen God, God fills us with the joy we are to practice in our hope. As we are told to be patient in tribulation, God fills us with the peace of faith. And in the midst of our fatigue in committing to this daily trust, our Helper the Holy Spirit fills us with power that we "may abound in hope". The beautiful promise of God is not that we would taste hope, or be acquainted with hope, or that we would know about hope. The beautiful promise of God is that we would abound, leap, dance, and rejoice in the act of trusting the unseen God and His oftentimes intangible promises.

Pray Confess to God how you have tried to be the God of your own hope.
Ask God that you would experience rejoicing in Him afresh.

Hope Fulfilled

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For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Jeremiah 29:11

There's nothing wrong with enjoying the cuteness of a pinky promise. But if the fulfillment of the promise is taken as seriously as a bond secured by intertwining pinkies, then no amount of cuteness is going to satisfy the heartache of deferred hope. If we are honest with ourselves, some of the promises we read in Scripture can sometimes feel like little more than a cute pinky promise. Like a motivational cat poster, they are effective only for small problems and only for short increments of time.

Jeremiah, a prophet of the Old Testament, witnessed the destruction of his nation and the captivity of his people. Imagine being in a land that is not your own, ruled by a people who despise your God, after witnessing the utter destruction of everything you loved. And then God tells you that He has "plans for welfare and not for evil". How difficult would hope be in the face of such a promise. Yet as God promised, He delivered His people from their captivity in Babylon and returned them to their land in the time He prescribed.

How do we best ignite hope in the face of hopelessness? Remember the times of the past where hope was not put to shame. God delivered His people. God continues to deliver His people. Peter writes that God caused us to be reborn "to a living hope" (1 Peter 1:3). Our hope is not rote. It is not stale. It is not stagnant. Our hope is living. The promise of hope rests squarely on the shoulders of Jesus. This promise was fulfilled in Jesus. So we look back to be reminded of hope secured as we continue patiently and prayerfully in our living hope.

Pray Confess to God how you have tried to be the God of your own hope. Ask God that you would experience rejoicing in Him afresh.

Reflecting on Hope

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**And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?
My hope is in you. Psalm 39:7**

Restlessness might be an accurate antonym for hope. While hope is described as patient, restlessness could be described as hasty. While hope is saturated in prayer, restlessness plugs its ears. While hope ought to be joyful, restlessness is anxious and nervous. David, as he wrote this psalm, was restless. In verses 2-3 he confesses, "I held my peace to no avail, and my distress grew worse. My heart became hot within me." Without peace, locked in distress, David sounds like the epitome of restlessness.

I think about my own restlessness. I think about my own dissatisfactions. I think about where peace has fled and distress overwhelmed me. Where was my hope? What do I do to focus my mind and calm my heart? Seemingly on a dime, David turns his attention to God. He renews his mind and asks of himself a simple question. In the midst of his utter restlessness, he takes pause and asks, "for what do I wait?".

My lack of hope is found in my proclivity for restlessness. David in his attempt to wait couldn't stop fidgeting. But then he takes measure of himself and asks one simple question. What am I waiting for? And then he makes an equally simple proclamation. My trust is in God. Where I let restlessness stir, I compromise my trust in God. Where I desire restlessness to cease and patience to take its foothold, I must ask myself, "for what do I wait?" and turn my attention to commit to one choice. Trust in the unseen God.

Pray Confess to God where you are restless in your pursuits.
Ask God that He would give your heart pause enough to hope.

Peace Absent

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In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. Psalm 4:8

Instability creates a craving for safety. Whether it is instability in a relationship, or financially, or academically, it escalates our desperation for security. It's like being caught in the eye of a storm: shelter is immediately necessary, urgency fills our veins with adrenaline and wild-eye intensity, and we become narrowly focused on this one goal. When the sun is shining, however, we may not be aware of the shelter that is nearby. We are not intent on finding our way to safety. How quickly shifting ground can result in shifting focus.

