



Stories

of

Joy

A VPC ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Dear Church Family,

This “Stories of Joy” devotional is brought to you by people who are a part of your church community—your brothers and sisters in Christ. Their stories are meant to encourage you in this season of Advent as we anticipate the joy of celebrating our Savior’s birth. What is joy? Why does Christ matter? How can you be connected to people at your church... even if you haven’t met them? Ponder these questions as you read the real life stories of the people who worship with you. They are your church family, offering you ways to experience the joy of Christ.

As you read this devotional, you’ll notice that the joy themes follow the traditional weekly Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. This booklet is a journey to explore how to have the joy of hope, joy of peace, joy of joy, and joy of love.

With each day, consider how you might respond in prayer. Here are two points of reflection to guide you:

1. What stood out to you about the writer’s story, daily scripture, or joy theme? Why did it stand out to you? Pray to experience the aspect(s) of joy the day’s devotional is about.
2. Pray for the writer. As your brothers and sisters in Christ support your faith in these pages, you can support them in your prayers. Many of these devotional stories address needs, temptations, moments of loss, moments of blessing, and praises. What can you ask God for on the writers’ behalf? What can you praise God for on their behalf? How wonderful for them to know their church family is praying for them on the day they have written for!

Let’s experience Advent together. Thank you for joining us!

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Many thanks to our volunteer editor, Amelia Townsend, and the twenty-three writers who shared their stories. Your contribution brings joy-filled encouragement to VPC and beyond!

JOY OF HOPE

HOPE IN CHRIST'S COMING

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2023

By Pastor Robert Austell, Jr

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. 3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. 4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. 5 Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. 6 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. 7 Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 9:2-7 (NIV)

Darkness. It may seem a strange place to start our season of coming to Christmas. Or it may be right where you are. That's part of our reality as human beings; in this world there is darkness. And that darkness often seems to be a lot harder to bear at Christmas time. It may be because you lost a loved one at Christmas time. Or it may be the contrast between the happiness you think you are supposed to feel and the real struggles that you face. But this whole season can be a very difficult and even lonely time.

However, it is an unfair and untruthful characterization of God to say that God is distant from all that. Now I know God may FEEL distant; but he is not. Did you hear some of the language used in this passage: gloom, anguish, contempt, darkness, and more? But God sees and God knows. God knows of the "yoke that burdens them" and the "bar across their shoulders." God has seen the "rod of their oppressor," the "warrior's boot" and the "garment rolled in blood." Does that seem possible to you? ...that God has seen your gloom and anguish, your oppression, your suffering and loss? God has seen all that has been lost, stolen, wasted, and crushed. Sometimes, it is simply enough to know that you are not alone, that someone sees and someone knows. But that is just part of what is said here. Isaiah has another hopeful word from the Lord for his people. Isaiah reminded the people of God's promises, describing them as a great light in the darkness, perhaps still far off as a point of light.

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That promise and hope was wrapped up in the birth of a child who would sit on the throne and who would be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” He would rule with peace, justice, and righteousness, and do so forever, with God’s blessing and power.

And that’s the connection point to you and me. That light was the Light of the World, the same Jesus who is our Savior and Lord. That means that in our darkness—whether that is depression, loneliness, sickness, disobedience, or the evil or oppression of others—God has something to say. Not only is God there with you, seeing the very rod of oppression and the blood-stained clothes of your struggles; but God has words and a promise of hope, of light in YOUR darkness, and that is through Jesus Christ.

As the Wonderful Counselor he sees, hears, listens, understands, and offers wisdom and discernment in our confusion and lostness. As the Mighty God, he is as bigger than, stronger than, whatever challenge you or I may face. If God was bigger than the most powerful world empire of the time, he is bigger than a lost job, a medical diagnosis, a storm of depression, or any other darkness we face, big or small. As the Eternal Father God is wise, present, and loving. Even when God’s people were at their worst in terms of disobedience, lack of faith, and outright rebellion, God did not leave or abandon them, but continued to pursue them in love. Jesus pointed us to God as Abba Father: personal, close, compassionate, and not afraid to come running after us like the Father of the Prodigal. As the Prince of Peace Jesus proves to be both warrior-king and gentle mediator. He is strong enough to face anything, but wise and merciful enough to bring peace where we need it most.

Hear the Good News in God’s Word today. It is not a promise for a quick fix, but all the hope of a steady light in the darkest of places: through Jesus, joy will replace anguish and gloom, the oppressed will find freedom, and we will come to know the strong but peaceful reign of Christ in our lives. Cling to hope; cling to this Great Light; cling to the promise of God in Jesus.

Amen.

JOY OF HOPE

THERE IS NO HOPE WITHOUT CHRIST

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2023

By Kim Pattianakotta

12 Before you believed in Christ, you were separated from him. You were not considered to be citizens of Israel. You were not included in what the covenants promised. You were without hope and without God in the world. 13 At one time you were far away from God. But now you belong to Christ Jesus. He spilled his blood for you. This has brought you near to God.

Ephesians 2:12-13 (NIRV)

“He’s a goner. There is absolutely no way he’s making it through.” This was my train of thought as I approached my car one morning and found a magnificently neon green bug attached to my windshield. “Little dude. You look magnificent, but you are no match for crossing the American Legion Bridge. Too bad you don’t know what’s coming.”

Heartless of the bugs’ need for rescue, I drove off and gave him no other thought that day until...

I hopped in the car after work, started to adjust my mirrors, and found him alive! Still hanging out on my car! With his claws gripping the right side mirror, he looked ready to rumble. This bug was serious, and he won my support. “Little dude, do you have it in you again?”

I rooted for him the whole drive home, anxiously watching him cling to the mirror as the wind tore at him. “Come on. You can do it! *You* can do it. Cling harder. *YOU*’ve got this. *YOU*’re going to get back home to your tree. Look at *YOU* go! *YOU*’re incredible. Little bug, I want to be like *YOU*!”

He was so magnificent, I considered making him a pet. But creatures like that aren’t meant to live jar-ed. So, I snapped a picture for memories’ sake, and decided not to tell my husband about our potential pet bug before I walked in the door.

However, my admiration for the bug was not over. I continued to think about his strength. Could I face such peril? Maybe I should buff up my resilience. Prepare for future challenges. You know, get my grasping claws ready to dig into my life plans and hold on in rough times. Because what happens in life is all up to us, right?

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Wrong. Because sometimes I want what happens in life to be all up to me. If I could just get by on my own strength, I could try to make anything happen that I want to have happen, and only have to blame myself when it doesn't work out. Or just come up with a new idea.

But we're not the masters of life. We don't create life, we can't make life last forever, and we're not the solution to death. We can't truly rescue ourselves.

My magnificent green bug had to rely on himself. His hope was in his own strength. When it comes to how my life goes, my temptation is to rely on my own capabilities and rest my hope in myself. Yikes. There's no real hope in that.

