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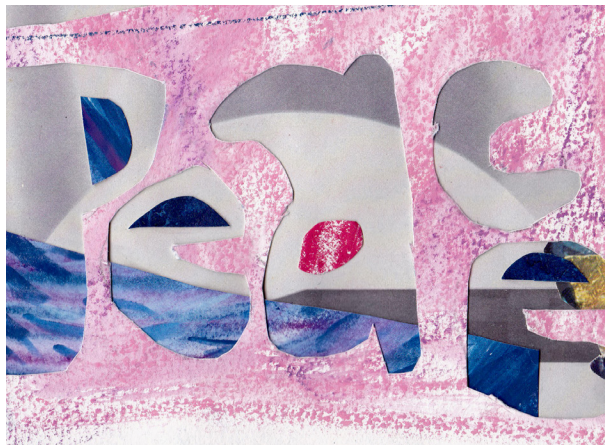
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BEHOLD

A Community Advent Devotional
by and for the Gathering Church

2019





About the Artwork

Katie Kimbrough

The collage series created for this year's advent devotional was created using painted and found papers. It was my intention to use bright color to both call attention to and communicate the joy following the birth of Jesus.

Bright colors also suggest the presence of substantial light. With little or no light, there are only shadows and darkness, respectively. The birth of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, enables us to see God more clearly and vividly as He takes on human form and walks around this earth with us.

Simple abstract forms illustrate biblical text:

The open hand of which the Lord promises to take hold, and the blind eyes that will be opened by the coming of Jesus Christ, are seen in **Hope**.

Gabriel visits Mary in **Love**.

A repeated harp shape represents Mary's Song of **Joy**.

A path of peace emerges by the light of Jesus Christ to guide us through darkness in **Peace**.

A single candle flame represents Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, in **Light**.

About this Devotional

Curt Lowndes

Behold.
Take note.
Slow down and pay attention.
Stop multi-tasking.
Be still.

Our Advent theme is “Behold.” This word shows up throughout Scripture and serves to draw our attention so that we’re focused on what follows.

“Behold” tells us to notice something or someone important. During this season of Advent, we’re beholding the coming of God in Jesus at his birth, but we’re also looking ahead to when God will come again to make all things right.

As we wait for God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, we look for signs of God’s kingdom breaking through into our daily lives. God calls us to be signs and witnesses, to point out the glimmers of hope, love, joy and peace we see in our world.

In the pages that follow, you have just that: a collection of signs calling you to behold the God who is with us. We hope this devotional helps you to behold God’s presence all around you and within you.

We have designed this devotional to be used every day (except Sundays) throughout the season of Advent to help you prepare for the celebration of God’s arrival and for the renewal of all things in Jesus Christ. Each week has its own theme, some practices to help you experience that theme, and a short memory verse. Each day has a Scripture passage and a reflection created by one of our own. Our weekly themes are hope, love, joy and peace.

We pray this devotional enables you to behold the One beholding you.

Weekly Memory Passage

“Behold, the former things
have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth
I tell you of them.”
-Isaiah 42:9 (ESV)

Weekly Psalm

Psalm 130

Weekly Practices

Watch the sunrise, write down what you are looking forward to in the coming year, encourage a friend or stranger, offer help to a neighbor, consider contributing to or partnering with a ministry or organization that seeks to give hope to people in difficult situations (people who are incarcerated, refugees, etc.)



Advent 1

Monday

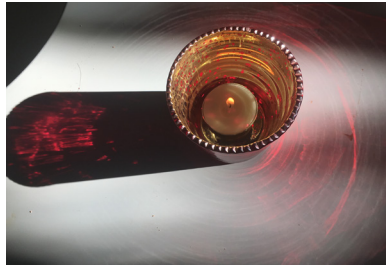
Laura Yost-Grande

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”
This is what God the Lord says—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
“I am the Lord; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.
See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.”

-Isaiah 42:1-9

I love this servant that Isaiah speaks of in 42:1-9. I like to title this section, "Behold: A Servant Comes To Make Everything Right, To Make All Things New." A servant who will come who is humble, gentle, a righter of wrongs, a healer, a teacher, someone to bring light to the Gentiles. This passage of hope is not just for the Israelites of thousands of years ago; this passage is a hope for us today.

How do I live in this hope? How can I walk in this hope? How can I be hope to others? My too-often, half-empty glass way of viewing life would see nothing but darkness and hopelessness in the world. The increasing numbers of refugees in the world, having to leave their homes because of war, violence, and poverty. Political divisiveness constantly shredding the common good. Cynicism, apathy and meanness increasing exponentially. Darkness that makes me question where and if God is working in the world.



Around me, I see family, friends and acquaintances living in extremely difficult, potentially soul-crushing situations. In my own life, living with a chronic mental illness that brings its own darkness through depression. Darkness that can deceive me into thinking that life is not worth living. All of it—SO overwhelming.

Yet, Jesus says there will be trouble in our world (John 16:33), in my life and yours as well. So when that darkness would want to overcome me, I am learning that I can't "just hope" which says to me, "just be positive." I am learning that I must practice hope; I must exercise hope like a muscle. I now believe that by practicing hope and thus, growing my hope, I grow my faith and trust in God as well.



This past summer, I experienced an acute episode of depression. It lasted for 3 1/2 months. It was so discouraging because the previous 2 1/2 years, I had lived symptom free. I knew I needed to practice hope or the fear of falling into despair and suicidal thoughts would engulf me.

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). (The church's study of John had come just in time.)

Serendipitously, I came across a notecard stuck in a book with Ephesians 5:8 written on it. "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light."

I began meditating on all things light and my hope began to grow.

There is light in community. My husband, my small group, my church family, friends who have walked alongside me for many years were there to pray and listen.

I found light in the simple things: small tea lights in Dollar Store candle holders, twinkling stars in the clear night sky—even a doctor’s penlight.

A memory of a penlight returned to me during this time of trouble reminding me that a minute amount of light can exist and the darkness trembles (John 1:5).

When I was in labor with my son, he started experiencing distress. It was decided that I should have a c-section. At the very moment that decision was made, the lights in the hospital went out. The machines were quiet. It was completely dark and very scary. We were in the middle of an ice storm. In an instant, my doctor pulled out his pen light and said, “I have all the light we need.” I vividly recall laughing and feeling totally safe. I can name it now—that tiny bit of light gave me hope that all would be well. And, thankfully, it was. The darkness trembles even at a penlight.