I've been known to invest in a wide variety of securities in an attempt to make myself feel safe. Whether it be friendships, financial success, emotional intimacy, or ministerial busyness, there are plenty of options available to help satisfy my need to feel secure. I feel the chaos, the conflict, the confrontation, and I run to find peace. I seek peace in every place I can think to look. I make investments in each of these places and wait impatiently for the dividends to be paid out in abundant peace. Yet, the Psalmist doesn't seem to appreciate my diversified portfolio of security accounts.

David claims to lie down and sleep in peace. Sometimes this simple image sounds like a far away fantasy. Why does peace seem absent? Why does sleep not feel as peaceful as it seems to be for David? And then I see it. My portfolio of security accounts turns out to be a portfolio of counterfeits. My investments seeking after safety returns nothing, but more dissatisfaction. Because it is the Lord alone that can "make me dwell in safety".

Pray In what counterfeit accounts have you tried to find your safety?
How is God inviting you to relinquish these false securities?
Confess your counterfeits before God.

Peace Suspect

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**For to set the mind on the flesh is death,
but to set the mind on the Spirit is life
and peace. Romans 8:6**

Peace in the Christian life can sometimes feel fleeting more than it feels consistent. In some seasons, peace is an unmovable rock upon which we stand confidently, surveying the stormy seas surrounding us with calm and quiet spirits. In other seasons, peace is an elusive pixy, flitting and fleeing from our attempt to grasp and grab at it in clumsy desperation.

Seeking safety and security in counterfeit accounts is a lifelong behavior that must be broken in each and every one of us as we come into the family of God. It's a process in progress and we have to trust the process. Paul presents a stark contrast between the result of investing in counterfeit accounts and investing in God's account. Setting our mind on the flesh, the things that we wish could give us the safety we desire, leads to death. It leads to insecurity, instability, and incredulity. We strive after peace and are left to dissatisfaction, despite all our best efforts.

"...but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Our minds require a focus. They require an object on which to dwell. If we let them dwell on the things of the flesh, on our counterfeit securities, they will obsess and be consumed with what leads to disillusionment and death. But if we encourage our minds to dwell on the Spirit, the Helper that provides abounding hope, we are not only given new life, we are given immediate peace. Distractions and busyness do not rob peace. They prevent peace from ever being deposited in the first place. The reality is that peace is most absent when we are least focused. Focus on the Spirit and peace will feel familiar.

Pray

Confess to God those areas that you often focus on the flesh for peace.
Ask God that He replace those areas with the things of the Spirit.

Peace Secured

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You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Isaiah 26:3

It is the Lord alone that can make us dwell in safety. When we allow things of the flesh to occupy our focus, we're led to disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and death. But when we fill our focus with the Spirit, we are led to new life and immediate peace. And if I was a stronger person, I might be able to maintain such a Spirit-filled focus and enjoy such immediate peace for the rest of my days. Unfortunately, it seems that I need help.

Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet, speaks to a people who have been battered and beaten. Isaiah speaks of a day that is to come where the spirits of the people will be lifted, the nation will be secure and safe, and there will be prosperity. Speaking of God, the prophet says, "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you..." In these words we find security. We seek to keep our focus on the things of the Spirit. And in all of this it is God who keeps us in perfect peace. Our faith is in Him and He keeps us in His peace.

The phrase concluding Isaiah's thought is simple and powerful. God keeps us in perfect peace, "because [we] trust in [Him]." The act of trusting in the unseen God is what we call hope and hope is encouraged in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. What should give us relief is the reality that finding peace is far from one sided. We are invited to focus our minds upon the Spirit and find immediate peace. But the peace we seek has already been secured by God and He keeps us in His peace. All that He asks of us is that we trust Him. In our hope we find peace.

Pray

Ask God to help you keep your mind on Him.
Ask God to remind your heart of His peace.

Peace Sustained

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Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.