Ephesians 2:12-13 calls us to remember that we were hopeless before we believed and belonged to Christ. We were alone, left to our own strength—a strength that may be able to hold up against strong wind and help life go on a little longer, though it's not an endless amount of strength. We do not have that power, but we can draw near to our loving Creator who does. We are meant to put our hope in the Lord of our lives, finding joy when we surrender our will (our strength) to his.

Surrender is hard. So that exuberant, fun, jump-for-joy, feeling is probably not what you're going to have. But you can have a firmer sense of joy that grounds you in hope—the hope that comes with knowing you are clinging to the One you were meant to rely on all along.

JOY OF HOPE

THOSE WHO HOPE IN THE LORD WILL RENEW THEIR STRENGTH

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2023

By Kate Katch

28 Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. 29 He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. 30 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; 31 but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:28-31 (NIV)

I love the imagery in this verse. We have all felt it—weak, exhausted, powerless. Nothing left to give and no idea where to go from here. Then comes the contrast—fresh strength, endurance, energy, flying above it all.

The verse reminds me of a scene from my favorite childhood movie, *The Never Ending Story*. A young, often bullied boy, Bastian, is whisked away by a dragon, Falcor. As Bastian soars on the back of the dragon, he can see the land below with perspective and his bullies are confronted. Bastian feels exuberant, confident, and victorious because he is on the wings of one that is greater.

I clearly remember the first time my powerlessness met God's strength. It was the night my dad suddenly died in 1997. I was 16 years old, alone in the middle of the night, and aware that my life would never be the same. I felt as if the foundations of my world had shaken and irreparably cracked. All I could do was cry out one simple word, 'Jesus'. In an instant I felt His presence so tangible I thought I could reach out and touch Him. A peace washed over me. In His mercy, God gave me a glimpse of how he would use my father's death for good in my life and those around me. He assured me it was ok to be weak. I would not get through those next days, months, or years by my strength. He would carry me.

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Over the years when I have faced trials, I have reflected upon that darkest night. It is filled with light because it has become a testimony of Jesus' loving presence, tenderness, power, and reality that can never be disputed.

In that sense, it reminds me of Christmas. On the night Jesus was born, it was dark—physically, socially, and politically. Into the darkness, light entered, and hope rushed in. Hope came through in the form of a Savior whose strength, life and peace is everlasting and limitless. All we need to do is call on Jesus and trust in Him. Jesus is the true Savior on whose wings we can soar.

JOY OF HOPE

FILLED WITH HOPE

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2023

By John and Donna Hall

12 And again, Isaiah says,

*“The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope.”*

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:12-13 (NIV)

What are we doing for the holidays? Well, for starters it will be a continuation of our ‘Adventures in Faith – 2023’. What do we mean by that? (Maybe you have seen John’s name on VPC’s list of those we pray for who have cancer?) Let us tell you our story.

After 80 years of good health, the cancer diagnosis during a regular check-up came as a real shock. Neither the specialist nor we were expecting “news” of the sort he brought. After a crash course in the basics of “our” cancer—very much a family affair—we learned the good and bad and began to share with family and close friends. Most of all, though, was the thanks we gave to God for all the good possibilities and opportunities this chapter of our life afforded.

God’s Word brought constant reassurance. *“In this life you WILL have trouble, but fear not, I have overcome the world”; “underneath are the everlasting arms”; “Be still my soul; the Lord is on thy side”*. These are but a few of the many verses that have come to mind. It is amazing how God’s Holy Spirit works to provide for all our needs, spiritual and otherwise!

For the last couple of months, chemotherapy has been a weekly part of our life. The many medical people at the Johns Hopkins Comprehensive Care Center at Sibley Memorial hospital have been models of God’s gifts of loving and caring in our lives.

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By the time you read this in early December, we will have learned the treatment results thus far, and hints into the next phase of treatment. No matter though, we are totally assured and reassured that our watchwords will continue to be the above (and below).

And so, our friends, we really do take faith, joy and hope into this Christmas season. WE CHOOSE JOY! We are learning to integrate the hard news of “troubles” with the promise of our Lord that *“your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”*

Our increasing assurance, even in struggles, also comes via the presence and encouragement of old and new Christian friends, and the many forms of worship we experience. In particular, we were moved recently by the Cathedral Brass’ rendition of the “Finlandia” arrangement by Sibelius, lyrics inspired by Psalm 46. The music brought tears of joy, and the words continue to ring in our heart: *“Be still my soul. The Lord is on thy side. Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain. Leave to thy God to order and provide. In every change he faithful will remain.”*

Christ’s Shalom, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as we celebrate with joy his coming.

JOY OF HOPE

WHAT WE ARE SUFFERING NOW IS NOTHING
COMPARED WITH OUR FUTURE GLORY

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2023

By Guowei Wright

18 What we are suffering now is nothing compared with our future glory. 19 Everything God created looks forward to the future. That will be the time when his children appear in their full and final glory. 20 The created world was held back from fulfilling its purpose. But this was not the result of its own choice. It was planned that way by the one who held it back. God planned 21 to set the created world free. He didn't want it to rot away. Instead, God wanted it to have the same freedom and glory that his children have.

22 We know that all that God created has been groaning. It is in pain as if it were giving birth to a child. The created world continues to groan even now. 23 And that's not all. We have the Holy Spirit as the promise of future blessing. But we also groan inside ourselves. We do this as we look forward to the time when God adopts us as full members of his family. Then he will give us everything he has for us. He will raise our bodies and give glory to them. 24 That's the hope we had when we were saved. But hope that can be seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? 25 We hope for what we don't have yet. So we are patient as we wait for it.

Romans 8:18-25 (NIRV)

Suffering is no stranger to us. It comes in different forms and shapes as part of our human experience. A Kenyan sister-in-Christ said to me, "Maturity has nothing to do with age, but how we process pain."

How do we suffer? How do we process pain as a follower of Christ?

Five years ago, when our 23-year-old daughter, Margaret died unexpectedly from epileptic seizure, my family and I were thrown into crushing waves of grief. It didn't take long for me to realize that God was the only one I could hold on to for comfort and healing. In those first few months of intense grief, I sat with God with my sadness and my questions. Questions about God's plan for Margaret, about unanswered prayers, about his goodness and mercy.

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In my grief, I wanted to see Jesus on the cross. I wanted to be with him as he is with me. I wanted to unite with him in his suffering so I would be able to rise with him in his glory. Isn't that what we profess at our baptism? Our sanctuary cross at VPC is an empty cross. Jesus is risen! We celebrate the risen Christ. I get that. But without the suffering Christ, how do we celebrate resurrection?

My healing mercy came as a vision of seeing how Margaret was received by Jesus—as God's whisper, "This is temporary." Then as a road sign. "God .Win. Drive." Then as Margaret's voice speaking to my longing heart.

These precious gifts are like hugs from Heaven. They give me a glimpse of Heaven that is as real and as close as my next breath and they reveal the magnificent mercy of the God I worship.

In his presence, my pride and my entitlement for this world melted away. Jesus, who is acquainted with sorrow, is with me in my suffering. He fills the whole of my heart. He is more than enough. That is joy! Mystical joy!

