

Advent 2020

at St. John's UMC

Advent Devotional Study

Tuesdays December 1, 8 and 15 at 10 a.m., and 6 p.m., on Zoom. You will need a copy of the devotional.

Cantata: *The Song of the Shepherd* written by Terry Byars

Sunday December 13 at 10 a.m. in the Family Life Center

Journey to Christmas

Sunday December 13 come-and-go from 5 to 6:30 p.m.

The Shepherd's Market Tenth Annual Great Turkey

Giveaway

Saturday December 19 — Volunteers needed at 7 a.m.

Online Longest Night Service

Monday December 21 at 6 p.m.

Premieres on Facebook Live, Vimeo, YouTube and our website

Christmas Eve Worship Opportunities

Online Christmas Eve Service

Our pre-recorded service will be available on our website, Facebook, Vimeo, and YouTube for use by anyone at any time on Christmas Eve (and anytime following). This service will be familiar – in that it will mirror what we usually do in person on Christmas Eve. It will include prayers, readings, Christmas carols, and some special surprises.

Carols by Candlelight at 5 p.m. on the front lawn, a socially distanced outdoor celebration



ST. JOHN'S

United Methodist Church

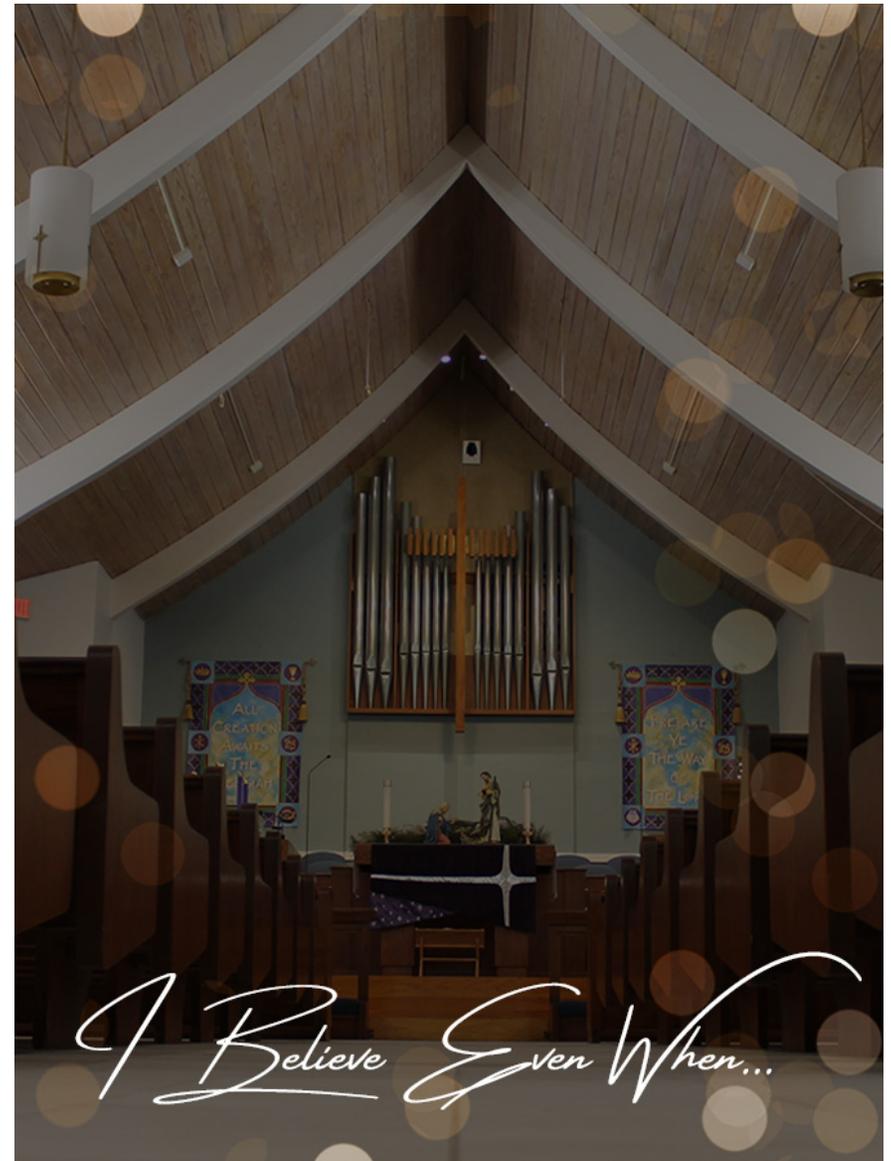
Glorifying God. Feeding People. Making Disciples.

