

GRIT TO *Grace*

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



United Methodist Churches of Indiana

NOVEMBER 27 - BISHOP JULIUS C. TRIMBLE

"Guide my feet on this hope-filled journey." -Ephesians 1:18 (NIV)



Marian Wright Edleman, the founder and president emerita of The Children's Defense Fund, set out to write a book on policy. She ended up writing a book of prayers and meditations for children.

This book of prayers and stories reminds me to keep asking God to guide my feet in the ways of hope.

Hope that is wrapped in the promise of the coming the Christ Child. Hope that is a reminder that, as Christians, we never walk alone. Hope that is quiet and warm like a candle we light in our sanctuaries and homes. Hope that sustains us while we run this race of faith. Hope that brings joy to others when we do not pass the opportunity to do small things.

In *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations for Our Children*, Ms. Edelman writes, "Lord, I want to be free of the pressure to do great things in the world by being great in doing small things for Thee." Big or small, we need God guiding our feet. Our youngest son, Julius Thomas, reminded me recently of a powerful sentiment, "We cannot ask God to order our steps and be afraid to walk in them."

As we begin this journey of Advent, I invite you to join me in the joyful journey of hope as we continue walking where God leads and serving God with acts big and small.

Loving God, help us to do both big and small things for you. Order our steps in the love of the coming promise and promises of God. Amen.

NOVEMBER 28 - PASTOR OSCAR RAMOS

"Because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." -2 Corinthians 4:18 (NRSV)

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." -Isaiah 9:6 (NRSV)

I met Rosa at El Buen Pastor, a Methodist congregation located in downtown Reynosa, Tamaulipas, a border city. She briefly attended our congregation while she was waiting to cross the

border and join a friend in Chicago. Rosa left behind her parents and siblings back in a little town in Honduras and ventured through dangerous roads and cities confronting endless dangers. After a



month of walking and riding in the back of trucks—and sometimes sleeping with some families in Mexico who support the immigrants—she completed the 1,200 miles that separated her town from the U.S.A.-Mexico border.

When she shared her testimony at a Sunday morning service at El Buen Pastor, I couldn't understand why she was so determined to make it to Chicago...until she stroked her belly. "His name will be Emanuel," she said. She was 4 months pregnant and couldn't see a future for her baby back in Honduras. Our congregation provided a doctor, a clean bed, clothing, hot food, and many prayers. Months later, we knew she made it to her "icy promised land" of Chicago.

Hope is a contradiction to the present reality. Just like baby Jesus was and is. Just like Rosa's baby. Hope is our rebellion against the establishment. It is our capacity to believe in something different despite the reality we live in.

Hope is not a passive thing. Hope is action; hope is faith; hope is our capacity to live according to what we don't see yet. It is impossible to have hope without being a visionary. Hope was Rosa.

God, breathe on the embers of hope You have put in me. Empower me to live into the world You are making. Amen.

NOVEMBER 29 - CHRISTY HUSTON

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." -Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

As early as I remember, my family and Christian education taught me God has a plan for us all. We feel hope in knowing that even in difficult times, God's got this. Although I always believed this, experiencing a difficult pregnancy gave the Jeremiah scripture about hope an even deeper meaning in my life.

Early in my pregnancy, my husband and I learned that our fourth child would have physical and intellectual disabilities and may not even survive birth. We consulted with our pastor, named our son, prayed for his health, prayed that he would feel our love, and prayed that our family would be equipped to help him flourish. Many people prayed with us.

We felt hope. Without hope, my entire pregnancy would have been filled with anguish. Even after our son's birth, as we have guided him in learning and through challenging times, we have felt hope in knowing that God has a plan for our son and for us as his family.

Feeling hope in God's plan is comforting and gives our lives renewed purpose.

God, there is difficulty in our lives and in our world. Reassure us again of Your commitment to humanity and Your great love for us. Amen.

NOVEMBER 30 - PASTOR MIKE BEEZLEY

"Come, house of Jacob, let's walk by the Lord's light." -Isaiah 2:1-5 (NIV)

In Isaiah's day, God's people hoped for oppression to end and God's Messiah to arrive. In time, Jesus came, fulfilling scripture and embodying life-changing hope.

In our day, we continue to hope for oppression to end and God's Messiah to return. We look for Jesus to fulfill more scripture, to change our lives, and to change the world.

Christmas lights and decorations can't hide the fact that we're in tragic need of our world-changing Messiah. In this season of Advent and beyond, what will we do while we wait for him? We're called to "walk by the Lord's light," working within his will to help bring forth these changes we hope for.