2 Thessalonians 3:16

Each time God is given a name it should perk our ears. Each and every word He uses to describe Himself throughout Scripture is a beautiful revelation of who He is and how He has chosen to relate His character to His people. Paul professes one such revelation of God's character here. He refers to God as "the Lord of peace". How satisfying is it to know that our God is the Lord of peace when it is peace that our hearts desire.

As is sensible to conclude, the Lord of peace is the one who can distribute peace. Peace belongs solely to our God and as He is Lord of peace, He alone can give peace and grant peace. This is not a small point. If peace belongs to God, then I cannot fabricate or contrive peace outside of God by any means of my own. In other words, as I could not secure peace in and of myself, I cannot sustain peace by any such means either. Paul reiterates this by saying that the Lord may, "give you peace at all times in every way." Peace is completely the Lord's to give away and He gives generously.

The basket can feel so empty when the day is done and the wages are brought home. It seems like it would be easier to just invest in another one of my counterfeit securities. They at least feel good, otherwise they wouldn't be so tempting. But no peace has ever come from worshipping idols, because no idol has ever had any peace to offer. Peace is God's alone. He is the Lord of peace. And Paul concludes his thought with the most peaceful reality there is. "The Lord be with you all." The Lord of peace, the one to whom all peace belongs and from whom peace flows generously, is with us.

Pray

Confess to God the idols from which you've sought peace.
Ask God to turn your heart away from those idols in your life.

Peace Insurgent

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I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. John 16:33

Possibly one of the scariest situations a soldier could find themselves in is to be caught behind enemy lines. You're off the reservation without support in enemy territory. The odds are not in your favor. I'm sure fear begins to settle in. If there's one thing you are probably not experiencing, it's peace. I think it is easy to read of a babe in a manger, with angels singing overhead, shepherds gazing in awe, and see only a peaceful scene of serenity. But remembering the conflict for which Christ came to reconcile, we can take a step back and realize what has just happened. Jesus has been sent behind enemy lines.

The insurgence of Christ into the world cannot be mistaken as anything less than aggressive action against the chains of sin and shame that hold humanity captive. This is enemy territory. As 1 Peter 5:8 says, "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." There is a war being waged and a champion sent to fight our battle. That champion is Jesus Christ. And as a baby born in the stables of an overcrowded inn, he was sent in behind enemy lines to establish a stronghold against the enemy.

Now there is no mistaking that, "In the world you will have tribulation." We know this all too well. But the advent for which we prepare our hearts was a successful insurgence of peace. Because Jesus tells us that the Lord of peace has overcome the world. To Him belongs peace and from Him peace flows generously.

Pray

Praise God for sending Christ behind enemy lines.
Ask God how you might have peace in enemy territory.

Reflecting on Peace

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

Colossians 3:15

Measuring the peacefulness of my heart is an easy inventory to complete. Am I in conflict with those around me? Do I find it easy to shout curses at my fellow drivers on the road? Do I find myself scoffing under my breath at things other people say? Do I feel friction around those who are supposed to be my brothers and sisters? Does harmony or discord best describe the state of my relationships? Peace is directly relational and as such can be checked on by taking the pulse of my community.

It is no mistake that Paul exhorts peace to rule in our hearts in tandem with reminding us that we are one body. We are in community with one another and on mission with one another. And if we are to spend very much time at all together, the peace of Christ must rule in our hearts. Otherwise nothing but dissension will be accomplished. We seek peace in our circumstances, both internally and externally, but we also must seek peace in our communities. And this is the peace for which Christ fought on our behalf.

The room for peace to take a foothold in our hearts was fought for by a strategic insurgence by Jesus Christ. He is the Lord of peace who wants to give us peace abundantly and generously. He keeps us in perfect peace as we trust in Him and seek Him. Peace is where we wait upon the Lord. And peace is where we hold fast to one another, serving one another, encouraging one another, and being built up together. As peace reassures us of our safety in God, and hope eases our restless hearts, let us look forward to the joy that awaits.