I want to practice hope all the time now. I want to focus on light even when I’m doing well. I want to grow my hope so I won’t see the glass half-empty but overflowing.

Yes, we live in a dark world, as did the Israelites when Isaiah pronounced his good news. But behold, look, see! There is a servant coming who will be a light for us, to make everything right and all things new. And in that Light we find our Hope.

Where might you practice hope this Advent season?

Take note of physical light you encounter today – let it be a reminder of the hope of Jesus.

Tuesday

Jessica Neiman

I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.
I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.
Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:
Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."
The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;
it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.

-Lamentations 3:19-26

How do we have hope in heartache?

Last year at this time, I hurt so bad moving to this new place. All that we loved and knew was 1600 miles away and everything that gave me a sense of routine, structure, and security stayed behind with that vast western skyline. I would feel so homesick my stomach would knot, bones felt wormy, and muscles moth-eaten. I felt so weak that my body did not want to get up off the bed, or off the bathroom floor. Door after door closed to me when I was looking for work. After yet another rejected email or phone call, I would head outside and move a rock pile, or pull weeds, or rip out old carpet. Although I tried desperately to conceal my pain, when the night came, I could not ignore the real feelings of abandonment, rejection, and failure. The heavy shroud of grief would cover me—suffocating. O yes, I know those “dark nights of the soul” where you dread nighttime and sleep is evasive. My soul could not stop the tidal wave of despair.

I could not shake the song from childhood that would come whispering into my mind, “This is the day, this is the day that the Lord has made, that the Lord has made. I will rejoice, I will rejoice and be glad in it, and be glad in it. This is the day. This is the day. I will rejoice. I will rejoice...”

Slowly, ever so slowly, I heard in my heart, wait. Wait, my sweet beloved. Wait. I am here. I am with you. Not far off but holding you right here. See. Wait. It took time, grace, love, and patience. I began to see. Yes, today, Lord, you are giving me fresh mercies. I see them. I turn my eyes to the beauty of the sky and the green of grass, my ears to the laughter of my children. O, the delight in my cup of coffee, and fuzzy slippers on my feet. The sound of the birds chirping. My soul quiets.

And I wait for you to show me how much you love me. TODAY. Today. Jesus, you saved me. You save me. How faithful you are when I do not see you and I turn into myself and see only the lack, unanswered prayers, and doubt.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

-John 1:9-14

Behold, Emmanuel! There is a Light that never dims, Love that burns bright when the night is long, and Hope—HOPE when ours is gone.

Wednesday

Jenny Lowndes

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”
These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.

Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.

By day the Lord directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God my Rock,
 “Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
 oppressed by the enemy?”
My bones suffer mortal agony
 as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
 “Where is your God?”
Why, my soul, are you downcast?
 Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
 for I will yet praise him,
 my Savior and my God.

-Psalm 42

Baby Justin was born at 22 weeks, weighting 1lb 2 oz, in a hotel bed while his young mom worked to support her addiction. At birth he tested positive for cocaine and heroin.

Baby Kamden was born at 25 weeks, weighing 1lb 8 oz. He too tested positive for cocaine, heroin, and THC and suffered major cardiac complications.

I could list so many similar stories, so many similar babies. So many stories of addiction. So many “sad” stories. So many “hopeless” stories. So many stories conceived and consumed in darkness. But I chose these two boys because I recently held them in my arms on the same night. I wrestled them to clean their feeding tubes, to measure their central lines, and to change their diapers. I held them, and I experienced darkness. But I also experienced light, and that light turned to hope.

Many days and nights the rooms and halls in the Duke University Intensive Care Nursery seem dark, and hope seems something that only will make the job more heartbreaking. Where are you, oh God?

In the roar of the waterfalls
the waves and breakers
are sweeping over this place. (v. 7)

Perhaps you too know similar stories or maybe you are living a similar story. Stories with too much darkness. Stories where light seems absolutely impossible.

My soul is downcast within me. (v. 5)
I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy? (v. 9)

Facing the dark, desperate to stand in the light, but too afraid to move from the shadows. Longing for a sign, maybe a deer yearning for water like the psalmist writes about. But the deer is on the move, showing us that hope is on the move, showing us that hope is found in the pursuit of light. Hope is not found standing still in the darkness. Even in the depths there is a window or a path. Don't be afraid to reach out your hand or step foot into the light.

As the deer yearns for streams of water,
so my soul yearns for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God? (vv. 1-2)

I held these boys, these two gifts, and watched them smile at me. It would have been so easy to write their lives off. They aren't supposed to be alive; they really should not have survived birth. They both have complicated care. They both cry a lot. They have no home to go home to. But here they are. In my arms, looking at me and smiling. They smiled, and I glimpsed hope. They smiled and the darkness had a glimmer of light.

God doesn't promise to keep us out of the dark or raging waterfalls or free of death or unimaginable pain, however God does make it harder to get lost in the depth of that darkness. And if you are struggling to find some light, borrow some from a friend. Our friends can't keep us out of the darkness, but like God, they can make it harder to get lost in there. Because as much darkness as I have seen over the years, I have witnessed far more light, far more smiles, far more homecomings. Having hope doesn't keep the darkness at bay. Having hope allows us to believe and cling to the promise that there will be light again, and it will be even brighter because we have walked through the darkness.

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God. (v. 11)

Thursday

Katherine Morrow

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

-Romans 8:18-25

“Shh, keep quiet. Your brother is still asleep,” my mother whispered to me after I bounded down the stairs. It happened every year. My brother decided that he would sleep in on Christmas morning (mostly to spite me, I was sure). I nursed my orange juice and stared at the presents under the tree, impatiently waiting for him to join the rest of the family so we could begin the Christmas celebration.

Patience has never been an easy virtue for me. I like to know what to expect. If it’s good, like Christmas morning, then I cannot wait for it to happen. If it’s unknown or negative, like exam results or an unpleasant conversation, I want to get it over with as soon as possible.

Paul understands creation’s difficulty with waiting. He writes of the suffering of humankind as we wait for God to reveal His glory. He acknowledges our suffering as real and painful. However, Paul stresses the impermanence of these sufferings and the need for hope. For me, the most difficult aspect of waiting and hoping is the uncertainty. We don’t know exactly what God’s future glory is going to look or feel like. And yet, Paul urges us to look beyond our present suffering and believe in a future that we cannot see—where we will freely live in the fullness of God’s glory.