St. John's United Methodist Church

230 Renee Drive | Baton Rouge, LA 70810

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Join us for Sunday worship at 10 a.m. in the Family Life Center
Livestream: Facebook Live, YouTube, Vimeo & stjohnsbr.org/live



Advent Devotional 2020

Written by Members & Friends of
St. John's United Methodist Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Introduction

Advent was not a part of my childhood, but when I joined the United Methodist Church I loved the tradition of the candles that drew us, as a church and community, to Christmas. The candles of Hope, Love, Joy and Peace are luminaries that draw us to the birth of the Holy Child. Setting aside just a moment to light a candle can open the place for God to be born again in you this season.

2020 has been a year filled with great suffering, chaos and injustice; it is a year not unlike that time long ago, when God humbled himself to be born in a manger to an insignificant and unorthodox little family. This year, in particular, we find ourselves turned upside down, on our knees and wailing in deep travail. In the season of Advent we wait, and at times, holding onto belief with only a small string. Yet Christmas **will** come and we continue to see glimpses of Hope, Love, Joy and Peace in the ordinary and insignificant; a small box turtle, a child's first steps or a beautiful sunrise.

I pray for you, my beloved St. John's family, that God will be born again for you this Advent season. I pray that as you light your Advent candles you will be the one to set the world ablaze with God's Hope, Love, Joy and Peace. I pray that you will continue to believe, even when...

Rev. Deirdré Halliburton
Associate Pastor

Weekly Movies

One of the things we all love about Advent and Christmas is spending time with loved ones. One of my favorite traditions is to watch beloved Christmas movies. Each Saturday we will recommend one such movie geared toward families that relates to that week's Advent theme and includes related Scripture and prayer. We invite you to read aloud these passages and prayers and consider how they may relate to the movie each week. There is also a movie option for grown-ups who want to dive deeper into that week's theme.

Thank You

Thank you to all of our writers, especially those who are sharing their work with St. John's for the first time and to Cindy Popadic, Kathy King, and others for their editing assistance. Special thanks to Mari Walker whose help and talent with the layout in print and online was invaluable. I could not have done this without her persistence, encouragement, and dedication to this project. As always, my gratitude to Lynn Cooper for final touches and printing. May God's blessings be with you this Advent and Christmas Season.

—Pastor Deirdré

Advent Devotional 2020 Table of Contents

Saturday December 26, 2020

Week 1 - Hope

Sunday Nov. 29	Advent Week 1: <i>I Believe in ... Hope</i> <i>Litany of Hope</i>	pages 4-5
Monday Nov. 30	<i>I Believe Even When My Faith is Small</i> Brycen Stubbs	page 6
Tuesday Dec. 1	<i>I Believe When It's Hard to Believe</i> Susan Johnston	page 7
Wednesday Dec. 2	<i>Waiting</i> Jean Clark	page 8
Thursday Dec. 3	<i>I Believe When I Remember the Past</i> Deacon Latrice Mallard	page 9
Friday Dec. 4	<i>I Believe Even When the Dawn Seems Far Away</i> Kristine Isenhower	page 10
Saturday Dec. 5	Family Movie: <i>A Charlie Brown Christmas</i> Dive Deeper into Hope: <i>Defiant Requiem</i>	page 11

Week 2 - Love

Sunday Dec. 6	Advent Week 2: <i>I Believe in ... Love</i> <i>Litany of Love</i>	pages 12-13
Monday Dec. 7	<i>Advent Evening</i> Betty Schroeder	page 14
Tuesday Dec. 8	<i>Lost Without Love</i> Rev. Marie Williams	page 15
Wednesday Dec. 9	<i>Advent Poem</i> Daphne G. Grady	page 16
Thursday Dec. 10	<i>Another Wise Man</i> Guy Johnson	page 17
Friday Dec. 11	<i>In Love</i> Betty Schroeder	page 18
Saturday Dec. 12	<i>Advent Calendar</i> Caleb Doan	page 20
	Family Movie: <i>How The Grinch Stole Christmas</i> Dive Deeper into Love: <i>Girls on the Wall</i>	page 21

Family Movie: *The Muppet Christmas Carol*

A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. —Isaiah 9:6

This week we will explore peace through *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. Along the way we will find that peace isn't necessarily about being "nice and quiet." There is an outer peace and an inner peace that only come when we do as Micah 6:8 would remind us – do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.