Pray

Ask God that His peace would make you fearless.

Ask God that His peace mobilizes you in enemy territory.

Joy Elusive

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A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. Proverbs 17:22

Throughout the course of our journey toward Christ, it can be a discouraging reality that we are not always joyful of heart, even though we feel we ought to be. And let it not be mistaken, we have plenty of reason to be joyful. But what we know from Scripture and what we experience in life does not always line up as neatly as we'd like.

Sometimes in our pursuit of mature faith in the Christian walk, we begin creating inventories that can measure our progress and identify our blind spots. We read things like the fruit of the Spirit and create mental checkboxes for each of the descriptors as if they are individual buckets needing to be filled. Joy, inevitably, is on that list. Oftentimes, 'joy' is distinguished little from 'happiness,' and so we assume that if we are happy more often than not, then we must be experiencing true joy. But the difference between true joy and contrived happiness is the difference between good medicine and dry bones.

While it may at first not seem that the promises of God are as clear and present as we would like, they are fulfilled exactly as God has designed through the person and work of Jesus Christ. That being said, joy seems to be a Christian experience that carries with it the highest expectation and therefore the heaviest burden. As Christians we feel that if nothing else, we at least ought to be joyful. And in the midst of the heaviness of our hearts, not only do we fear that we may be missing something, but we condemn ourselves for having missed it. So let us first and foremost relieve ourselves of the burden to force out joy.

Pray

Ask God to heal sadness, defeat, and complacency in your life.
Identify something in your life that makes you feel happy. Thank God for it.
Identify something in your life that gives you joy. Thank God for it.

Joy Performed

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You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Psalm 16:11

What happens when I feel like my Christian life is lacking joy? Usually I put on my happy face. I make sure I have a smile on every Sunday morning. I make sure I'm involved in my community. I make sure that I am well-dressed, well-spoken, smiling often, shaking hands and giving hugs. If I can go through the motions of what I think a joyful person would do, maybe by some means of self-deception, I can begin to feel the joy that I am trying to emulate.

The Psalmist stops me dead in my tracks. David reminds me that it is God who lets me know how to get that bread; the bread of life. I don't come up with the plan for life. I've been entrusted with this life and have to make decisions along the way about how I go about living it. But the way to the satisfying full life to which David is alluding belongs to God alone. David continues to say that it is through time spent in intimate and intentional relationship with God that we find "fullness of joy". Arriving at this kind of joy requires time. There's no other way around it.

What then does God think about my performance? I think it breaks His heart. Because when it comes to joy, our Father wants to give it to us in complete and utter fullness. And the way He freely gives His joy is through time spent in relationship. So when I seek to perform my joy through activity and checkboxes, God is waiting patiently for me to sit down and simply spend time with Him. That is where we enjoy and learn what it means to participate in God's joy.

Pray

Confess to God how you've attempted to "fake" your joy.
Ask God to release you from your own expectations to "feel" joy.
Spend time with God today simply listening for what God cares about.

Joy Shared

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These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

John 15:11

There is no way to have joy in a vacuum. By that I mean joy doesn't happen in solitude. It can't really. Jesus says clearly that He shares His joy with us, and through His joy, ours is made full. Certainly, it is in relationship that joy is cultivated in our lives. And primarily, it is our relationship with Christ through which joy is made manifest in our daily lives. And through that relationship, we then can share our joy with others as Christ shared His with us. Because the nature of the relationship is one that overflow and pours out. That is the example set by Jesus Himself.

Joy is cooperative in nature. Jesus did not force upon His disciples the presence of joy. It was not something spoken of as an obligation or a duty. It was a natural reaction by the listener to what Jesus was sharing. He says, "These things I have spoken to you...". A message was given. The content was communicated and delivered. However, what the recipient did with the message was not guaranteed by the message itself. Jesus spoke truth to His disciples with the intention that His joy may be in them and that their joy may be full.