There's more. 2 Corinthians 4:17 tells us, "*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*"

Scripture tells us there are so many more treasures in Heaven waiting for those who overcome.

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

On that day, I shall see my Maker face to face—not as a stranger—but as his beloved child and a lover. My faith shall be made my sight. It will be a glorious day.

JOY OF HOPE

WE CAN TRUST GOD

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2023

By Chris Ryan

22 Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Hebrews 10:22-23 (NIV)

I think Christmas is a time where we all hope for something. When I was a kid, I used to hope for snow because movies and television made it seem so integral to the magic of Christmas. Growing up in Texas I spent many years hoping for snow that never came—or came around just long enough to let me watch it melt as it hit the pavement.

As I got older, what I hoped for changed, but I still have that childlike expectation of hoping for something unexpected at Christmas. Of course, my hope in Texas snowfall and other longings over the years, did not instill in me confidence in the outcome I desired. I've often had no idea what would happen or what to expect, whether it be my childhood dreams of a white Christmas or my later hope for peaceful holidays surrounded by family and friends.

As I think about the idea of what Christmas means, the central image for me is the manger surrounded by the warmth and love of Joseph and Mary.

If we consider not just the Nativity scene, but everything that came before and since, we see that Christmas is a story grounded in hope. Hope that we are not alone. Hope that we are not abandoned to the darkness. Hope that our suffering and pain does not go unnoticed. Hope that justice will run down like waters. Hope that mercy triumphs. Hope that love never fails. God calls out to us where we are, telling us to trust him and walk alongside him until the end. Our faithfulness and desire to be with him matters more to him than any rules we can invent.

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On the first Christmas night, the manger became the center of creation. It was the place where the God of the Universe called down from eternity to declare, "I AM with you, not only now, but for all the days before, and yet to come."

Christmas is a reminder of this hope on which we stand. The hope in the truth that when we cry out, God answers, "I AM with you in the darkness. I AM with you when your enemies surround you. I AM with you when you are alone. I AM with you in your pain, and grief, and heartbreak. I AM with you in the midst of oppression and injustice. I AM with you when the seas rage and the winds howl and your soul is shaken to its very foundation."

It is this hope that brings us out of our dreary past and stagnant present. It draws us into the glory of eternity.

In 2004 my family was living in Victoria, TX, a town nestled between Corpus Christi and Houston about 20 miles off the Gulf Coast.

I traveled home from Texas A&M for the holidays and remember being greeted by a few flurries falling from the sky as I left Christmas Eve service. I laughed and thought to myself how funny it was to see snow in South Texas. On Christmas morning, I woke up to the first (and to this day, only) white Christmas I've ever experienced, It was a foot-thick as far as I could see. I have to imagine God smiling just a little bit as he watched the boy-turned engineering student, marvel at the wonder of an impossible snowfall in an unexpected place.

JOY OF HOPE

I PUT MY HOPE IN GOD'S WORD

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2023

By The Friendship Class

The Friendship Class is an inclusive community for adults with and without intellectual disability to get to know each other better as they get to know Christ. They meet on Sunday mornings, and wrote this devotional prayer during a class exercise.

5 I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
6 I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.
7 Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
8 He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

Psalm 130:5-8 (NIRV)

Dear Lord,
I feel down and scared.
My disability makes me afraid that I can't do what I need to.
I can't control my circumstances.

Lord, give me patience.
Help me wait.
Let me feel your LOVE and PEACE.
Help me stop, breath, and pray.

Lord, "You are the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).
Your love never changes and it never will.
Your word is your promise.
I put my hope in your Word.

JOY OF PEACE

DO NOT BE AFRAID; GOD IS WITH US

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2023

By Pastor Charles Geschiere

18 *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

20 *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

22 *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

24 *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

I have had a long-standing interest in foreign policy, having grown up in the hot and heady days of the Vietnam conflict, watching from north of the border the efforts of President Nixon and Henry Kissinger to bring that war to a "peaceful" close. Foreign policy is not unlike a chess match where one needs to be seven to ten strategic moves ahead of an opponent!

It was Nixon who coined the phrase and developed the strategy of "peace through strength," an approach President Reagan used to bring an end to the Soviet Union and the influence of communism in Eastern Europe. Basically, this strategy can be summed up as: "If you want to keep the peace, prepare for war." Granted, the Christian idealist within us grates at such an approach, but in a fallen world of political thugs and thieves and terrorists, it is, perhaps, the most realistic: nations of good will, meaning no harm to a neighbor, must prepare for war in order to keep the peace, not necessarily the state of real peace that exists between friends, but at least the absence of war between enemies, simply because the enemy does not dare war.

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Jesus said to his disciples, an offer he extends to present day disciples: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let not your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). What he promises here is two-fold: 1. an external end to man’s rebellion against and conflict with God—an end to the war; “peace,” as reconciliation, “I leave with you.” And then 2. an internal sense of comfort and calm that we are now right with God, no longer enemies but actually friends, so much so that Jesus grants “my peace,” the same peace he enjoys with the Father, “I give to you.”

And how did he do both of these things? “Peace through strength!” Jesus, God the Son, was born as a baby, lived a sinless life, born to die, to give his life to pay for our sin. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” His strength! “For he himself is our peace, who...has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” between us and God, “to reconcile [us] to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Ephesians 2:14-16). A real peace!

In actual fact, after Adam and Eve’s first sin, God prepared for war against sin in order to bring us to peace with himself! But here’s the twist. “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly die. But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7, 8). Talk about strength! Never will a nation surrender itself to an enemy nation to claim victory in a war, but that’s exactly how we have peace with God, through his strength. We have peace because, through God’s own death, God prepared for war, securing victory by defeating our sin. His name is “Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21).

The term “peace dividend” refers to the economic boost that a country gets from a peace settlement that ends a state of war, in that a government can reallocate funds used for defense to domestic policy priorities. By ending the war with us on his terms, God amazingly does not even spend the peace dividend on Himself. He gives that to us as well! “My peace I give to you,” promised Jesus—freedom from being afraid of God, from anxiety that we’re bound for hell after death, from any worries that our sins are not paid for or forgiven, from any guilt and shame, or that somehow we still need to do more to get right with God. “Do NOT let your hearts be troubled,” says Jesus. And, then he added later, “... I have called you my friends...” (John 15:15). That’s quite the peace dividend: friends of God!

“What is your only *comfort* in life and in death?” asks The Heidelberg Catechism. Answer: “That I am not my own but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ....” Peace and the peace dividend, through strength! To God be the glory!

JOY OF PEACE

HE WILL BE OUR PEACE

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2023

By Michael Bronson

2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”
3 Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. 4 He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. 5 And he will be our peace.

Micah 5:2-5a (NIV)

Growing up as the oldest of seven children, “peace” was something I rarely considered as a child, much less experienced. Christmas time was usually filled with activities and excitement—much at a frantic pace and ear-shattering volume. A delightful time, certainly. It took many years for me to appreciate the true blessing of the Peace of God.