Although it’s easy to get caught up in the suffering of this world, know that God is with us (Isaiah 43:2). He is with us as we wait and hope, even if we don’t know exactly what we are hoping for.

As you wait and prepare for Christmas during this Advent Season, I pray that you remember the impermanence of whatever present challenges you face and find hope in God’s promise.

Are you in a season of waiting or hoping for something – either to arrive or to end? How might the reminder of unseen eternal glories affect your waiting? Are there places in your life where you’ve seen God’s glory begin to break through?

Friday

Bobby & LaClaire Stewart

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

-Joshua 1:9

Each Christmas season, our family tries to walk the tightrope between a focus on celebrating the birth of Jesus by giving generously to our loved ones and the focus of our children on the anticipation of receiving gifts. Walking this tightrope is a delicate balance that we struggle with and, honestly, fail to balance each year.

In Joshua 1:9, God signals a gift that we can celebrate and anticipate with full focus. God makes clear His commitment to being with us wherever we go. God's commitment is steadfast, regardless of the challenges we face – which will be many. Whether we are facing family issues, a health crisis, financial uncertainty, an unexpected death, or even a crisis of faith, God promises His presence with us every step of the way. What an amazing gift! God the Father walking with us, leading us, guiding us, carrying us through life's challenges.

The gift of His presence alone is astounding. Fortunately, this gift keeps on giving. Joshua 1:9 clarifies that God's constant presence gives us the gift of freedom from fear and discouragement by providing courage and strength. Wow! Now this is a gift worthy of focusing our anticipatory gaze. Are you hurt, confused, scared, hopeless, bitter, unsure of how to move forward? Instead of avoiding those thoughts and fears, we can walk by faith directly into the pain, being fortified by God's presence and His gift of strength and courage. God guides us toward healing by being present and providing the strength to overcome our fears. Walking with God step by step ... wherever your feet take you.

As you celebrate Christ's birth this year, take a moment to gaze upon that amazing and life-giving gift.

Have you overlooked God's presence in your life lately?

Where might you need the courage provided by God's presence in your life?

Saturday

Josh & Katie Whiffen

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

-1 Peter 1:3-9

As Christians, we know, on a factual level, that Christ provides us with all things, especially hope. And in the good times, it's easy to remember that and believe it whole heartedly. But when we hit the bottom, during our lowest of lows, it becomes so difficult for us to remember that hope.

In my (Katie) job as a rehab occupational therapist, I see people who are going through those difficult times, and without fail my patients ask me the question that many of us ask ourselves in moments such as those – “Is there hope?” Stroke patients want to know if there's hope to regain the use of their arm. Patients with spinal cord injuries ask if there's hope to ever walk again. No matter the diagnosis, every patient yearns to find some source of hope in the midst of their struggle. As Christians, though we ourselves may sometimes forget the hope of Christ, it is when others around us are struggling that we can serve as reminders of that hope.

When my patients ask me if there is hope, I point them to the tangible examples of the progress they've made and how things have gotten better. How just last week a task that was impossible is now easy - they may not have had any movement in their hand, but today they can hold a cup of water. Even though there are examples of how Christ has brought those around us through tough seasons, sometimes we need a reminder that there's hope.

1 Peter reminds us that Christ is the source of our hope. We will go through times of suffering, but these times of suffering will serve to strengthen our faith and hope in Christ. This Advent season, as in all seasons of life, there will be trials. We all face different struggles every day, but for this season, remember that Christ has given us the greatest hope we can receive. And remember that you can be the reminder of that hope for others.

How can you be a reminder of hope to others today?

Notes from Week 1:

Weekly Memory Passage

"For nothing will be impossible
with God."

-Luke 1:37

Weekly Psalm

Psalm 103

Weekly Practices

Serve the vulnerable or someone in need, call your family or friends to tell them you love them, include someone who may be lonely, identify someone with whom you disagree or have a hard time getting along and prayerfully consider a specific way to show them love (even if nothing else changes in your relationship).



Week 2

So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the Lord had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin..."

-Exodus 34:4-7a

"To me this is like the days of Noah,
when I swore that the waters of Noah
would never again cover the earth.
So now I have sworn not to be angry with you,
never to rebuke you again.
Though the mountains be shaken
and the hills be removed,
yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken
nor my covenant of peace be removed,"
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

-Isaiah 54:9-10

One of my fondest childhood movie memories is of watching the Cecil B. DeMille epic **The Ten Commandments** on TV. I can see clearly Yul Brynner as the arrogant Pharaoh and Edward G. Robinson as the evil overseer Dathan, but most especially I can picture Charlton Heston as Moses. I loved watching Moses develop from an impetuous son of the palace to a shepherd in Midian to a reluctant spokesman for God and finally to the leader of his people, the one whose outstretched staff signaled the parting of the Red Sea. Maybe the special effect was filmed with Jell-O, but to my young eyes it was cinematographic magic.

But when Moses brought the tablets of the 10 commandments down from Mt. Sinai and found that the Israelites had built a golden calf in his absence, I found myself astounded. I wondered how the people could be so impatient, so ungrateful, so stupid. Hadn't they been paying attention?

Hadn't God just sent ten plagues to torment their captors in Egypt?

Hadn't God freed them from slavery?

Hadn't God intervened to rescue them from Pharaoh's army?

Good grief. No wonder Moses broke the tablets. If I had been writing the script, I probably would have had God turn his back on the Israelites forever. "Sorry, Abraham," I might have had God say, "I can't trust your descendants to be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Forget that promise." No swirl of cloud. No pillar of fire. Exit stage right.

Good thing I wasn't writing the script.

From the very beginning, God had planned for human beings, his image bearers, to enjoy life with him. As the first chapters of Scripture tell us, the mother and father of humanity listened to the lies of the enemy. The disease of sin and its attendant death entered the world, and every person was subject to it. The Bible is remarkable for sharing the stories of the ways in which its characters disobey and disrespect the God who created them.

But even more remarkable is the way the Bible tells us about the character of God. Rather than raging in anger at the disobedience and disrespect of his image bearers, God abounds in love. Over and over we see the love of God demonstrated as God works with his people—always providing, always keeping promises. Even more than a God who demonstrates his power by sending plagues or causing the waters of the sea to part, God demonstrates his love and compassion by remaining faithful to his people even when they aren't faithful to him.