I know that I have joy in Christ. Whether that joy ever interacts with and encourages my own joy is wholly dependent on how closely I listen to the things He has spoken to me and how willingly I respond. This joy that God shares with us is shared through the person and work of Jesus Christ. And then we, emboldened by this joy, are able to take it to others. In this response and cooperation our joy may be full.

Pray

Confess to God where you have not responded to His invitation into intimacy. Ask God to move your heart toward a desire to spend time with Him.

Joy Committed

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**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.
Philippians 4:4**

I've heard it said many times that happiness is a choice. We choose to be happy rather than to be in misery. Circumstances should not dictate our emotional response, otherwise we would be tossed to and fro by the waves of life. As it goes for our emotional responses to the circumstances of life, so it also goes for our spiritual disciplines in our pursuit of Christ. Circumstances cannot dictate my spiritual posture toward the Lord.

When I have struggled the most with finding real joy is when I have spent the least amount of time with God. It's never been circumstantial. Everything could not be going my way. I could be struggling academically, financially, professionally, and relationally, but if there is consistent and willing time spent with God, then joy persists. In contrast though, there have been times where everything has gone my way academically, financially, professionally, and relationally, but I lacked joy. How? How could joy be lacking where "my way" is prospering?

Joy is not only commanded here by Paul. He says "rejoice"! This is not a suggestion. However, there is a person in whom we rejoice. We don't rejoice in a way, in a thing, in a success, in a plan, or in a purpose. We rejoice in the person of Jesus Christ. Joy is a choice. It's a choice provided to us by God through the person and work of Jesus Christ and what has been accomplished in and through Him on our behalf. And now that the choice is presented to us, we are called to lean in. There is nowhere else where we can find joy and nowhere else we can commit joy. Joy is committed in Christ alone.

Pray

Confess to God where circumstances tend to dictate your emotional response.
Ask God to build in you a joyful fortitude that stands against circumstances.

Joy Unleashed

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Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory...

1 Peter 1:8

In the season of Advent, we are spending intentional time preparing our hearts and minds to remember a historical event happened over 2,000 years ago. We are celebrating the incarnation of Christ, God made flesh. We are anticipating this day we've set to commemorate this beautiful and awe inspiring event of the God-man born in Bethlehem. And yet not a single one of us have seen Jesus. We've not laid eyes on Him. We've not walked the ground next to Him. We've not heard His voice as He speaks from the hillside of Galilee. And we don't have to.

Peter speaks to his audience whom most of which were alive when Jesus was alive. But they never met Him. So Peter reminds them, "though you have not seen him, you love him". To see Christ is not necessary to love Christ. I can still love Him without ever having seen Him. This is what faith in a person looks like. My faith is not in His historical interactions or His physical presence. My faith is in Him.

According to Peter, what results from this belief is a "joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory...". This is the joy that God sought to give us. The good medicine that God came down to give us was that of a joyful heart. In His presence there is fullness of joy. So He brought His presence down to us through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. And Christ invited us into His joy so that our joy may be full. This is God's joy unleashed. Let us accept that joy today.

Pray

Spend time in God's presence meditating on His joy.
Articulate to Christ that you accept His invitation into His joy.
Ask God to unleash your joy to be used for His purposes.

Reflecting on Joy

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You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. Psalm 4:7

My number one distraction to enjoying the presence of God and sharing in His joy is comparing myself to other people. When I think about what I have and what they have, materially speaking, there is no way for my joy to flourish. Comparisons pit me against someone else in competition where I want to win. And if I am going to win, then they must lose. There is always someone who gets put down, pushed down, or let down when the measuring tape gets brought out. With me deciding who measures up and to whom I measure up against, only conflict can be the result.

But God has put a joy in our hearts that is overwhelming. It is an abundant joy. It is a full joy. It is a joy that outweighs the material. When I might strive to produce joy through material gains and therapeutic retail, the joy God has for me is more. This joy encourages surrender, instills security, overcomes fear, and fosters loving community.