In my mid-life, I was afflicted with several physical setbacks caused by 30+ years of living with Type-1 diabetes. These included kidney failure and peripheral vascular disease, among others. These issues resulted in the loss of both my legs by below-the-knee amputations about eight years apart. Yet I was blessed with a double-organ transplant which has now lasted over 24 years. Without this transplant, I likely would have gone to be with the Lord many years ago.

The peace of God has become a reality as I have matured in my faith. As my faith has grown, I am trusting more and more that “*In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28). The peace that allows me to set aside worry, fear, and anxiety, began for me with surrender to the Lord, trusting that his will for me is better than anything I could even imagine. This trust has changed the way I live. Now I often begin my day trusting the Lord has something meaningful for me to do, and praying for him to reveal it to me at the right time.

In this Advent season, please consider the ways God may be working to draw you closer to Him. “*And may the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 4:7). Wishing you peace and joy this holiday season!

JOY OF PEACE

THE LORD GIVES PEACE TO THOSE WHO TRUST IN HIM

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2023

By Carrie Miller

3 You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. 4 Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.

Isaiah 26:3-4 (NIV)

I love the season of Advent! Actually, I love all of the seasons of the church, but Advent is one of my favorites! A time of preparing and of great expectation and joy! And, for us, time with family. When my kids were little, even before my youngest was born, we started a tradition of reading an amazing book called “The Advent Book” every night. It is a beautiful book with intricate pictures with animals hidden on each page. There is a simple Bible passage that tells the story of Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem and finally, the birth of Jesus. Emmanuel, God with us! Each page has a door that opens and a picture is revealed.

Each night, we would spend time focusing our minds on Christ. We would light a candle. Read. Search for the animal friend. Open the door. Talk about the story. Sing and pray. Then go off to bed. Sounds perfect. Many, many nights it was, praise God! But there were nights that were tough to get everyone to sit, and there were fights over who got to open the door. I can look back and laugh about those little struggles now, and I feel grateful for the memories!

As the kids grew older, transitioned to more independence, and had social interests (i.e. sports, jobs, and eventually college), it got harder to keep up our Advent book tradition.

Transitions can be exciting, but they can also be challenging. They lead us to new things and growth, but they can leave us feeling uncertain and unsure of what could be coming next.

My mom always says that the only thing we can count on to be constant is that there will be change! But as Christians, we put our trust in the Lord, the rock eternal. He is constant and if we trust in him, he will bring us perfect peace.

JOY OF PEACE

While the seasons of life change, it is easy to get swept up in the busy of the holiday season, sports seasons, work season, caring for others seasons... But what brings us peace and joy is returning our minds to God each day—sometimes many times per day—in a steadfast way. It helps us to remember that we are not meant to go through this alone. Being "steadfast" means to be unmovable, unchanging, firmly loyal, constant, and unswerving. It's a lofty standard for sure, and not one I can reach without the help of the Holy Spirit. So, for me it means focusing my mind on Christ, the same way I did when I was reading "The Advent Book" with my kids when they were little. It is a tradition or my routine of prayer, Bible reading, reflection, silence, and staying connected to my church, my friends and family.

Now that two of our kids are away at college, "The Advent Book" tradition holds many fond memories for us. I hope that with our family traditions we have begun in some small way to teach our children a lesson in keeping their minds steadfast. God knows. However it may manifest in your walk with Christ, strive to be constant and unswerving in your mind this Advent season. The Lord is our rock and he will bring peace to those who trust.

JOY OF PEACE

BEAUTIFUL ARE THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS AND PROCLAIM PEACE

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2023

By Hunter Keeter

7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!

Isaiah 52:7 (KJV)

Look away west from the mountaintop to the valley where the lights of distant, timid cities gleam. Or from the campfire's glowing coals, watch inconstant sparks lift—soaring, dying 'round—toward uncertain peaks. See as I, not long ago, that night is falling.

In the late autumn of 2010, I was in the Alleghenies fishing for brook trout on the fly, nothing in my creel but hope, and wondering on the Lord's ways which are not ours. At home, the days of the gentled year had come down around us in drifts of color, drawing with them an ending.

My wife, Hayley, and I on another hillside, far away and weeks before, fainting in the too-warm October churchyard as they buried my uncle. "Not at all well," she had whispered.

And soon after, a beginning. "Heartbeat," a technician had said, tuning the machine so we could hear.

On the mountaintop, cold dark settled into the hollow places beneath the stars. In the small hours of my camp, I woke to gibbering voices that were never human. Rising, I shined a red lamp across the slope of witchgrass above me. Two dozen pairs of jackals' eyes glared back.

Ancient Israelites knew their messengers from far off by the appearance. One sort brought good news; another, bad. Which would I have from this congress of embers?

When the Jews returned to Jerusalem after seventy years of Babylonian enslavement, the prophet sang of "beautiful feet", of emissaries coming over the mountains, crying freedom. Here were no feet, but a legion of claws that scratched impatient earth.

JOY OF PEACE

With God's grace, Hayley and I had overcome a mountain of our own the previous summer. From a human certainty of disappointment. "Never happen," she had smiled bravely through tears. "Dogs and donkeys, instead." To the absolute of two parallel lines on a test strip.

There would be beautiful feet, of a new messenger with life's fire impassioned. As St. Paul to the Romans recalled Isaiah, a thousand years' prescient of the Evangelists: "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace and bring glad tidings of good things!"

And on the mountaintop, this world with dreadful crimson eye kept watch. Until suddenly, the night melting away, the yearning phantoms from joyous dawn retreat. Our world—beautiful and terrible—which God so loved, he gave his only begotten Son for our salvation.

JOY OF PEACE

CHRIST GIVES US HIS PEACE

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2023

By Michelle Rahal

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid

John 14:27 (NIV)

Greg and I got married later in life, hoping to have children. Sadly, that was not God's plan for us. Though I have come to accept that fact over the years, I occasionally experience the pangs of disappoint and loss—especially when I am in the presence of parents and grandparents.

I set my troubled heart aside when my nephew and his wife brought their newborn daughter home from the hospital after six weeks in the NICU. Eric and Shannon already had two little boys at home, but because I hadn't visited in over a year, they only knew me by name. Tentatively, I asked. "Would you like me to come out for a week to help?"

My name was added to the list. First, Eric used up his paternity leave. Then Shannon's mother took off work and flew in for a week. Eric's mother did likewise. Finally, it was my turn.

When Shannon and the kids picked me up at the airport, the boys respectfully said hello, then silently stared at me as if I was sporting a third eye. Casually, Shannon announced that she was going to stop at the doctor's office on the way home and that "Aunt Michelle" was going to play with them outside while she went inside with the baby. I was excited at the prospect, but the boys were silent. They apparently had serious doubts that this plan would be as fun as Mom was making it out to be.

While Shannon went inside, the boys and I explored outside. We looked for insects, played hide-and-seek, ran a couple of races, and climbed a wall we had no business climbing. When Shannon finally emerged an hour later, she found us taking pictures with my cell phone of a caterpillar we discovered inching across the sidewalk. In that short amount of time, I no longer felt like the strange aunt with the third eye.