In this time of great division, what will we personally do to settle disputes? Every act of peace we enact

changes the world just a little bit more and helps the hope we have to persevere.

In the wake of gun violence and mass shootings, what will we personally do to "beat our swords into iron plows" and "spears into pruning tools?" Every time we choose to forego the urge to retaliate and move to protect innocents from harm, it changes the world just a little bit more. And again, hope perseveres.

In these ways and more, we walk in step with the Lord, even as we await his return.

God, You refused to stand at a distance from us. You came to us in Jesus Christ and will come again. Enable us to walk by the light of Jesus each day. Amen.

DECEMBER 1 - SERENA ACKER

"Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." -Luke 2:10-11 (NIV)

Christmas cards each year idyllically portray Jesus' birth. Sweet baby Jesus peacefully lays in a manger as Mary and Joseph gaze at him lovingly. The star of Bethlehem shines brightly guiding the three wise men, who appear as silhouettes riding their camels through the desert sand. Can't you just hear Silent Night playing in the background?

But very little about Jesus' birth was ideal. In fact, the whole thing was quite messy.

Mary was a virgin. Can you imagine what people

said about her when she became pregnant? Poor Joseph then had a pregnant fiancé. Even though an angel appeared to him in a dream and prophesied all that would occur, I can't help but wonder if he had moments of frustration and questioning.

As it came closer to Jesus' birth, nearly nine-month pregnant Mary was subjected to 80 miles of riding on a donkey. Upon arrival in Bethlehem, she was not afforded the luxury of a bed in which to give birth. The Son of God was born in a barn and laid—not in a cradle or bassinet—but in a cow trough. As a farm



girl, I can assure you that there is very little about a barn that is sanitary. Most barns are fly infested and reek of their animal inhabitants.

And yet somewhere in the messiness of it all, a holy infant was born into this world, a world He came to save. “For unto us is born this day in the City of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

That, friends, gives us hope. Hope of a future. Hope that even beautiful and redemptive things can come

from even the messiest of Christmases.

God, how grateful we are that You do not turn away from mess, but instead choose to inhabit it. You make it Your home, and You make new life. The messiest places of my heart and this world, I name before You now, as an act of hope in Your redemptive power. Amen.

DECEMBER 2 - PASTOR JOE BOGGS

“His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm...” -Luke 1:46-55 (NIV)

The Canticle of the Turning, a musical setting of Mary’s Song from Luke 1, has long been one of my favorite hymns—not just during Advent, but throughout the entire year. There is something about the words—arranged by Rory Cooney and sung by Theresa Donaho—that helps me remember that Jesus was born into this world, not some ideal world. Jesus came to a world in which the pain and anguish of sin in all its forms makes it hard to see much reason for hope.

“Though I am small, my God, my all, You work great things in me.” Mary sings not of a simple hope that ignores all that is wrong but of a hope that sees every obstacle, every disaster, every reason to lose hope and chooses to persevere and to look forward anyway. Mary—an unwed teenage mother facing a mountain of uncertainty—nevertheless chooses to embrace the hope of a future that is virtually unfathomable.

It doesn’t take much looking at the world to find oneself overwhelmed by the apparent hopelessness that is all around us. It is easy to get so caught up in what we can’t see that we forget that the future for which we hope does not depend on us. In these days, as in all days, we would do well to learn to sing Mary’s song anew.

“My heart shall sing of the day you bring, let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn!”

God, give me eyes to see where You are at work today, turning the world and turning me towards You. Amen.

DECEMBER 3



"Mary Consoles Eve"

Sister Grace Remington, Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance



The band Rain for Roots wrote a song by the same name in response to Sister Grace's painting. Read the lyrics below or [listen to the full song](#). Hope is on the way!

Eve, my sister
The one who took the fall
Eve, my sister
Mother of us all
Lift up your head
Don't hide your blushing face
The promised One
Is finally on His way

Almost, not yet, already
Almost, not yet, already

Eve, it's Mary
Now I'm a mother too
The child I carry
A promise coming true
This baby comes to save us from our sin
A servant King, His kingdom without end

Almost, not yet, already
Almost, not yet, already

He comes to make his blessings flow
As far and wide as the curse is found
He comes to make His blessings flow

Almost, not yet, already,
Almost, not yet, already...soon

Eve, my sister
The one who took the fall
Eve, my sister
Mother of us all
The promised One
Is finally on His way

Written by Katy Bowser (©2015 Velveteen Songs [SESAC]), Flo Paris Oakes (©2015 Flo Paris Music), Sandra McCracken (©2015 Drink Your Tea, [ASCAP], Admin by Simpleville, Inc.) & Kenny Hutson (©2015 Jiggyfoot Music [SESAC])

DECEMBER 4 - PASTOR LISA SCHUBERT NOWLING

“He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” -Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSV)

“Will you be a peacemaker at school today?” I asked our two-year-old daughter on our way to daycare. We had read a book about peace because she was struggling to share her toys with another classmate.