In verse 6 of this psalm, David writes, "There are many who say, 'Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O Lord!'" How many times have we had the same question? Where is the good that is due us? O Lord, You have made many promises for good and not harm, for our prosperity, for our security, for our deliverance. With all these promises made, where is the good? And David answers the question with ease. He says of God, "You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound." Sometimes the good we keep looking for God to give us is not the good God has in mind. But His joy; that is a good worth taking the time to pursue. Because it is in and through this joy that we begin to understand the love of God.

Pray

Reflect on what God has taught you about His joy.
Ask God to reveal the purpose of His joy in your life.

Love Loaned

12

21

18

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Romans 13:8

My son is 5 years old. Teaching him manners and how to speak to people is a constant area of focus. It's always the simple things at first like saying hi to people when they say hi to you. Or to say bye and hug Grandma and Grandpa when we leave. Or to not take a toy away from another kid. These are the kinds of manners we all try to teach kids in their toddler years. As he has grown, he has begun to understand emotions more. He understands what pulls at the heartstrings. So when it's bedtime and he's not ready to go to sleep, he might say, "But Daddy...I miss you..." And my heart melts.

Now let's be honest. He's just being manipulative, using an emotional intimacy as leverage to weaken his Dad's will and procrastinate going to bed! But how often do we attempt the same kind of emotional manipulation with those who are closest to us. Paul encourages us to owe nothing to one another, except to love each other. Our love should come with no strings attached. We do not love in order to receive something from someone. We do not give in order to receive. Our love cannot be on loan.

When we are met with conditional love, we can smell it. We can sense it. We don't like it very much. As human beings, it's impossible for us to love another unconditionally as God does, because we are not God. But what we can do is remove as many of the sinful conditions we bring to the table as possible. And if the only condition remaining in us is, "Because God loved us first", we'll find this is where godly love liberates, instead of obligates, us to love without expectations.

Pray

Take an inventory of your relationships and how you show them love.
Confess any areas where you use love as a bargaining chip in your relationships.
Ask God to purify your love and liberate godly love through you.

Love Contrived

12

22

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**And as you wish that others would do to you,
do so to them. Luke 6:31**

"I love you" can be three of the most meaningful, significant, and powerful words one person can say to another. Those words ought never to be said lightly and then they also ought not be said sparingly. I know my parents love me. It's still meaningful every time I hear them say it. I know my son loves me. It still melts my heart to hear his sweet voice say those sweet words. They carry with them the implication of devotion and commitment, to stand beside each other and with each other.

Possibly one of the most destructive measures against love is when the words said are not matched by the actions that follow. When someone professes that they love you, but then hurt, insult, or abandon you, it doesn't just hurt your trust in their love. It hurts your trust in all love. Authenticity in love is crucial to how we accept and share the love of Christ. Luke puts it plainly in what we might know as the Golden Rule. But what's pivotal in the Golden Rule is that we ourselves wish to be treated well. When we get hurt and lose trust, we might not think ourselves worthy of being treated well. We might not think ourselves worthy of love.

This is the tragedy of ingenuine love. Paul in Romans encourages us to "let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good." (Romans 12:9) A simple practice with colossal consequences. John reiterates authenticity saying, "let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." (1 John 3:18) Telling people that you love them is significant, but it must be accompanied by behavior and actions. For us to accept and share the love of Christ, we must first accept that God's love is genuine, consistent, and true.

Pray

Ask God to heal old wounds of relationships that are keeping you from His love.
Ask God to foster in you a desire to love authentically those He has put in your life.

Love Given

12

23

18

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

One of the most difficult truths for me to grasp is that God loves me. It's not difficult in the sense that I just don't understand it. I understand what Scripture says. I understand that God is a loving God. I understand it is His nature to share His love. All these things I know and can understand at face value as true statements regarding the God in whom I believe. What is difficult to grasp is the implication of that reality.