When we see Scrooge on Christmas morning, what has changed? What are some of the things he does that show us he has changed? One thing we can't change is the past. But we can change what we do today and throughout our life when we choose to live a life of hope, love, joy, and peace.

*Loving God,
We choose to live in hope,
In love,
In joy,
In peace.
God bless us everyone.
Amen.*

Dive Deeper into Peace: Film Suggestion for Grown-ups

Sweet Honey in the Rock: Raise Your Voice, available to rent on Amazon.

Emerging from the strong tradition of Freedom Singers, Sweet Honey in the Rock is a group that's as soulfully rich as it is provocative. Using song to stand in unison, five African-American women sing solely a cappella, along with a sign language translator. Their music evokes stories from the past, encourages introspection in the present, and inspires progress for the future. Since it was founded in 1973, more than twenty different women have contributed to the Grammy Award-winning group's distinct sound, which embraces semblances of gospel, blues, and hip hop, all with a political tone. The film features a trove of concert and rehearsal footage as it follows the group on their thirtieth anniversary tour, which is also coincidentally when founder Bernice Johnson Reagon announces she will retire. Through a variety of interviews with members, historians, and fellow artists, the film explores the roots of Sweet Honey in the Rock's existence and influence.

*Adapted from Worship Design Studio materials by Marcia McFee.
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Saturday December 26, 2020

I Believe Even When ... Things Change

Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. —Romans 12:2 (NIV)

I love the Christmas season. It is the time of year that I feel closest to God. The traditions of Advent and Christmas help me focus. I start thinking about the season in September, start planning in November. I like the comfort of the traditions of the Advent Festival, Lessons and Carols, church gatherings, Christmas movies, seasonal hymns, family visits, and Advent devotionals.

This year, 2020, will be different. There is the pandemic. Many events will be cancelled. Some will be moved to a virtual format. Some family members will not be able to travel. Gatherings will require social distancing. Many Advent traditions will have to be changed.

Then there is our house. We started a renovation a month ago which will extend into the new year. By mid-December, the kitchen will be totally dismantled. No baking, no holiday meals, no parties – at least not done the way we always have done them. Holiday decorations will be sparse as furniture is moved to storage and dust coats what is left. The Christmas tree will not be set up in the living room. Many family traditions will have to be changed.

I do not like change. I like the comfort of the status quo, of those things that are predictable and known. Change stresses me, but this year change cannot be avoided. Could God be telling me that my Advent routine is not the only thing that should change? I feel the push already. The push to find new ways to see God and hear his guidance. With less activities, there will be more time to examine what God wants me to do this season. Maybe what the 2020 Advent season should be is a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ and to develop new traditions to keep our faith fresh.

This odd season will provide an opportunity to renovate Advent. No, not renovate. To renovate is to restore to a previous state. Jesus' birth was not intended to restore us to our previous state. It was intended to change us, change the world. If we embrace change this Advent, we can do more than renovate. We can transform the season and ourselves. We can find God in different places than we did last season.

I believe even when things change, but I will change because I believe.

Dear Lord: Thank you for change. Please help the differences I experience, in this non-traditional Advent season lead me to a time of transformation where I look for you in new ways. Let me channel the stress of change into positive actions that glorify You this season. Amen

Susan Lambert

Week 3 - Joy

Sunday Dec. 13	Advent Week 3: <i>I Believe in ... Joy</i> <i>Litany of Joy</i>	pages 22-23
Monday Dec. 14	<i>God of the Mountain</i> Bobbi Marino	page 24
Tuesday Dec. 15	<i>My Name is Joseph</i> Guy Johnson	page 25
Wednesday Dec. 16	<i>I Believe in God's Presence</i> Theresa Sandifer	page 26
Thursday Dec. 17	<i>I Believe Even When I Feel Disconnected</i> Kathy King	page 27
Friday Dec. 18	<i>Alice</i> Molly Means	page 28
Saturday Dec. 19	Family Movie: <i>Frosty the Snowman</i> Dive Deeper into Joy: <i>Following the Ninth</i>	page 29