JOY OF PEACE

Over the next few days, I had the extreme pleasure of getting to know the boys better by playing pirates, watching Toy Story (three times!), brushing their teeth, preparing fun snacks, reading to them, and listening to their detailed sagas. I was in aunt heaven!

One night, Shannon told her 2-year-old that she would help him with his pajamas after she got the baby to sleep. Confidently he said, "Aunt Michelle will help me."

And I did, my heart bursting with love. On Sunday, the 4-year-old snuggled up to me in church when Shannon left the pew to attend to the baby. Within minutes, he fell asleep, nestled in my lap, and he didn't awake until the end of the service. I thought, *This must be what it feels like to be a grandmother.*

During that one week with my nephew, his wife, and their precious children, my feelings of maternal inadequacy and insignificance disintegrated. God replaced them with feelings of love, value, and peace. Though I may not be a grandmother, I have discovered and embraced my role as a beloved aunt.

JOY OF PEACE

THE PEACE OF GOD TRANSCENDS ALL UNDERSTANDING

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2023

By Todd Burger

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 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. 9 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 4:6-9 (NIV)

Christmas has changed for me over the years. When I was growing up in New York, it meant a lot of snow, good food, fun with family and friends, and of course presents! As a young parent, it remained a joyous time of celebration with our growing family and seeing the excitement and anticipation of Christmas morning in the eyes of our children. Christmas now, while still a time to experience great joy with our family and friends, means so much more. Christmas is now an example of God's faithfulness.

It is the fulfillment of his promise to bring peace (Isaiah 9:6) through the birth of our Savior—one I so desperately need. A Savior that represents both inward peace (John 14:27) in the assurance of our salvation, but also an outward peace with others (Ephesians 2:19-22).

In 2003, after fourteen years of working on Capitol Hill, the Congressman I was working for retired. Christmas 2003 was not a time of peace! There would be no paycheck beginning in 2004, and while having a few prospects, there was no job on the horizon.

JOY OF PEACE

Ten years later in 2013, I ended my time working for the Fairfax County School System. This Christmas, however, was different. In January 2014, I would begin serving in full-time ministry with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. This Christmas would be a time of peace!

In Luke 2:14, we are told that the angels appear to the shepherds and proclaimed, “Peace on earth.”

This “peace on earth” is true and trustworthy. It is not a fleeting or “feel good” emotion. It is as Paul writes in Philippians, a peace “*which transcends all understanding.*” It is a peace that can be found by first making the choice to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and then putting into practice all we have learned from him. It is a peace that comes from a journey of following Jesus and committing to discipleship.

We can have the fullness of peace in our hearts on Christmas day, and every day, because that same Jesus born on Christmas sits at your right hand in heaven and makes intercession for us. Not only that, but he paid our sin debt and loves us with a love that is unfathomable. Nothing, nothing at all, can separate us from his love. He is good and his plans for us are good. He is “Peace on earth.”

Merry Christmas and may you continue to feel the peace of Jesus.

JOY OF PEACE

ASSURANCE IN CHRIST'S PEACE

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2023

By Chuck Allen

8 I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly. 9 Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

Psalms 85:8-9 (NIV)

On one day's notice in 2008, I was sent to Iraq for what was supposed to be a two-week effort to wrap up an agreement guaranteeing protections for our people there for the following three years. What “folly” it was that I thought I was equipped for this.

The things I threw in my bag included a VPC devotional booklet from summer 2007. It was full of scriptures and very brief devotions—each week exploring a different part of the Lord's Prayer.

The so-called “interagency team” I joined made it immediately clear that my department (Defense) was not needed or welcome. They viewed the protections we sought for Defense personnel (approximately 150,000 at that time) as unnecessary, and my presence an irritant.

Finding myself isolated and ineffective—and in wartime Baghdad on top of that—I went to this booklet in despair, but also with unusual focus. Day after day, I prayed from the devotional booklet and repeated its scriptures. The devotional based on Philippians 4:4-7 said to meditate on and memorize the phrase from verse 4, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice.” Over the days to come, I'd memorize this passage through verse 7, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

The thing is, many times I didn't feel joy or “gentleness” (verse 5) or “thanksgiving” (verse 6). But God...

JOY OF PEACE

Out of isolation and inadequacy came insights that stamina and teamwork were able to turn into solutions. Two weeks turned into eight tense weeks of “conflict resolution” among us, along with hard negotiations with the Iraqi government. After several weeks, with the ultimate deadline looming, there was a turning point. People seemingly stepped up from nowhere with good ideas and moral support, both within our compound in Iraq and from 8,000 miles away in Washington. Icy relationships warmed to a place of regard for one another. Just in time, we achieved a good agreement full of what we needed.

“I will listen to what God the Lord says” (Psalm 85:8.) As Albert Barnes says, “The state of mind here is that of patient listening; of a willingness to hear God, whatever God should say; of confidence in him that what he would say would be favorable to his people—would be words of mercy and of peace.”

Albert Barnes, Notes on the Bible, 1834.

What this booklet did was lead me to scripture, “To what God the Lord says.” I’m grateful that despite my haste and folly of naïve self-assurance, I had the devotional with me during my unforeseen personal crisis. To this day it reminds me of how clinging to God’s promise of peace makes all the difference.

JOY OF JOY

GOOD NEWS THAT WILL CAUSE GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2023

By Rev. Dr. David Renwick

1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 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. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 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.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

15 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." 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

JOY OF JOY

21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

Luke 2:1-21 (NIV)

Our passage today in Luke 2 is like a movie with five scenes. In the opening scene we are introduced to the seemingly absolute power of the Roman Emperor Augustus, who, with a word, can make people go wherever he wants. From coins and inscriptions found in the ancient world, we know that his titles included “Son of God”, “Savior,” and “*pontifex maximus*” (the great bridge between God and people); and we also know his birthday was celebrated by some as a day of “*gospel*” (which means “good news”). And in some senses it was. Far from always abusing his power, Augustus is best known for using his power to establish peace (the “Pax Romana”) throughout much of the Mediterranean world. It was this peace that facilitated the spread of the *gospel* of Jesus throughout the ancient world. (Search “Priene Inscription” if you want to read about a first century Augustan inscription.)

In the second scene, the camera zooms in on Mary and Joseph, traveling about 70 miles south from Nazareth to Bethlehem because of a decree from Augustus. Arriving in Bethlehem, Mary’s baby is born, and laid in a manger—in an animal shed or cave—because there’s no room left inside the house. It is a tough scene, not entirely unexpected in a world controlled by the Roman “Son of God” who sees you as no more than a pawn in the great scheme of things. On the other hand, the rough journey and “no vacancy” experience was not quite expected either, given that Mary had previously been told by an angel (Luke 1:32-35) that her baby was going to be “great,” and, like Augustus, called *Son of God, king of an eternal kingdom*.