When I crave the love of another and find myself heartbroken over love lost, why does God's love not immediately lift my spirits and fill that wound? The easy answer is because I'm not really understanding the implication of the reality that God loves me. I remember the first time I read John 3:16. To be honest, I read right past it because I was more intrigued by this whole concept of being born again. But as I started spending time on it and hearing more about it and hearing it repeated everywhere, I began letting it sink in.

God gave all so that we could know Him. And then encourages us to go do likewise so that all would know Him. What better way to know God more intimately than to love like He loves? This is what John is saying as he encourages us to "love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God." (1 John 4:7) Children proud of their parents desire to emulate them. The parents set a model and the children are glad to follow it because they know they are loved. Let us be children proud of our Father, that we would want so badly to be like Him. Just as John says, "We love because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19) Our Father set the example. Let us follow in love.

Pray

Ask God to stir your heart anew with His love.

Ask God to disrupt your heart with the reality of His love specifically for you.

Christmas Eve

AT LEGACY CHURCH

3PM & 5PM

Love Received

12

24

18

And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:14

Receiving love reflects God. When we receive love we are altered by it. We are changed by it. We are persuaded by it. In all of these ways we are transformed by it and begin to reflect the character of God. When I first became a Christian I remember being overwhelmed by love. I remember wanting to reach out and share the love of Christ with everyone.

Then things started to happen. People I was trying to love didn't really care about Christ. They didn't want to hear about Him from me at least. Some people that did seem to want to listen were actually just trying to pull a scam (successfully I might add) on a young Christian. And then when others just needed a little help, I never seemed to have enough to feel like I actually helped at all. There was a series of bumps along the road that all of a sudden made love feel dangerous.

And here Paul tells us in Colossians that it's worth it. Did you know that? The hurt that comes with trying to love with the love of God is worth it. Because this love "binds everything together in perfect harmony." (Colossians 3:14) It may not be easy, or quick, or famous, but harmony is struck at the heart of those who love. Love is worth it because "God is love". (1 John 4:8b) Knowing God, knowing His heartache, knowing His desires, knowing His will is worth taking the risk to love. Peter reminds us that even when it gets messy, "love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8) If you choose to love like God loves, you're going to get hurt. But love binds us in harmony, love brings you close to your Lord, and love covers shame, pain, and death. Love is worth it.

Pray

Confess to God where life has made it difficult to love.
Ask God to reignite the desire to love like He does in you.

Reflecting on Love

12

25

18

...For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth... John 18:37

Arriving at the end of the Advent season we've seen the fulfillment of four significant promises. **Hope** is the act of trusting in the unseen God and His oftentimes intangible promises. **Peace** can flourish in our hearts because of the surpassing peace that is to be in the presence of our God. **Joy** is ours because Christ shares His with us as we come close and draw near to Him. And **love** binds us together, makes God known to us, covers shame, death, and sin, and is worth the risk.

We live in an age of fulfillment because of the person and work of Jesus Christ. We have the hope of God, the peace of God, the joy of God, and the love of God thriving within us and the community of believers. The beauty of living in this age of fulfillment brought by the advent of Christ, is that we can be about what Christ came to be about.

In John 18:37, Christ says, "...For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth..." This is the mission He came to inaugurate and the mission into which He invites us still. As Paul says, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died..." (2 Corinthians 5:14) No season pardons us from forgetting what price the baby laid in manger grew up to pay. As innocent as He was laying in the stables, Christ died so that we might know the hope, peace, joy, and love He came to share with us. Now let these promises, as we walk in their fulfillment, fuel our hearts to about what Christ came to be about.

Pray

Ask God to unleash you.



Home for Christmas

LEGACY CHURCH

Many thanks to **Steven Nelms** for writing and sharing this year's Advent Devotional. We hope it has been a useful tool and a blessing to you throughout this season. **Merry Christmas!**