“No, I’m going to be a waffle maker!” she exclaimed.

We can all identify. We don’t want to be peacemakers either. We prefer a false peace built on power, control, and weapons. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah warn us what happens when we cry “peace, peace” but there is no peace. About 750 years before Jesus, Isaiah proclaimed a harsh word to God’s rebellious people on the brink of national disaster. They ignored widows and orphans, oppressed those in poverty, worshiped false gods, clung to religious nationalism, and aligned themselves with evil empires.

Isaiah believes their only hope is to repent, which means to turn back to God, and offer their covenant loyalty and faithful worship. If they do, he paints a beautiful picture of God’s people streaming together to God’s holy mountain. There, the people will live together in peace, beating swords into plowshares

and spears into pruning hooks. They will not study war anymore. They will be God’s peacemakers.

“Blessed are the peace-makers,” Jesus preaches several centuries later. Notice he doesn’t say peace-lovers or peace-hopers. He says makers, because peace is something we actively do. We roll up our sleeves and partner with Jesus to bring about God’s preferred future—Christ’s reign of peace on earth.

This Advent season, we’ve got work before us. We need grit to end gun violence. We require strength to call out Christian nationalism. We must advocate to stop conflict in Ukraine and Afghanistan. We can unite to eliminate child poverty in Indiana. We can build a Church that is anti-racist, inclusive, and vibrant. This is what it means to be peace-makers.

Seem overwhelming? Perhaps we could start by learning to share our toys.

God, in the flurry of all the things we make this Christmas, empower me to be a maker of peace like Christ. Amen.

DECEMBER 5

These past several years have wrought polarization, separation, and isolation from one another. This is another area of our shared life together that we need God's presence and power to break in. This Advent, we wait in prayer together for the Prince of Peace to bring unity. We are expectant for the God who came to us in Jesus Christ, who so loved the world that before going to his death, prayed this for his disciples:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have

given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." -John 17:22-23 (NIV)

The wait for unity is not a passive one, for we are invited by Jesus' teaching and example to do the work of peace: to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us; to tend wounds like the Good Samaritan; to be quick to listen and seek understanding; to give up our very selves for one another, like Jesus did.

DECEMBER 6

The 17th century hymn by Johann Olearius, "Comfort, Comfort Ye My People" is perhaps most famously known through Handel's Messiah. The first verse says these words:

"Comfort, comfort all my people; speak of peace,"
so says our God.

"Comfort those who sit in darkness,
groaning from their sorrows' load.
Speak to all Jerusalem of the peace
that waits for them;
tell them that their sins I cover,
that their warfare now is over."

For a beautiful rendition of that classic hymn recorded and compiled during COVID-19 distancing, [listen here](#).

Let us pray today for the areas of our world that have known war and unrest. We may not know the names of people in these places, but God does.

God, hear our prayer today for the nations and people across our world who know war and unrest. We name the countries before You now... bring an end to war and its sour fruit of displacement, violence, fear, and domination. Comfort our world and bring Your reign of peace. Amen.

DECEMBER 7 - PASTOR ANGELO MANTE

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.”

-Romans 12:17-19 (NIV)

We’re living in a tumultuous time. While hyperbole comes easy, it really does seem like we’re living in one of the most tense, conflict-ridden periods in our nation’s history. With the exception of the Civil War era, politically we are at least as divided as we’ve ever been. Hate crimes and domestic extremism are on the rise; domestic violence has surged since the beginning of the pandemic; and the gun violence crisis has reached the point of national emergency.

Sadly, for those of us who call ourselves United Methodists, our own denomination finds itself in crisis, as decades of ongoing conflict finally appears to have come to a head.

In the midst of all of this chaos and conflict, we’re called to be a people of peace. We’re called to be peacemakers, which is to say that we’re called to actively seek and make peace in a violent world.

I’ve been reflecting all year on the wise words of St. Paul in Romans 12:18, especially on the phrase “as far as it depends on you.” There are times in which we might be in a conflict with another party who simply doesn’t want peace. No matter what we say or do, they continue to curse and revile us.