In the third scene, the camera turns away from Bethlehem to the surrounding fields at nighttime, where some shepherds are looking after their sheep. It is a familiar Biblical scene. In fact, the two greatest leaders of ancient Israel, Moses and David, had been shepherds watching sheep when God visited them and called them unexpectedly into his service. So too, with these shepherds. There they are, minding their own business, seemingly on the outside of life, but now, God unexpectedly calls them to come to the very center of his activity on earth to “*see this thing that had come to pass.*” Here in human flesh, they would see *the true bridge* between God and humans—the very *Savior-Messiah-Lord* that the greatest Shepherds of Israel, Moses and David, knew about, but were never privileged to see.

JOY OF JOY

In the fourth scene, the shepherds do as the angels say. They find Mary and Joseph, and when they see the child, they cannot keep their mouths shut! They gossip the *gospel* of the angels' message about the baby to Mary and Joseph, leading to a lovely vignette, in which the camera turns from the shepherds to catch a glimpse of Mary pondering! She must have felt exhausted after the journey and birth, and perhaps disillusioned or jaded. Yet, here she is, unexpectedly quiet, thinking, and perhaps now smiling as she "*treasures all the shepherd's words in her heart.*" Words that surely brought her back to her own angel visit, reminding her that the God she had trusted in then was still at work on the downside of life and the upside, in both the expected and unexpected.

And then, the final scene—familial peace has returned! The baby is named Jesus, which means "God is savior" in Hebrew... and we get the point! Good news! Gospel truth! No matter what it looks like to us, or to Mary and Joseph, or to your average person minding their own business, it is not Augustus, or anyone or anything else that has the power to rule the whole show. It is God alone. Who, in his own often unexpected way, brings all kinds of "*good news of great joy*" to us through this baby, Jesus—THE Son of God, Savior, and bridge between us and God.

JOY OF JOY

WITH JOY YOU WILL DRAW WATER FROM THE WELLS OF SALVATION

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2023

By Robin Portman

In that day you will say:

1 “I will praise you, Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. 2 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation.”

3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4 In that day you will say:

“Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. 5 Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. 6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.”

Isaiah 12:1-6 (NIV)

When I was much younger, I could never understand when my devout Christian brothers and sisters would say, “It is in the most difficult times in life that we feel God’s loving presence the most.” I always thought that was counter intuitive! Doesn’t it make more sense that difficult times would harden our hearts, and make us bitter? How could there be any peace in Christ during hard times?

Until about four years ago, I had not experienced real hardship or adversity—and when I did experience difficult times, I resolved to “solve it myself.” But when my husband was diagnosed with a terminal illness in June 2019, well, that was real adversity and certainly nothing that I could fix myself.

JOY OF JOY

When I was younger, I didn't fully understand God's promise of salvation and eternal life. As I have intentionally walked my spiritual journey over the last two decades, I have seen how Christ has promised us "joy in salvation." God intends for us to live life joyously, free from the guilt, and the consequences of sin. Christ himself promises this eternal life in him, while acknowledging that there will be difficult times for us during our life on this planet.

Through these difficult months, my husband and I have seen and felt God's presence beside us. In real and tangible ways, we have experienced many joyous moments while leaning on God and his promises. Knowing that God promises salvation and eternal life really does bring us joy even in the darkest of times! As we lean into God (instead of ourselves) during rough patches, we see him working on our behalf. My husband passed on to Glory last month, and although I have my sad moments, I know that God has him now. I appreciate all the joy we had together, the joy in my life today, and the joy to come! Praise God.

There is true joy in knowing that no matter what happens, God promises us salvation through Christ. This enables us to live joyously knowing that we are free from sin and have a hope for eternal life. "With JOY we will draw water from the wells of salvation." Amen.

JOY OF JOY

OUR JOY IS MADE COMPLETE WHEN WE ABIDE IN CHRIST

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2023

By Jonathan Lochhaas

5 *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

9 *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 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. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

John 15:5-11 (ESV)

I miss Richard. He was a professor of music at my undergraduate alma mater. While I’d never taken a class with him, we got to know one another quite well over coffee and conversation. One morning, we sat in the welcome, overwarm air of the college cafeteria, lazily gazing out at a freshly fallen blanket of snow; wistful clouds rising from our mugs tracing whorls and spirals that hinted at secrets just beyond our grasp. If only we knew how to read them. Deep into Advent, the contentment that comes with winter break and the coming Christ child settled over us.

That morning’s topic was joy. To Richard, joy was not the brief moment of happiness one gets from a birthday cake, a child’s smile, or even the sublime beauty of the sunrise on a cold winter morning. Instead, it was a calm, enduring delight: the deep-seated acceptance that the One who created all these things loved even me.

To Richard, joy pointed beyond our daily challenges and fears, and even past sorrow and world-weariness that we sometimes bear. It pointed a finger at eternity and reminded us of the hope we have. It was contentment in the face of adversity.

JOY OF JOY

To illustrate, he used one of my favorite pieces of music: “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring.” The name itself tells us that we find our joy in our desire for Christ. We do not find calm delight in ourselves or in the pursuit of things that satisfy only for a time. We find it the eternal Christ; in seeking him and his spirit, the source of all joy. Richard’s understanding of joy came from the German title of the piece which translates to “Jesus remains my Joy.” In the midst of the tumult of life and daily distractions, Jesus remains my joy. While I may not be constant, he is.

The German words go on to say that Jesus is “My heart's comfort and lifeblood.” He is at the very center of who I am, not because of what I do, but because he remains with me. He remains my savior, my desire, my home. We abide in his love, amid inconstant waves of happiness and sorrow, and our joy is made full.

Richard and I kept in touch for a few years after I graduated back when handwritten letters were a thing, but my unkempt, twenty-something mind was too distracted to keep up such a treasured relationship.

When I learned of his passing a few years ago, I wept, perhaps in part for my own failings as a friend. But in my sadness, I was reminded again of the hope Richard held in his heart. He now fully abides in the love of Christ, his contentment complete. He knows the deepest meaning in the closing lines of the song, “Thou dost ever lead Thine own, in the love of joys unknown.” And I am comforted.

JOY OF JOY

GREAT REJOICING WHEN THE LOST ARE FOUND

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2023

By Phyllis Swenson

3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Luke 15:3-7 (NIV)

I was so embarrassed when I heard my mother say these words to my husband one summer afternoon; “Warren, I’m so happy that you made a good Christian girl out of Phyllis. She’s always been a lost little lamb.”

Well, this “good Christian girl” was 30-years-old at the time. When I saw the proud smirk on Warren’s face when my mom said those words, I frowned and wanted to smack him.

Yes, my mom was right. God used my precious husband to help this lost little lamb find Christ. I’ve always been stubborn, rebellious, independent, and full of myself. I’m from Missouri, the “Show Me State”. I was called the “Missouri Mule” by my colleagues when I served in the Air Force because of my stubborn independence. I thought I knew how to run my life better than God. But God, and Warren, knew better. Warren took his role as spiritual head in our marriage seriously.