Week 4 - Peace

Sunday Dec. 20	Advent Week 4: <i>I Believe in ... Peace</i> <i>Litany of Peace</i>	pages 30-31
Monday Dec. 21	<i>I Believe</i> Rhonda Tucker	page 32
Tuesday Dec. 22	<i>The Prince of Peace</i> L. Darlene Dickson	page 33
Wednesday Dec. 23	<i>I Believe Even When I Think I Don't</i> Bonnie Byland	page 34
Christmas Eve, Lighting the Christ Candle: <i>We Believe ... Even Now</i>		page 35
Thursday Dec. 24	<i>Christmas Eve 2020</i> Pastor Deirdré	page 36
Friday Dec. 25	<i>Christmas Day 2020</i> Rev. Lane Cotton Winn	page 37
Saturday Dec. 26	<i>I Believe Even When ... Things Change</i> Susan Lambert Family Movie: <i>The Muppet Christmas Carol</i> Dive Deeper into Peace: <i>Sweet Honey in the Rock:</i> <i>Raise Your Voice</i>	page 38 page 39

I Believe in ... Hope

This Advent, we are looking to hear some words of comfort, of challenge and of good news. The prophet Isaiah and the four Gospel authors were writing in a time when people needed desperately to hear all of these as well. This first week, Isaiah, the prophet, and Mark - the Gospel writer who published first - reassure the people that good news is beginning, and yet they both say, "Make yourself ready! Raise your voices, change your hearts, get ready to be transformed, because now is the time." As we light this first candle of Hope, let us embrace hope that we can do what needs to be done to bring more light into the world.

*Holy One,
we thank you for the glimpses we catch
of your gift of untiring hope.
Even in the midst of fear,
of challenge, of struggle-
even when our view is obscured
by clouds of doubt,
ignite the flame of hope within us,
that we might glow with its brilliance
from the inside out. Amen.*

(Light the Candle of Hope.)

Read Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-15

Litany of Hope

In times when humanity disappoints,
perhaps when even our own thoughts and behaviors disappoint,
it is an important act to call out, name and claim the consequences of
our wrongs. And in times of distress, it is a prophetic act to call out,
name and claim **the belief in our hope for tomorrow**, which is in
Christ Jesus.

Christmas Day 2020

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. —John 3:16

This day conjures memories of home – gathering with family and friends around the Christmas tree and the glow of a warm fire (even if it's 80 degrees outside). A place of comfort and room at the table for everyone.

The Christmas story reminds us of home, too. It is a story of a young family on the road, away from familiar comforts. The unwed couple needs a safe place to spend the night, as they welcome a child into their lives. I imagine the first Christmas felt chaotic as Mary and Joseph wandered through the desert longing for home and for the familiar.

We too, are longing for the familiar today. This Christmas, home feels different to us. Our world aches for a sense of normalcy. We want to gather with family and friends, but COVID-19 separates us.

In spite of all of these setbacks – Christ still comes. The birth of Jesus reminds us that in the uneasy moments of life, God shows up. Chaos does not have the last word. Today – Emmanuel – God is with us.

I pray that your home is a place of peace, despite the uncertainty and turmoil of 2020. May you find hope for brighter days ahead, and may the love that God showed to us on Christmas fill your heart and home with joy.

Emmanuel, God with us, we celebrate your presence this day. Fill our hearts and homes with your peace and help us find hope in the future, for we know it is in your hands. Amen.

Merry Christmas,
Rev. Lane Cotton Winn
Lead Pastor

Christmas Eve 2020

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. —Isaiah 9: 6

A dear friend told me about how hard her mother worked every Advent season to get everything “just right” for Christmas. Maybe she hated it and felt it was a heavy burden to meet so many expectations. On Christmas Eve, we find ourselves in a season of obligation that often feels measured by some unspoken standard. When the packages are all unwrapped and the goodies consumed, many of us tumble into bed grateful the fuss is all over. There is so much effort and for what?

Why do we celebrate Christmas or even birthdays in such extravagant ways? Is it to honor the infant growing into personhood? Is it the opportunity to walk down memory lane and be reminded of the love and care we have for another human being? Is it our chance to give thanks for the gifts and presence others bring into our lives and to gather with others who have similar memories, love and thanks?