In some situations, it might be appropriate to stubbornly seek peace and reconciliation. In other cases, we might need to release the relationship. But in every conflict, we’re called to continually reflect upon our role and ensure that we’re not contributing to the conflict in ways that cause further harm.

What’s a conflict that you’re dealing with in your own life? What’s your role in this conflict? Have you responded at any point with revenge or by “repaying evil for evil?” What might “making peace” look like for you? Can the other party be won over, or do you need to release the relationship?

As the people of God, we must develop the self-awareness and capacity to engage in conflict constructively. We must not mirror the violence of the world around us, but rather model for the world an alternative way to be and live. And the world will know us by our love.

God, as far as it depends on me, help me go about my days and weeks with a commitment to live at peace with everyone. Amen.

DECEMBER 8

*“O Lord, open my eyes that I may see the needs of others
Open my ears that I may hear their cries;
Open my heart so that they need not be without succor;
Let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong,
Nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.
Show me where love and hope and faith are needed,
And use me to bring them to those places.
And so open my eyes and my ears
That I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for thee.”*

- Alan Paton, South Africa, United Methodist Hymnal #456

DECEMBER 9 - PASTOR MARY R. W. DICKEN

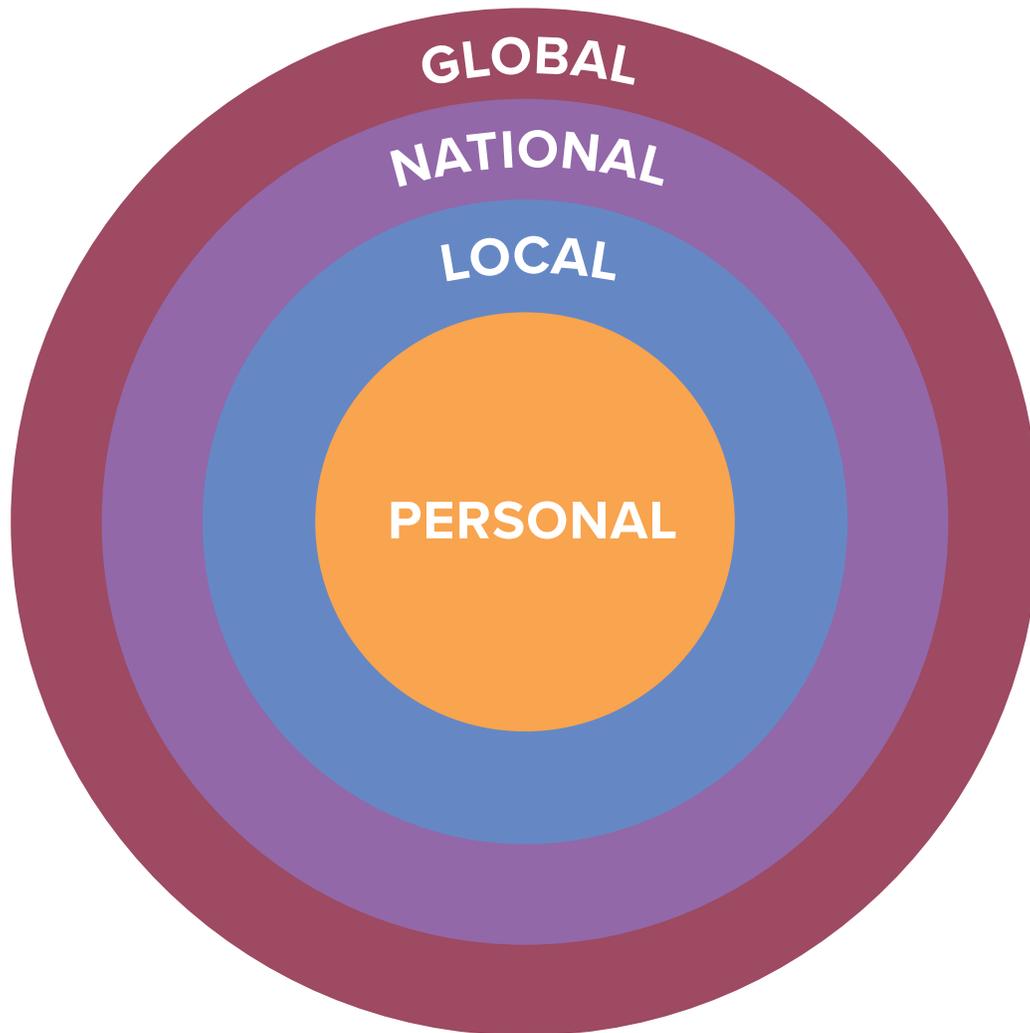
*“This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham... and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.”
-Matthew 1:1-17 (NIV)*