On our first Christmas Eve together, I wanted to immediately tear into my presents. But Warren stopped me and told me that in his family tradition, his dad would read the Christmas story from Luke 2:1-21 before opening gifts. Warren wanted to continue that tradition with me. I thought it was silly but went along with it. When he read the story of the birth of Jesus, I cried. Ever since then on Christmas Eve, I looked forward to his reading the Christmas story. Warren’s devotion to reading the story of Jesus’ birth helped me to stop being a lost little lamb and become a person who was happy to be found by the Good Shepherd who gave his life for me.

JOY OF JOY

Just a week before Christmas 1994, my beloved Warren died in my arms, and went to be with the Lord, at the age of 44. The loss of my good husband was devastating. Even though I deeply miss him, I continue to read the Christmas story from the Book of Luke every Christmas Eve in his memory. I imagine that Warren sings “Joy to the World” in heaven with the angels and communion of saints, and gets a wink from Jesus as he watches me, his good Christian girl, grow more as a woman in the love, light, and joy of Christ.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

JOY OF JOY

JOY EVEN WHEN WE SUFFER

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2023

By Andrew McCormick

1 We have been made right with God because of our faith. Now we have peace with him because of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through faith in Jesus we have received God's grace. In that grace we stand. We are full of joy because we expect to share in God's glory. 3 And that's not all. We are full of joy even when we suffer. We know that our suffering gives us the strength to go on. 4 The strength to go on produces character. Character produces hope. 5 And hope will never bring us shame. That's because God's love has been poured into our hearts. This happened through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Romans 5:1-5 (NIRV)

There are a few moments in life so saturated with emotion that you can never quite shake those memories and feelings. Naturally, I'll always remember how I felt when I learned on March 17, 2020 that Tom Brady was leaving my beloved New England Patriots. I will also remember where I was and how I felt two months earlier when I learned my wife Amanda was dying of cancer.

There was no shortage of chaos in our lives before that moment as the parents of four kids under five years old. However, the typical worries and to-do lists were quickly replaced by countless surgeries, hospital visits, chemotherapy, and the persistent fear of death. Oh, and suddenly schools, church, and even Ben & Jerry's were all closed with the onset of the pandemic. Our hearts, bodies, and minds were certainly not prepared for the new and unwanted adventure.

But God's grace was relentless.

Through a priceless mix of faith, medicine, community, prayers, and laughter, Amanda was able to fight through two years of surgeries and painful treatments. She has now been cancer-free for nearly two years. It has been a remarkable turnaround that we will cherish forever. I would never want to walk that path again, but that journey of suffering also led to many beautiful moments where there was no other option but to cling to God's grace and the love of our friends, family, and community.

JOY OF JOY

I love the imagery in this passage of standing in God's grace. Whether it is during a time of joy or a time of suffering, God's invitation of grace is persistent. Suffering will come to us all, and probably in multiple waves, during our lives. It is normal to react in anger, fear, or sadness during those emotionally charged moments, and we certainly did at times. But there is something so poignantly powerful about just throwing up your hands, standing in God's grace, and fully trusting in the Lord's strength. That might not miraculously fix the suffering and struggle you are facing, but choosing to live a life of authentic joy—even when it makes no sense—can be an incredible source of hope and strength to you and your community.

I know there are people reading this who are angry, fearful, or depressed about something they are facing. I encourage you to throw up your hands, stand in God's grace, and look for those opportunities for joy even in the dark times. There is no greater example of love than Jesus' birth and eventual death. Whether it was Mary giving birth next to some cows in an unfamiliar town or Jesus hanging on a cross, both of those stories were filled with stress, fear, and pain, but they still brought hope and joy to all humanity.

JOY OF JOY

FILLED WITH AN INEXPRESSIBLE AND GLORIOUS JOY
OVER CHRIST AND HIS SALVATION

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2023

By Melissa Wolfe

8 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, 9 for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:8-9 (NIV)

I was reaching the end of my rope and was willing to try anything. I had been dealing with challenges at work and had not slept well for weeks. Months of being “locked in” due to COVID restrictions had taken a toll on me—an extrovert who gains energy from being with others. I often struggled to get out of bed and felt there wasn’t much in life worth looking forward to.

I confided my woes to a friend and former colleague, Ms. Minnie. She asked me a simple question. Had I accepted Jesus Christ as my savior? For some reason, I hesitated. Truth be told, I wasn’t sure what she meant at the time. Sure, I believed in God and had been to church on and off. Looking back now, it seems my church-going was more about checking a box and going through motions, rather than something truly meaningful to me. In recent years, my faith had taken a back seat to life’s “busy-ness” and my adherence to the brass tacks of getting stuff done. Reading daily devotions or saying prayers routinely didn’t really cross my mind. Who had time for those in this hectic world?

Ms. Minnie then asked me if she could pray with me. She wanted to pray the salvation prayer. I said sure, as I was willing to give anything a try. It was the morning of December 8, 2020 at 8:46 AM. I recall it vividly and remember writing the date and time down in my planner for some reason. Something felt like it was going to be different. I now realize this was the time I was filled with the Holy Spirit.

JOY OF JOY

In the following weeks, Ms. Minnie and I would often have long phone calls. I had so many questions and there was so much for me to learn. She would answer all of my childlike questions about God and being a Christian with the patience of a saint. She shared details of her walk in faith and helped guide me towards finding mine, teaching me that each person's walk is unique and everyone has to find their own. I am so grateful to Ms. Minnie for helping me come to know God and to discover how to walk with him every day. It has truly changed my life.

While at Reston Town Center recently, a gentleman sitting on a bench stopped me as I walked by. He told me that I seemed "full of absolute joy." After this exchange, I thought back on my life just a few short years ago. My "walk" has brought me to a place where I am filled with an "inexpressible and glorious joy" to the point that others are taking notice, even complete strangers. Sure, challenges and troubles of various shapes and sizes arise each day, but I now look at them as building blocks on my journey, perfectly preparing me for serving Him. I follow his steps and know I'm in good hands, feeling filled to the brim with joy.

My hope is that as you prepare for a weekend full of "busy-ness" leading up to Christmas Day, you remember the "Reason for the Season." Find the joy in every single moment while helping others do the same. Sharing the joy of his *presence* is the best present of all.

JOY OF JOY

YOU FILL ME WITH JOY IN YOUR PRESENCE

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2023

By Macy Wright

- 5 The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
- 6 The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.
- 7 I bless the Lord who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.
- 8 I have set the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.
- 9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
my flesh also dwells secure.
- 10 For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.
- 11 You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalm 16:5-11 (ESV)

Most parents don't willingly send their daughter to jump out of an airplane. Fortunately for me, my parents did. The evening of my twentieth birthday, I opened a tiny box, which I had been told held my "biggest gift" of the day. The box contained a single slip of paper, which simply read: "YOU'RE GOING SKYDIVING!"