Much later, the Bible tells us plainly that God is love (see 1 John 4:8)—not just that God is loving, but that God is love. The life that God intended for his image bearers is to be recipients of that love, included in the beautiful relationship that Father, Son, and Spirit have enjoyed forever. Although we might sometimes picture God as angry at us, disappointed in us, or intent on punishing us, the God revealed in scripture is compassionate, gracious, and slow to anger. Love is God's nature; despite our doubts, God will never not love us. Instead, God patiently lifts us into his love.

Sometimes we get a glimpse of the greatness of God—in the splendor of a starry sky, the empathy of a friend's outstretched arms, the charm of a baby's sleepy smile, even sometimes in the magic of movies. One day we'll see clearly, and no doubt we'll fall to our knees in joy, gratitude, and worship as we see Jesus face to face. Until then we walk by faith, clinging to the promises that the Father has made to us, following the lead of the Spirit, trusting in a force that can't be shaken—the eternal love of God for us.

Can you think of a time when you experienced God's faithfulness even in the midst of your faithlessness?

Tuesday

Brandon & BethAnne Dorn

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of gods.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords:

His love endures forever.

to him who alone does great wonders,

His love endures forever.

who by his understanding made the heavens,

His love endures forever.

who spread out the earth upon the waters,

His love endures forever.

who made the great lights—

His love endures forever.

the sun to govern the day,

His love endures forever.

the moon and stars to govern the night;

His love endures forever.

He remembered us in our low estate

His love endures forever.

and freed us from our enemies.

His love endures forever.

He gives food to every creature.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of heaven.

His love endures forever.

-Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26

Earlier this year, we had the opportunity to go to the International Dark Sky Reserve in central Idaho. The reserve is not a specific location, but rather the designation of a large portion of land with the lowest levels of artificial light in the country. The result is a pitch-black night sky where one can see galaxies (and sometimes the Northern Lights) with the naked eye. Our drive out into the country led us to a dirt road winding through a valley surrounded by mountains. We stopped by a lake, climbed on top of our rented truck, and waited until our eyes adjusted to the darkness. Barely able to see five feet in front of us, the skies revealed themselves in a way we'd never seen before: painted with soft light from the Milky Way, dotted with vibrant planets twinkling, accented by shooting stars.

This display has been going on for billions of years, night after night. Yet we only were attuned to its grandeur when we found ourselves in an isolated place, alone in darkness. Long after our trip to Magic Valley (as that place was so appropriately named), the stars will burn overhead, will endure, whether we pay attention to them or not.

It seems a constant of human nature that we take for granted the things that are always there, especially those things that don't announce their presence. We're much more attuned to change and disruption than we are to the sustaining patterns and materials of our lives, things like breath, air, light, water — the brilliant things that fade into the background like stars in a city sky. The writer of Psalm 136 takes pains to help us attend to the underlying framework of all life: God's love. We can't finish a sentence without being reminded that it is present and enduring in everything. Repeated over and over, the refrain becomes a pattern for our response to whatever we encounter: whatever has oppressed us, and whatever we have overcome, God's love endures forever.

Seeing the stars that night in Idaho, we wondered what it would be like to be a local, able to look up on any clear night at the undying embers of the cosmos. No one else was out there with us that night; turns out the lure of Netflix reaches even to Dark Sky reserves. We take for granted the things we don't attend to; we stop attending to the things that we see all the time. As Christians, we risk losing a sense of awe at God's love as we hear it preached week in and week out — the fact that love, and nothing else, is the motivating force behind all that is. Love that forever seeks us, love that is with us before we're born and after we die. Like the lines of the Psalm, the more we attend to God's love, the more we see it interspersed between all the parts of our lives until we can't help but see it everywhere sustaining us, a rhythm that goes on into eternity.

What beauty have you taken for granted in life?

Take a moment to focus on the breath in your lungs – think of how God's love sustains you.

You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.
I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.
I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.
I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.
On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.
Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.
I cling to you;
your right hand upholds me.

-Psalm 63:1-8

After a long and draining year, being asked to write a reflection on “love” for Advent seemed too hard. I read Psalm 63 over and over, searching for some “spark” to inspire a reflection and rekindle my excitement and hope. What came out, instead, was this “response” to the psalm - an attempt at an honest conversation with God via scripture. Though I wish that my words could be full of exuberance and exclamation for joy, I am hopeful that they will give permission for honesty and genuine wrestling with scripture and with God.

“A Weary Soul’s Response to Psalm 63”

1. God you are my God. I am searching so hard to find you. Body and soul, I thirst for you in this dry and weary land without water.

God, you say you are Immanuel, that you are with me and for me. But I am oh so weary and feel trapped in a world that offers no respite for broken hearts.

2. Yes, I have seen you in your Temple. I have seen your strength and glory.

I have seen you work in my life. It would be a lie to say you haven’t come through for me before.

3. Your faithful love is better than life, so my lips praise you.

I want to have lips that praise you more than they curse you, but I can’t get there by myself.

4. By my life, I will praise you. In your name, I lift my hands in prayer.

I promise to devote all of myself to you, but I feel like I need you to show up a little faster and in more obvious ways.

5. When I sit down to satisfy my hunger, my joyful lips hunger to praise you!

I look all over for fulfillment, for relief from heartache, and for deep soul rest. I stuff my heart and mind with things that give only a temporary high.

6. I remember you while lying on my bed. I think about you in the middle of the night!

During sleepless nights I call on you, but only to accuse you, call you a liar and claim your love is inconsistent.

7. That is because you are the one who helps me. It makes me happy to be under your protection!

When I blame you for leaving, you remind me that you're closer than my next breath.

8. I stay close to you, and you hold me with your powerful arm.

Help me to see that I am sinking in an ocean of your grace, not drowning in a pit of despair.

Have you ever felt uncomfortable expressing your honest thoughts and feelings to God? Why does this seem difficult or off-limits? If you find yourself struggling to relate to God honestly right now, read some of the Psalms (try 6, 10, 13, 22, 38, 55, 69, 74, 88, 102, or 142) and use the Psalmists' heartfelt cries to God as a model for your own response.

Thursday

Amy & Peyton Crump

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

-Romans 8:31-39

I follow a guy on Twitter who writes the exact same tweet every week:



BJ Thompson
@bj116

I am a mess & yet deeply loved by God.

5:45 PM · Nov 10, 2019 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

Every time I read the tweet, it hits me at just the right moment. It can be when I first wake up in the morning, during a hectic day, or waiting in the carpool line. There isn't a time I don't love the reminder that while I am a mess, God deeply loves me.