The Gospel of Matthew begins rather dryly, with a recitation of Jesus’ genealogy. (Liturgists always give me grief about reading this passage because there are way too many names.) It’s tempting to skim this section to get to the good stuff that follows, but we miss out if we do so. Take a moment to read all the names of Jesus’ ancestors. It is a patrilineal account, tracing genealogy through the fathers, but the Gospel writer curiously also includes four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the woman who “had been Uriah’s wife” (her name was Bathsheba). More than 40 generations and only these four women are mentioned. Why only these women? There are other more-popular matriarchs in Jesus’ ancestry, Sarah and Rebekah, to name two. So why only these four? What is their significance?

Perhaps these women are highlighted because they have something to teach us about the coming of Christ. These are the women who were the outsiders, the ones with little to no power and influence, the ones with nothing left to lose and everything to gain. These are the women who took great risks because they hoped for better lives. These are the women who persevered over years of hardship and still believed God would do something marvelous. Their inclusion in these verses is no accident. We need to be reminded that the story of Christ’s coming, over 40+ generations, is a story of radical hope, a story of perseverance, and a story of grit revealing grace.

God, so often my life puts me in the center of it all. Push me this Advent to look to the outsiders and those who live on the margin so that I might not miss where You are doing a marvelous work of grace! Amen.

DECEMBER 10



“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” -Isaiah 9:6 (NIV)

Today, you are invited to take a prayer walk. You might do this in your neighborhood or around your church, or even on the treadmill. As your feet hit the ground, press into the soles of your feet to feel the ground rising up to meet you. Take three, deep breaths with your eyes closed, praying on the inhale, “You are the Prince of Peace,” and on the exhale, “Heal our world.”

As you walk, hold the image of the circles in your mind. At the largest is the concerns of our world, like the climate, war, refugees, and global cooperation, etc. Then, the concerns of our nation, local community, and our personal lives. As you walk, move through each circle of concern praying for Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, to be born anew in all of our world.

DECEMBER 11 - PASTOR JACK HARTMAN

"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 2:20 (NIV)

When our granddaughter was three years old, I built her a wooden, swinging cradle for her baby dolls as one of her Christmas presents. I was a pastor, and Advent was a particularly busy time. Finding time to complete the project was more than I had anticipated. But by Christmas Eve, the cradle was finished.

We put the unwrapped cradle under the tree. When she entered the room with the presents, she stopped and looked at the cradle. Her eyes lit up, and she offered a heartfelt, "Oh!" as she ran to it. All the work I had put into building the cradle was worth every moment.

I have never forgotten the look on her face, her audible response, and her rush to the cradle. As I have reflected on this, I have thought about the shepherd's response when they saw the cradle of Jesus for the first time. It must have been like my granddaughter's response. What is our response to the birth of Christ? If we take the time, we, too, can look at the manger, have our eyes light up, and offer a heartfelt, "Oh!"

God, help us see the manger anew this Advent with all of its complexity, and with all of its joy. Amen.

DECEMBER 12

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel" UM Hymnal #211

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Adonai, Lord of might,
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height,
In ancient times didst give the law
In cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

DECEMBER 13

Benedictine Monk David Steindl-Rast defines joy as “the happiness that doesn’t depend on what happens.” In his book, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An approach to life in fullness*, he says, “Ordinary happiness depends on happenstance. Joy is that extraordinary happiness that is independent of what happens to us. Good luck can make us happy, but it cannot give us lasting joy. The root of joy is gratefulness. We tend to misunderstand the link between joy and gratefulness. We notice that joyful people are grateful and suppose that they are grateful for their joy. But the reverse is true: their joy springs from gratefulness. If one has all the good luck in the world, but takes it for granted, it will not give one joy. Yet even bad luck will give joy to those who manage to be grateful for it. We hold the key to lasting happiness in our own hands. For it is not joy

that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.”

Steindl-Rast goes on to say that the presence of suffering and evil make being grateful for everything an impossibility but affirms that we can be grateful in every moment. Pause today and survey your life in prayer with God, giving thanks, and being grateful for the gifts you see. May God make us a grateful and joyful people!

God, every good and perfect gift is from above. Bring them to mind so that I might give You thanks and be overflowing with joy for them all. Amen.