I have always loved the sky. Nothing is more beautiful to me than puffy white clouds on a sunny day, and I'm in awe of the paradox of the sky; it's one of the only things in life that is simultaneously ever-present, ever-changing, and ever beautiful. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork! So I was delighted to find myself on a tiny little airplane by 9 a.m. the following morning, ascending into the autumn morning sky.

JOY OF JOY

There was an unusual and complete peace in the ascent. “*I have set the Lord always before me. I will not be shaken.*” And then I jumped. There aren’t quite words to describe the thrill of falling through three miles of open sky, but the word that comes closest is joy.

Never before had I experienced the sensation of being so completely immersed in the splendor of God’s creation. All I could see was earth and sky, all I could feel were currents and clouds, and all I could hear was rushing wind. This all-encompassing immersion in creation led to a heightened awareness of God’s tangible presence. And “*in his presence, there is fullness of joy!*” It never fails to astound me that we have a God whose mere presence is the only requisite for joy in its truest, fullest form. As I fell, that joy was palpable, pulsing, and overwhelming.

Truly, the best gifts come in the smallest packages. The little box I opened on my birthday contained the purest joy I’ve ever known—the most consuming sense of God’s presence.

Likewise, God sent salvation—joy—into the world in the form of a small, precious package 2000 years ago. And that little package contained the complete fullness of God’s presence, and the greatest joy the world has ever known.

JOY OF LOVE

WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2023

By Pastor Connie Jordan-Haas

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

13 This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. 16 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. 17 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. 18 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.

19 We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4:7-19 (NIV)

"I found Jesus!" There could hardly be more wonderful words, right? Let's explore this together on Christmas Eve...

A devoted shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to search for and rescue the one who has gone missing.

A woman doggedly sweeps her house until she finds her one lost coin.

A lovesick father stands at his front door, scanning the horizon, expectantly waiting for his beloved prodigal to come home.

Gospel writer Luke paints these three accessible portraits for us to convey the fundamental truth of our Christmas Eve passage:

JOY OF LOVE

“WE LOVE BECAUSE GOD **FIRST** LOVED US.

Sometimes new Christians run around excitedly sharing that they have “found Jesus.” As they should! New life in Christ is glorious! But what if we were to simply reverse the subject and the direct object? As the jubilant declaration stands, it’s a wee bit out-of-order, even backwards.

We “find” Jesus, our Savior, not because HE was lost, but because WE were! Our salvation, our new life in Christ was and will always be GOD’s idea. Not our own. And, why? Because God loves us. We know God loves us because God gave what was most precious: his only Son. Love begins with God. Love comes from God. Today’s Scripture sums it all up in three words: “God is love.”

GOD is the one who pursues us and woos us. GOD is the One who sent his only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin, so that we can be restored to right relationship with God...so that we can have abundant life NOW and the assured certainty of eternal life!

Increasingly, denominations seem to matter less. Maybe that’s just fine with our Lord. Yet I do cherish one of the distinctive hallmarks of our faith as reformed, Presbyterian Christians. It is this: **God initiates. We respond.**

So what can this mean for how we love one another? If we have opened our lives to receiving and experiencing God’s personal love for us, we can then love each other from that overflow of God’s love! Because the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ is limitless! The more we allow and invite God to love US, the more we can then, in turn, truly love one another with God’s perfect love.

Said differently: LOVED people LOVE people.

Today’s passage reminds us that when we believe in Jesus, we are also filled with the Holy Spirit. Scripture teaches us what our lives can look like as the Spirit works in us. We produce fruit! And the very first fruit is that of LOVE (Galatians 5:22-23).

On this Christmas Eve, as you ponder God’s costly gift of sending his Son to earth, may your response to that amazing love spur you on to love others. May the song become even more true of us and our church family: “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

JOY OF CHRIST

FULFILLMENT IN CHRIST

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2023

Pastor Hope Lee

20 For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes." For this reason it is through him that we say the "Amen," to the glory of God. 21 But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, 22 who has put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a down payment.

2 Corinthians 1:20-22 (NRSV)

We're a Santa family. Santa does not replace Jesus or even come alongside Jesus in terms of importance in the Lee Household. Santa is more of a cultural tradition and an afterthought in our planning around the Advent and Christmas season. But we are a Santa family.

And, over the years, I've had those moments that I am sure many parents in our congregation have had. One of the kids asks for an impossible or impossible-to-get gift and Santa says, "We'll see."

There's no "we'll see!" What kind of response is that?! "We'll see" as in, "If you are good enough?" "We'll see" as in, "If Santa has time or thinks you're worthy enough?" That's one of the worst places for a parent to be and for a child to try to comprehend.

Of course we understand that Santa doesn't want to make promises he can't keep. And that's why we should never mistake Santa for God. Our God ONLY makes promises that he intends to keep and has the power to fulfill.

In Jesus, every one of God's promises is a "yes!" Promises that include things such as adoption into the family of God, a place in the Kingdom of Heaven, and that God will never leave us nor forsake us.

In the Old Testament, God made many promises—many covenants—with the people. And when the people got tired of waiting on God, they simply broke their promises—their covenants. But God never did. Instead, God doubled down and promised us a Savior.

JOY OF CHRIST

The people waited and waited. If we ever thought the stretch from Thanksgiving to Christmas was long, try the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments when the people waited on the promise of God. There was no “We’ll see.” There was “Amen,” which means “So be it!” God never wavered on His love for us or His promise that he would save us. God does exactly what God says he will do.

Imagine the joy of getting exactly what you want on Christmas morning. Everything you had hoped for, wished for, prayed for, shows up in all its glory on Christmas Day! It is a very rare gift, even among the most hoped for, that will actually go the distance. I think of all the years that my son absolutely had to have a very specific Lego set. He’d get it, assemble it in a day or two, and we never saw it again.

God’s gift to us in Jesus is not just for today. While it is true that we celebrate it in a big way today and remind ourselves of the incredible joy that is given to us through Christ, Jesus is a gift that will never grow old, break, fade away, or become irrelevant when something new comes along. Each year, Christians are invited to breathe in a fresh reminder of the joy of Christ as Christmas marks the start of the celebration that is followed by twelve days of joy. These twelve days are capped by the arrival of the Magi to Jesus—the first encounter of the Gentiles with Jesus, and a reminder that Jesus brings Good News of great joy for ALL people!

Did you know that even at 11, 14, and 19 my kids still humor their mom and get their picture taken with Santa every year? Though we had a good run with the same Santa for about five years in a row, every other Santa looks different. I’ve got to be honest, that ruins a lot of the Santa shine for me.

But, unlike Santa, our God is constant, faithful, and always, always, always fulfills His promises. He did it when he sent Jesus into the world. He did it when he gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. He did it when he sent the Holy Spirit to the people at Pentecost. And he will absolutely do it again on the day of Christ’s return.

When God promises us something in the Word, you can bet that in Jesus it’s going to be a “YES!” And for this reason, no matter what we do or do not find under the tree from Santa, we are assured of a very Merry Christmas from God. AMEN! So be it!



**A Caring Fellowship
Bringing Christ Into Our Diverse Community
Through Discipleship And Service**