I hope that during this season of Advent we have confidence that we can take our "mess"—our troubles, our hardships, our persecutions, our dangers, our fears, our sickness, our sadness, our pain, the deaths of those we care about, our demons, our despairs, our imperfections; our past, present and future messes—take it all to God without fear that it may cause separation between us and Him.

And when we are feeling like too much of a mess for words ... no worries. God can handle that too. God puts into words what we ourselves can't muster up; God knows our words before we say them.

And then, because God IS love, he responds with these words: "I am patient, I am kind, I keep no record of wrongs. I always protect, I always trust, I always hope, I always persevere. I will never fail you."

Recite out loud, "I am a mess & yet deeply loved by God."

What are some of your "messes" you can hand over to God?

Thank you, God, for loving us through our lowest lows and our highest highs. Thank you for taking joy in us. Thank you for never ever leaving us. Thank you for your deep, inseparable love. Amen.

Take some time to meditate on clear evidences in your life of God's love for you. Then spend a few moments reflecting love and adoration back to God.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

-John 15:9-17

I must admit that these verses raise many questions for me and a desire to better understand Jesus's meaning. I find some of these verses contrary to my experience - "ask whatever you desire, and it will be done if you are living in union with me." What then is the implication of not having our prayers answered? Why is the pain not taken away? Why is God silent? What is meant by "abundant fruit" and what constitutes abundant fruit vs. meager fruit in living out our lives? What is the difference between joy and peace and what are joy's manifestations? What does "loving deeply" look like in real life terms? How do we determine how much of our day is spent in loving others through serving/helping while living out "regular" lives? One of the gifts of being in a community of believers is to be able to discuss and hash out these many questions, to be challenged and compare notes about how we actually live out the words of Jesus. It would be good to do more of this.

For me, the feeling of bearing abundant fruit and expressing Jesus' love for others has been most profound while tutoring and spending time with kids in a nearby underserved elementary school. Each child is so full of potential and each one longs to be known, to know they are a unique and valuable creation of God. Simply validating their worth through spending one-on-one time with them, as Jesus validates our worth by caring for each of us, feels like rich abundant fruit.

As the garden metaphor continues from the previous verses, Jesus reminds us to receive nourishment from him, the vine, the source of life and flourishing growth. I love the idea that we are all branches on that vine, that growth occurs when we have hearts that desire to love each other as Jesus loves us. Of course, that is a tall order to make real, but simply caring and trying our best to love each other is one way to bear fruit.

“Keep my commands” - whoa, volumes could be written about this statement. When I think about all this means, it feels overwhelming. I return to the two commands that Jesus said were the greatest - to love the Lord God with all our hearts and to love our neighbors. These commands remind us that we are to remain in him as he remains in us, that the illusion of freedom coming through our own self-reliance and independence from God is not freedom at all.

Daily, often hourly, I find myself gravitating towards self-sufficiency, living in my own head vs. conversing with God throughout the day in partnership and trust. I think that is why I so appreciated the call to prayer while in Jordan. It reminded me to acknowledge God, thank him, to rest in his love, to know that he is the alpha and omega. What a gift to ponder this unfathomable love made tangible during the Advent season.

How might you show love for your neighbor today?

Do you have resources (time, skills, etc.) you could share with someone that would bear fruit in both of your lives?

What are some habits you could practice to keep yourself in conversation with God?

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

-1 John 3:1

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

-1 John 4:16-21

FEAR AND LOVE: A CONVERSATION

Susie: "I love this man and think I want to spend the rest of my life with him."

Fear: "You don't even know what love is, and even if you did, you don't deserve it. And you certainly can't trust it."

Love: "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?' Ponder all of the ways in which he has responded to you in love, with kindness and compassion, and with patience and endurance. He has not abandoned you, despite the many opportunities you have given him to do so."

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Carlos: "I never imagined myself getting married again, but Susie is everything I could ever want in a wife. I want her to be in my life for the rest of my days."

Fear: "This woman is out of your league. She is well educated, beautiful, and very successful. What do you think you offer her that she doesn't already have? You two just don't add up!"

Love: "Do you not see the gleam in her eyes when she looks at you? You have brought joy into her life and she into yours. Though you two may not work 'on paper,' Susie's heart and your heart are built the same, and that's what matters."



Love had to overcome a multitude of fears for us to come to the altar and be where we are today. Look with wonder at God's marvelous love for us - we are called children of God, and we are. When Fear tells us that we're unlovable, too damaged, defined by our sin, and never enough, can we see instead God's perfect Love for us, a lavish love that calls us beloved children, and in doing so silence the voice of Fear?

- Do you have examples from your own life of times where Love overcame Fear?
- What about the opposite? When has the voice of Fear prevailed and caused you to make a decision based on what it told you? What were the consequences of that?
- What is Fear whispering to you now?
- What practices are most helpful for you in focusing on the Voice of Love instead of Fear?

Notes from Week 2:



Week 3

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.

Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you."

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.
-Isaiah 35:1-10

When my little brother was around 5 years old, he made up this tradition of running up to my sisters and me at random with open arms, and embracing us, singing, "Reeeejoyce!" This would then be repeated over and over again for fun. I don't remember how this originated, and most of the time we would call it out randomly and surprise each other even when it didn't make sense. After a while we would refer to huge hugs as "rejoices."

I loved the spontaneity of this ritual, and thinking back, that is exactly how joy and rejoicing should work. Joy is not a feeling that only comes naturally to us when something good has happened—that is happiness. Joy is a choice. Something you choose to feel no matter what your circumstances are. We often have to remind ourselves of the source of our joy when we seem to lose it—which is the mysterious and perfect plan of God that, as humans, we will never fathom—this plan that included God coming down as a human being to sacrifice Himself and conquer death so our record could be a reflection of His.

It is because of this good news that we are called to be joyful in the struggle, to be joyful in the pain, to be joyful when we don't know what our future looks like. With joy comes faith and a power from above to conquer our fears, persevere through hardships, and bring clarity to the next steps we should take. Joy creates a path through life that drives away the lions and beasts. This path is clearer when our attitude is fixed on being positive and hopeful, trusting in God's perfect plan.

Being joyful does not mean ignoring pain and sadness. Grief is the right response when we and others are beaten down. What matters most is that we rise and pick both ourselves and those around us off the ground, time after time, saying: "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."