DECEMBER 14 - ELYSE GARVERICK

“Anna the prophetess was also there, a daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher. She was by now a very old woman. She had been married seven years and a widow for eighty-four. She never left the Temple area, worshipping night and day with her fastings and prayers. At the very time Simeon was praying, she showed up, broke into an anthem of praise to God, and talked about the child to all who were waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem.” -Luke 2:36-38 (NIV)

My middle name is Joy, but I’m not by nature very good at it. My temptation is to believe that joy and trial are mutually exclusive. I tend to distrust overly-positive people because I’m sure that they have chosen blind optimism in favor of cold, hard truth. I’m really fun at parties.

A widow 12 times the amount of time she had been married, Anna was now in old age, still waiting for Jerusalem to be free. But she NEVER left the Temple, choosing to fast and pray. If you’re spending that much time with God, I’d imagine you’ve got stores of

joy building up. To allow joy in the midst of pain is not dishonest; it’s the realization that life is complex, and God is good in spite of the storm around you. Joy and pain can and must coexist.

Do you tend to deny the existence of problems and put on a false smile? Or do you tend to reject joy and wallow in hardship? Most people lean one way or the other. Consider this: Anna chose to sit before God in the middle of it all. While most of us can’t spend 24/7 physically on our knees, we can walk through our ordinary lives in an attitude of prayer.

Perhaps you:

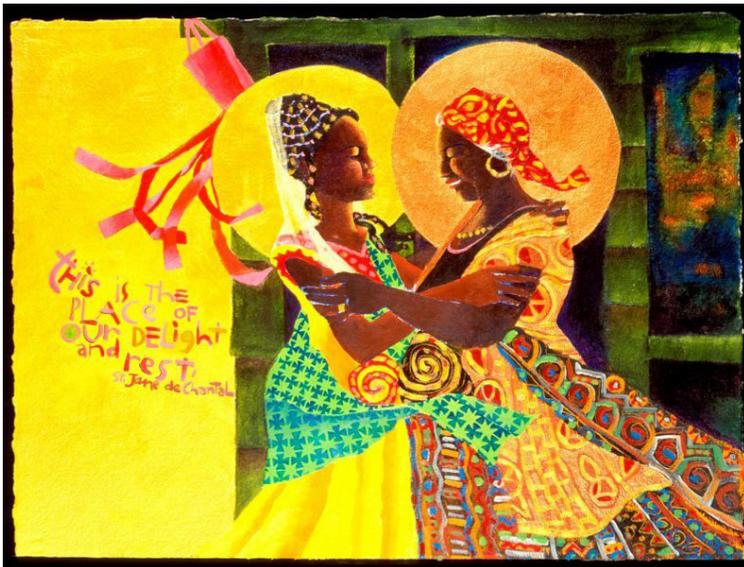
- Set an alarm on your phone to go off every hour. Stop, do a breath prayer, and remind yourself of God's presence.
- End your work day with a run, asking God to help you reflect on the day's emotions/ experiences.
- Wash the dishes before work and ask God to show you glimpses of his glory as you move through your day.

The practice of continuing to sit before God is a surefire way to cultivate joy in the midst of trial. May you experience joy even in your waiting.

God, make me like Anna, who knew what it was for waiting and joy to intertwine. As I wait, remind me of Your presence so that I might praise You. Amen.

DECEMBER 15

"At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" -Luke 1:39-45 (NIV)



"Windsock Visitation" by Oblate Brother Mickey McGrath depicts the joyful encounter in Luke's Gospel between Mary and Elizabeth.

Brother Mickey McGrath, Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, says this about the artwork:

"Mary, dressed in gold because she is the woman clothed with the sun, also wears a cape with green stars and blue crosses, which symbolize Bethlehem and Calvary. She is a little fearful of the news she has recently received herself, that she was pregnant with God's child. But Luke tells us that she put her fears aside to be with her cousin Elizabeth and help her in her own miraculous pregnancy. Elizabeth's bright and welcoming smile assures Mary, and us, that in God's plans, everything always works out for the best. The tops of their halos form a heart which meets at the bottom in the wombs of the two women. The fluttering windsock behind them reminds us of the wind of the Holy Spirit, ever fresh, ever new."

DECEMBER 16 - PASTOR WELLINGTON CHIOMADZI

"Be joyful always..." -1 Thessalonians 5: 16 (NIV)

My true definition of joy goes beyond the limited explanation presented in the Oxford Dictionary — “a feeling of great pleasure and happiness.” Defining joy as a feeling has this connotation that joy is based on circumstances. My view is that true joy is an attitude that defies circumstances.

I was raised in the Church, and I know the Lord calls us to be thankful at all times, to choose joy no matter what our surroundings or circumstances look like. But it's not easy. On a personal level, seeing my father wasting away and eventually passing on due to complications of diabetes in 2009 was the worst experience of my life.