"They shall obtain gladness and JOY, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (v. 10)

Sorrow and sighing flee at the very presence of this unconditional joy because partnered with it is faith. Faith that through all the pain, despair, and death, there is a reason to rejoice. Despite all the mystery, doubts, and questions, there is a reason to hope and trust. This faith-based joy brings rushing water into the wilderness and streams throughout the desert; it opens the eyes of the blind and ears of the deaf; it gives a voice to the mute, movement to the lame, and strengthens the hands of the weak.

When you feel like the world continually deals you trial after trial, grieve for the sin and darkness in the world. Feel the pain that comes with this sadness; but then look up and rise knowing that Christ has already conquered death to bring us life and joy. The light He has planted within us will bring change to the world and hope to the lost.

What could the relationship between faith and joy look like in your life?

How can you choose joy today?

Tuesday

Tyler Dunstan

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

-Hebrews 12:1-2

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

-James 1:2-4

Maybe the only thing worse than suffering is having a well-meaning Christian tell you to rejoice because you are suffering. Perhaps you've been on the receiving or giving end of this unfortunate scenario. The well-meaning Christian might be forgiven, however, because many texts in the New Testament seem to justify the trite triumphalism and toxic positivity that those who suffer can sense a mile away. Those who suffer know instinctively that even though Scripture has been quoted at them, something profoundly untrue has been spoken.

So what do we make of James and the author of Hebrews? Are they trafficking in trite triumphalism and toxic positivity? Is their counsel to those who suffer to put on a smile and pretend their faith has made everything okay when it clearly hasn't?

What is remarkable about so many of the New Testament writings is that they do not typically describe in detail the cosmic upheaval that has taken place. Often, the fact that God has "turned the world upside down" is simply taken for granted in texts that are mostly concerned with working out the implications of such an event in the life of the community of faith. That God's remaking of the world in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus informs the texts from Hebrews and James at a deep structural level. This is clear from the fact that "joy" and "cross" and "trials" are used in the same sentences. This combination of words was unthinkable before the Christian revolution. But in God's new world they somehow belong together.

But the definitions and assumptions of the old world are not far gone. The author of Hebrews says that Jesus disregarded the shame of the cross. If ancient crucifixion was anything, it was shameful. It was a type of bodily torture that was also designed to inflict a maximum of social and emotional torture upon its victims and those who saw them.

Crucifixion was a method of execution in which the one sentenced to death became a living and dying parody of their crimes. In a social and political world dominated by a strict hierarchy of status, honor, and shame, death by crucifixion was often reserved for those the Roman leaders thought had acted beyond their status—especially those who aspired by means of revolution or insurrection to take upon themselves the status reserved for men of power. Thus the crucified were mockingly raised up to a literal higher elevation so that by their temporary “high status” the world could be reminded of the truth.

“Behold.” This imperative to look and ponder deeply was at the heart of Roman crucifixion. This was a method of state execution that was meant to be seen. The Romans were especially gifted at visual propaganda. Through their coins, statues, monuments, temples, roads, and cities, they projected a network of visual symbolism that was undeniably powerful in its ability to shape the minds, the attitudes, and value systems of the millions of mostly illiterate humans who lived within Rome’s imperial reach. Perhaps no visual symbol of Rome’s complete and uncontested claim to its divine power over life and death was as potent as crucifixion. The sight of a heaving chest struggling to grasp for the breath of life spoke more than a thousand words inscribed in stone ever could. Rome instead inscribed its power visually on the bodies of the crucified. Behold.

The extent and power of Rome’s visual persuasion can be seen in the insidious way in which the Romans inscribed their vision of the world onto the minds of the subjugated peoples living under their sway. When Paul says in Galatians 3:13, “cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree,” he is appealing to what must have been a well-known and accepted interpretation of the phrase he is quoting from Deuteronomy 21:23. In a Roman world filled with corpses hanging on wooden crosses, what were Jewish onlookers to conclude theologically about those thus executed by the state? At least one response seems to have been an internalization of Rome’s visual narrative upon the minds of those they oppressed—those whom Rome crucifies must be accursed by the God of Israel as well. There is no escaping Rome when Rome is within you.

The power of Christianity in the face of the Roman empire was not its willingness to foment revolt against Rome's military legions. Christianity went after something much more fundamental to Rome's claims of divine sanction for its militaristic empire—its visual symbolism. For all the problems caused by the book of Revelation, chapters 4 and 5 undoubtedly justify its inclusion in the canon of Scripture.

In these two chapters we are given a visual glimpse of what Hebrews 12:2 only mentions in passing. Revelation 4 draws upon iconographic imagery from the Ancient Near East, from the heavenly visions in the Old Testament, and the propagandistic images of the Roman emperor to depict the God of Israel as the true emperor of the cosmos. This visual in itself is subversive of imperial claims, but the Christian vision subverts these images of power much more deeply still. In Revelation 5, John the seer turns and looks, and behold! in the midst of the throne there is a "Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered." In this one visual image the entire symbolic world of Roman power has been overturned. Moreover, trite Christian triumphalism and toxic positivity are all overturned.

What John sees is not an image of Jesus who is "all better now." John sees a lamb as if slaughtered. The symbolic force of this image is the reversal of the conclusion that those who suffer must be cursed by God. Human suffering as embodied in the shameful death of Jesus has been revealed to be the very heart of what it means for the God of Israel to be the ruler of the cosmos. What this imagery states so powerfully is that the resurrection and ascension of Christ are not only reversals of Jesus's suffering, but they are also the ultimate affirmations that it is in the face of the crucified Jesus that God's identity and power are seen most clearly.

This image of the crucified Jesus at the center of cosmic authority is the deep logic of the Christian connection between suffering and joy. James and the author of Hebrews know this logic and their appeal is for their readers to behold this image. These verses are not exhortations to “try harder.” The moral formation that happens is through looking at Jesus and having his image and his narrative shape our minds, attitudes, and value systems. It is in beholding Jesus that our minds begin to evaluate our lives and the world differently. The image of the crucified in the midst of the throne of God becomes the central image through which we see the world. The deep and abiding joy that comes from knowing that this image is the true shape of the world cannot be taken away by well-meaning Christians, by despotic politicians and rulers, or any of the numerous and horrendous traumatic events we suffer in this life.

What experience of suffering in your life could be transformed by viewing it from the perspective of Christ’s death and resurrection?

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

-Nehemiah 8:9-12

Holy.

Like the folks in this passage, the word “holy” often evokes a sense of vast distance between us and God, especially in light of our inadequacies and mistakes. And this grief weighs heavily on a heavy soul.

But God is not a heavy soul. As the Trinity in itself is the most joyful being in the universe, so the call for a holy day of rejoicing summons us out from our griefs and inadequacies toward a communion of rejoicing.

But he knows us. And knows how we would rather turn in on ourselves than join the festivity. Does it not seem funny, then, that God must command rejoicing as a response to holiness? How do you respond to that command?

We celebrate a joyful God who out of inexhaustible love spun stars, cradled creation, and breathed his life into creatures for whom he harbors wild affections. And as Christmas nears, we celebrate that that insatiably joyful God has come among us ... a holy day indeed. Breathe in that reality, that despite your griefs and pangs and self-doubt, a joyful God comes and has come near to woo you into joyful fellowship with Him and his people.

Behold! God is coming! Prepare yourselves! Put aside your grief and join with and in the Trinity’s joyous life – preheat the oven! – eat rich food! – drink fancy wine! – play board games! – invite and share the feast in every neighborly direction you can! For Mary carries the hope of all the world. It is a holy day indeed, and the joy of the LORD is among us and is our strength! Amen.

What are some specific ways you can spread joy to others this season?

What do you think it means for “the joy of the Lord” to be our strength?

I will exalt you, Lord,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
Lord my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.
You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit.
Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people;
praise his holy name.
For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favor lasts a lifetime;
weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.
When I felt secure, I said,
"I will never be shaken."
Lord, when you favored me,
you made my royal mountain stand firm;
but when you hid your face,
I was dismayed.
To you, Lord, I called;
to the Lord I cried for mercy:
"What is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?
Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me;
Lord, be my help."
You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
Lord my God, I will praise you forever.

-Psalm 30

Think of a time when you felt like you had joy...

From Tim:

"It was when I was younger, and I went snowboarding out in the Rockies for the very first time. On the first day of the trip I rode the ski lift to the top of the mountain. As I neared the end of the lift, my heart was pounding with excitement and anticipation. Before launching down the face of the slope, I needed to stop and take it all in. There I was, standing at 12,000 ft elevation with no buildings, trees, people or traffic around. There was a clear blue sky. I could see for what felt like hundreds of miles in any direction. Everything was quiet, breathtakingly quiet, and I felt at peace. There, in a place of majestic beauty, I could see all of God's glory and felt His presence. In that presence, I felt full of JOY."

From Erin:

"Most of my memorable experiences with true JOY are shrouded in deep pain, sadness, or heartbreak. These are moments when it seems happiness is impossible, but joy bubbles up and permeates through the situation. These are the moments His true LIGHT shines in and through the darkness, and I realize the truth in His promises of redemption, restoration, and joy. I remember flashes of living in Mozambique and seeing true joy in the eyes and lives of those living in tiny reed huts smaller than my son's nursery, eating day old unrefrigerated food, without electricity, walking miles upon miles to the nearest health clinic, debating over whether food or medicine was the priority for the week. I remember flashes of walking alongside families in the Neonatal ICU as they made the painful decision to say goodbye, standing near as their sweet infants took their last breaths, or rocking babies into the arms of Jesus when their families couldn't be present. I remember flashes of being in the mire of life and simultaneously overwhelmed while on a hike in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by unspeakable beauty in God's creation."

Psalm 30 promises joy. Joy is not the experiences you have, but who you have those experiences with. If you know Jesus, you will have joy in those experiences. No matter the situation or what God is currently bringing you through, He will always be faithful and there will be joy. Happiness results from outward things. Joy can only come from a relationship with Jesus Christ. Right now there may be silence, darkness, mourning, weeping, death, or desperation, but in God's timing, all things will be restored and there will be joy. Through relationship with Him, despite any outward circumstances, joy will well up.

During this Advent season, we challenge you to cast aside happiness, that which is dependent upon outward things and current circumstances, to dig deep and hold fast to Him and His promises to restore and redeem. Reach for JOY. Joy endures forever.

Jesus went on to say, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."

At this, some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" They kept asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying."

Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'? Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

-John 16:16-24

God's love and presence is so powerful and so focused on you– yes, you– that the grief you feel now will one day be turned to joy. A form of joy you cannot imagine.

The separation felt when you long for a miracle, the loss felt when your life shatters, the pressure felt when you lose grasp of what kept you grounded or comfortable. Each place of loss and sadness is the reality of an opportunity to cry, "Lord, Lord, help me! Lord, Lord, I need you in a new way, a way I never could have imagined before!"

Then a moment arrives when that which you knew and the pain that held your heart captive rises to a pitch of drowning all future life. The tide of bitterness and sadness begins to drown the last trace of hope that was built on all you knew before. Light draws its next to last gasp, your soul lets go of all that once placed surety under your feet .

Behold. Behold. Behold. Behold the risen lamb of God ... a risen savior who makes all things new. A new form of Christ stood before the disciples, replacing their previous foundation with an unimaginable power. The unquenchable love and call of God to love all of creation and all humankind. This new Christ, alive from the dead, spoke life into the void of each person's despair. A life previously unknown providing a new peace surpassing all understanding.

This new savior, loving you, present with you, is with you in a new way after all your seasons of grief. All you must do is stop and behold. Then watch Joy rise through the broken ground you stand within and rest in that which has no end, the risen power of Christ.

As you observe Christ's first advent this season, take time to reflect on the even greater joys His second coming will bring.

Saturday

Daniel & Aimee Jones

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

-Philippians 4:4-9

We are not promised an easy life. In the past year, we have experienced the paradoxical balance of sorrow and joy, heartbreak and peace that can only come from God.

We felt God's presence stronger than ever before on the day we found out our daughter Virginia (Ginny) Hope died in the womb at 35 weeks into pregnancy. Although we had intense pain and sorrow, we felt a deep comfort and peace that surpassed all our understanding. In that moment, we fully expected to feel hopeless, but God showed himself to us in an undeniable way. We still had hope, peace and even joy in our darkest hour. We both know fully well that without God showing up, we couldn't have made it.

When we think back to that day, we are reminded of the hardship, but we are also given a boost of faith. We remember how God met us there. Instead of a cycle of death, despair, and suffering, God brought us into a cycle of faith, peace, and joy in our loss. God's deliverance was beautiful.