My father and I were close buddies. When he passed on, I saw the landscape of my life crumbling around me. Four years down the road, in 2013, I was diagnosed with diabetes as well. Little did I know that the Lord had a plan to teach me joy in the midst of suffering.

I am aware that I cannot speak into the depths of every situation. I have no doubt that your season of hardship is just that... hard. For me, after my diabetes diagnosis, I had two options: choosing whether I face the challenges, the frustrations, the disappointments of life with a joyful heart or a bitter one. Choosing joy requires a strength I don't have, a reserve I can only find when I lean on God and allow him to turn my resentment to rejoicing. There are still days that are difficult, but I can truly say, “The joy of the Lord is my strength.”

God, I ask you that you would use the hard times in my life to create a fountain of joy in my heart. Teach me to lean on your Son Jesus Christ each day of my life. Amen.

DECEMBER 17

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he...” -Zechariah 9:9a (NIV)



Gill Sakakini (British), Éclat, 2015. Acrylic on board, 120 × 90 cm.

Artist Gill Sakakini named this painting, *Éclat*, a French word meaning brilliance, glow, glory, or a burst. Sakakini discusses it in an interview with Mark Byford in the book *The Annunciation: A Pilgrim's Quest*. The painting captures a post-Annunciation moment, she says: Mary, alone in her room, responding to Gabriel's news "through a bursting, embodied YES!"

Mary almost surely cycled through other natural responses to the unexpected news of her pregnancy, Sakakini shared, like shock and fear. Her ultimate posture was one of joyful acceptance, of celebration of what God was doing through her. "I'm not denying there were other stages, but this is the fruit of all those other interior conversations....This is when she's finally arrived."

*Adapted from Victoria Emily Jones's "Rejoice Greatly, Daughter! (Artful Devotion)" on artandtheology.org

DECEMBER 18 - LEANNE KETCHAM

"Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love, does not know God, for God is love." -1 John 4:7-8 (NIV)

The fourth Sunday of Advent moves us to the theme of "love," and it will always be one of the most special Sundays out of the year for me. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, in the train wreck year known as 2020, I went into labor, and my daughter was born—during the church service time slot no less. My pastor received a 1:00 a.m. email from me and stepped in at the last minute to fill my shoes.

One year later, I preached to that same church who prayed for me while my labor of love was born. I got to say to them the one thing that I have been praying for myself and for the world: These last years have labored and given birth to isolation, fear, division, cynicism, and more. Yet the Divine still comes, seeking to be formed in us and born from us again. God comes to us, inviting us to be living laborers of God's love born again and again through me and you.

1 John 4:8 says, "God is love." I can think of no greater need than for God to fill this world, our everyday, ordinary day-to-day and our deep structural systems, with real love.

Though before love can be born from my life, it must be formed in me. Pregnancy and birth were not exactly a cake walk, so I have no assumptions that love being formed and birthed will be painless. As I hold my toddler in my arms, I am assured that the forming and bearing of love only leads me also into the arms of God and into the lives of the people God so deeply loves.

God, let us join with Mary's, "Yes!" to the angel, acquiescing to become the body of God's work. May Jesus be formed and born from our lives anew this Christmas. Amen.

DECEMBER 19 - PASTOR CRAIG DUKE

"For he grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." -Isaiah 53:1-3 (NIV)

Once a pregnancy is announced, the anticipation begins and so do expectations of who and what the child is to be. Parents begin to envision their child as president or star athlete. Long before the fetus makes her/his/their way through the birth canal, a child's future is planned. One word from the doctor shatters, so it seems, all expectations: "Down syndrome," "cleft palate," "congenital heart failure." What is often heard is "defective." This, of course, could not be further from the truth.

These seemingly shattered hopes can also happen when a child shares that he/she/they identify as queer-gay-LGBTQIA+. Suddenly, it appears, that hope is gone. This is not true. ALL are created in the image of God. I've been with parents as challenging news has been shared. I have witnessed those same parents finding incredible love, joy, hope, and peace in loving their child, created as that child is.

God's incarnated self "possessed no splendid form for us to see." Yet, out of the ordinary comes the



extraordinary. Out of the barren comes birth, from the lame comes witness, and from death comes life. God gives birth to UNCONDITIONAL LOVE. Shall we love any less? No! Perfect love drives out fear.

In the challenging times of my life of unrealized expectations, God's love not only sustained me but motivated me to love even more.

Today, take a second look at your expectations through the lens of God's unconditional love. Now, what do you see?