Despite this peace, there are still many moments when praying with thanksgiving and making our requests known to God can be difficult. When the answer to a prayer is no or a request we deem monumental is denied, how can we thankfully ask for anything ever again? It is in those moments that seeing "whatever is lovely" feels impossible and finding "whatever is just" feels inconceivable. At those times, we have to rely on each other. We rely on you to pray for us and to see whatever is true and lovely and pure when we cannot. We depend on this church to remind us that love is bigger than loss, and in that, there is much joy to be found.

That joy comes from the truth that Jesus came to Earth and defeated death. When we internalize this truth, our eyes are opened to behold what is lovely and pure and worthy of praise. Because Jesus came, we can have peace and joy in the midst of loss and heartache.

We are not promised an easy life. But we can take comfort in knowing that our God is at hand and that He will show up in our times of need. Rejoice! Do not be anxious about anything!

Can you think of someone who is struggling to see what is true and lovely and pure right now? How could you come alongside them in faith?

If you are the one struggling, is there someone you could reach out to for support in believing the promises of God?

Notes from Week 3:

Weekly Memory Passage

“Because of the tender mercy
of our God,
whereby the sunrise
shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit
in darkness and in the
shadow of death,
to guide our feet
into the way of peace.”
-Luke 1:78-79 (ESV)

Weekly Psalm

Psalm 85

Weekly Practices

Stargaze, go on a quiet hike, clear your schedule for 30 min to sit and do nothing, support a peace-seeking organization (see missions table for more info), listen instead of speaking, research areas of the world in conflict and commit to pray for peace for people living there.



Week 4

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

-Ephesians 2:11-22

Separation. Hopelessness. Hostility. As we find ourselves living in the days between the 2016 and 2020 elections, these are concepts with which we've grown wearily familiar. It grieves many of us to see and experience this spirit of division in our news and social media feeds, our family gatherings, and even our interactions with fellow believers. What comfort God has for us in passages like Ephesians 2:11-22, then, as we are reminded that the early Church knew the same struggles, themselves living in between two key moments — the first Advent of Christ and the day of His return.

Before addressing the need for harmony among people, Paul first points to the infinitely more serious rift that existed between God and humanity — the whole reason for Christ's coming. In Ephesians 2:1-10, Paul rehearses the transfer from death to life that Jesus accomplished for believers through His own death and resurrection. Then he tells the mostly Gentile Ephesian church to stop, "remember," behold their status as those doubly far off from the covenant promise of eternal life that God had extended to ethnic Israel. In welcoming Gentiles into the New Covenant in Christ, God had already accomplished the greatest peace between two opposing parties. Paul wanted this truth to fill the Ephesian church with faith for the comparatively smaller matter of knowing peace with one another.

In the glow of passages like Acts 2, it's easy to forget the challenges the early Church faced in integrating non-Jews, but that tension fills many of the pages of the New Testament. Under the Old Covenant, God called Israel to consecrate themselves as His people, separating themselves from the nations around them by observing various types of laws. By the time Paul writes Ephesians, though, something has changed — instead of God's people seeking separation from the Gentiles, the Gentiles have become part of the people of God.

What has made the difference? Jesus, who came to earth and preached peace to those who were near and peace to those who were far off. Unified in their reconciliation to God, Jews and Gentiles are now called to pursue reconciliation with one another. Apart from Jesus, a wall of hostility makes this impossible, but Paul says that, just as the very body of Jesus was torn, the barrier between these groups has been demolished so that they can work together on a new construction project: life together as the dwelling place of God, with Christ as the Cornerstone.

The image of a cornerstone appears elsewhere in Scripture, and Jesus makes it clear in Matthew 21 that when David and Isaiah spoke prophetically of “a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation,” albeit one rejected by humanity (Is. 28:16, Ps. 118:22), He was the One in view. Whereas those Old Testament passages emphasized the cornerstone as a crucial part of a structure’s foundation, Paul, writing as the apostle to the Gentiles, reveals an even fuller understanding of the symbol. Now, rather than building and maintaining walls between ourselves, each believer, as a “living stone” (1 Pet. 2:5), is being joined with a variety of other stones into a new set of walls, with Jesus the Cornerstone bringing all opposing sides together to meet in Himself.

Does all this mean that believers will always agree on a single, official position on every matter? Of course not; the stones in a building are individual parts of a whole and thus retain their unique character, just as each follower of Christ has been created and called to walk out a custom-designed role in the kingdom of God. Robotic, coerced conformity is not true peace, and God’s ultimate goal is to craft each of us into the image of His Son, not to one another. We will still experience friction as we are fitted together into a place for the Spirit of God to dwell, but when we feel that tension, we can find peace and make peace by fixing our eyes on the Cornerstone and aligning ourselves with Him, the One who came to be our peace.

Can you think of a time Jesus was a cornerstone in one of your relationships, connecting you although you are different?

How can we be voices of peace in the coming 2020 elections?

Notes from Week 4:



Christmas Eve

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.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

-Luke 2:1-20

“Behold!”

Most English translations no longer include this word when the angel of the Lord announces to the shepherds the great news about the birth of a Savior.

I wonder if it was a command or an invitation. And did the shepherds really have a choice? When the glory of the Lord is shining all around, and then a heavenly choir breaks out, it seems that it would be impossible not to behold.

But think about it. How busy are you going to be today, Christmas Eve? How much do you have to get done?

Even getting to a Christmas Eve service can be very stressful, especially with kids.

What might we miss?

Where might God be saying, "Behold?"

How might you see the glory of Christ today?

How might it change your attitude about today if you were looking for the glory of Christ?

Try it right now.

Lord, help me to behold the glory of Christ today. Help me to recognize his glory. May the radiance of his peace be all over me. Holy Spirit, please open my eyes.
Amen.

Join us each Sunday for Worship at 10:30am at
Creekside Elementary School
5321 Ephesus Church Rd, Durham, NC 27707

THE *Gathering* CHURCH

Dec 1 **Behold Hope!** First Sunday of Advent

Dec 8 **Behold Love!** Second Sunday of Advent
Guest Speaker Will Acuff from Corner to Corner
Gathering Church Choir
Dec 13, 7-8p Reality Ministries Live Navity

Dec 15 **Behold Joy!** Third Sunday of Advent
Children's Christmas Program & Potluck

Dec 22 **Behold Peace!** Fourth Sunday of Advent
Jesus' Birthday Party (GC Kids) & the Hanging of the Greens

Dec 24 **Behold Light!** Christmas Eve
Candlelight Service 6pm @ Creekside Elementary School.