God, help me love as You love! Amen.

DECEMBER 20 - PASTOR JUDI PURVIS

"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." -John 1:1-5 (NIV)

It was early morning, and I was sitting on the front stoop looking across the open field into the darkness. The first rays of the sun began to show on the horizon, and the light from the rising sun grew brighter and brighter. The sky stretched wide from horizon to horizon, and the broad sweep of the fields made an earthen vessel into which the sun poured its increasingly-brilliant light—the coming of the sun! I viewed one of the miracles of life, and with it came light, warmth, clarity.

In the beginning was God, Genesis tells us. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God... The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it, John tells us. John then spends the next 12 chapters testifying to the True Light that had come to save the world, not condemn it.

The world we live in is filled with darkness, tragedy, sorrow, fear, perceived hopelessness. But we come during this season to join together as closely as we can around the light of God's love incarnate in the birth of Christ. Bruised and scarred by our arrogance, by our own sorry choices, or by the twists and turns of life over which we had no control, we limp up to the light assured that God's love is like a light that does not flicker or falter or fade, a light that shines and never goes out.

God, let Your Church's witness mirror the light of Your love and presence in the world. Bring people around us so we might testify to the ways Your light shines in the darkness! Amen.

DECEMBER 21

"Love Came Down" by Kim Walker-Smith

In a moment everything changed
On a silent night came the promised Child
In a stable so humble and poor
Unto us was born the Savior of the world

Love came down, hope was found
A star lit the sky, the angels cried "Glory!"
Light broke through the darkest night
Hope is alive, hope is alive
'Cause Love came down
Love came down

[Hear Kim Walker-Smith sing here.](#)

God, You never were content to be at a distance from humanity even when we've made an utter mess of things. We are still so in need of Love to come down once again into our lives. Do it again, God! Amen.

DECEMBER 22

"We Three Kings of Orient Are" UM Hymnal #254

We three kings of orient are
Bearing gifts we traverse afar
Field and fountain
Moor and mountain
Following yonder star

O star of wonder, star of night
Star with royal beauty bright
Westward leading, still proceeding
Guide us to thy perfect light



Wooden door detail by George Bandele, 1962, showing the Adoration of the Magi. Collection: SMA Fathers, Cadier en Keer, Netherlands. Source: Christliche Kunst in Afrika, p. 144

DECEMBER 23 - PASTOR HANNAH WISWASSER

“When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.” -Matthew 2:1-12 (CEB)

As the Advent and holiday seasons draw to a close, sometimes we find ourselves disappointed with how things have played out. We're told over and over again these seasons are magical. We hope and pray for perfect parties, magical moments, and fabulous presents. But sometimes those things don't happen. Families still have spats, parties or services don't go off without incident, or we don't get that one thing we really wanted. This doesn't mean the magic of the season has passed us by. There is still hope to be found.

In the story of the magi, found only in the Gospel of Matthew, we find an imperfect celebration. Jesus has been born! The Son of God has been born on earth! Yet the people are too afraid to go and worship him. They are unsure of recent events. In a perfect world, these people would be celebrating! They would worship the baby born in a manger. They would honor him with the best of whatever they had. Instead, people from a distant land, from a different

culture entirely, are the ones who come bearing gifts to worship the infant Jesus. God worked in their hearts and lives to help them understand when the Israelites could not.

Just because things aren't perfect doesn't mean that God is absent. God can work in our imperfect lives, with difficult situations, and amidst the stress the holiday season brings. We have so much to celebrate in Jesus' birth! Just because the celebrations are drawing to a close doesn't mean we stop rejoicing. We continue to sing praises to God, to celebrate Jesus' birth, even if things aren't perfect. Even if we have to travel back to our own country by another route.

God, things aren't perfect, but You're still at work! Let me give You a song of praise and the gift of my life today! Amen.

DECEMBER 24

“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. ”

-Luke 2:8-17 (NIV)

“O Come, All Ye Faithful” UM Hymnal #234

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant
O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem
O come and behold Him, born the King of Angels

O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him
Christ the Lord

O sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation
O come, o come ye to Bethlehem
O come and behold Him, born the King of Angels

O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him
Christ the Lord

Jesus, what love is this that You would come into this very messy world? We long for Your presence and power to lead us and heal us. Yet even in the complexity and hardship, we see Your hope, peace, joy, and love born into the world around us. You who could not bear to stand far off and chose to be born, continue to bear new life in our world. You came and are coming again. We huddle with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the Magi, in adoration of You, Jesus. Be born in us and through us this Christmas. Amen.