During Advent I wonder if we can fully understand the true reason for all the celebration? In this season we celebrate a god who would humble himself to be born as the baby, and the Christ who died living in obedience to God. We celebrate a life offered as an example of what God wishes us to be, do and value. We celebrate “believing” even when.

Like so many others, I too find the coming of Christmas to be a bit overwhelming. I struggle with trying to live up to what is expected of me and all the different feelings I experience. At times I feel as if I am missing out on something because I am frantically trying to embrace all the festivities and trappings of the holiday.

It was Kierkegaard that said that a faith that did not require struggle was not the kind of faith worth having, and so, perhaps it is okay to struggle in this season. I am reminded each Advent of the struggle of Mary; too young, unwed, and faced with visions and demands from angels. Perhaps our struggle is necessary to grow in faith and to believe in the times when hope seems small. We are called, after all, to walk by faith this Advent season and always. May you discover God’s great gift of love for you this Christmas Eve.

Holy God, you come to us as a tiny baby. Like you, we too struggle to find our path and footing this Christmas Eve. Yet, still you come to us! Humble our hearts and make us attentive to the great gift of love you have for us.

In His Service,
Pastor Deirdré

Hear these statements of belief from members of our own congregation:

When a pandemic has the world locked down,
and our spirits feel locked up,
We believe in God’s hope.

When life changes so quickly, when we are faced
with so much loss and injustice,
We believe in God’s hope.

When we feel stretched, or diminished and are so very tired of waiting,
We believe in God’s hope.

Give ear to your people, O God.
Let us not lose hope this Advent Season.
**We place our hope in you and
turn our hearts once more to your coming.**

Benediction

We wait for justice
but we do not wait to work for change;

We wait for restored health
but we do not wait to work towards healing;

We wait for wholeness
but we do not wait to work at binding brokenness;

We wait for peace
but we do not wait to work to eliminate hatred.

Go into your lives humming the tunes that keep that hope alive in you and that spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Raise your voices and say, “Do not be afraid!” Amen!

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I Believe Even When My Faith Is Small

“You don’t have enough faith,” Jesus told them. “I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it would move. For in Christ Jesus, nothing is impossible.”—Matthew 17: 20

I believe even when a pandemic has the world in lockdown.

I believe even when wildfires are raging in the west and hurricanes threaten the south.

I believe even when it seems there is no hope, because I have seen a mother and her child reunited.

I believe even when others do not, because I have seen the diseased and addicted change into beautiful, productive people.

I have truly seen faith, the size of a mustard seed, move mountains.

I believe even when the days are dark and the nights darker because the sun **will** rise again, and God isn’t finished moving mountains.

Creator God, you have formed the seas, the sky, and the mountains. You have known me before I took my first breath and have counted the very hairs of my head. You walk beside me even when I cannot believe, and you are the small seed waiting to be born anew. Create in us all, new hearts and minds this Advent season, for in You all things are possible. Amen.

Brycen Stubbs

Christmas Eve

Lighting the Christ Candle

We Believe ... Even Now

Today we return to the story of Jesus’ birth as it is told in the Gospel of Luke. This account is the narrative we read again and again on this holy day, for this author gives us the most beloved detail. We so desire to believe the Good News of the messengers that is the culmination of humanity’s pain of birth: “don’t be afraid” for unto us a sign has come that will be to all people... “on earth, peace.”

*Holy One,
we thank you for the glimpse
of heaven on earth
in the faces and the light of those around us.
Even in the midst of fear,
of challenge, of struggle—
even when our view
is obscured by clouds of doubt,
You have ignited the flame of
hope, love, joy, and peace within us.
Let us glow with its brilliance
from the inside out. Amen.*

(Light the Christ Candle and the candles of Hope, Love, Joy and Peace.)

Read Luke 2:1-20

Benediction

We wait for justice
but we do not wait to work for change;

We wait for restored health
but we do not wait to work towards healing;

We wait for wholeness
but we do not wait to work at binding brokenness;

We wait for peace
but we do not wait to work to eliminate hatred.

Fill the world with messages of hope, love, joy, and peace! Go into your lives humming the tunes that keep that light alive in you and that spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Raise your voices and say, “Do not be afraid!” Amen!

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I Believe Even When I Think I Don't

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. —Proverbs 3: 5-6

I believe even when
I am deafened by the silence and
When I am mute in the noise.

I believe even when
I tremble in the darkness and
When I shine in the light.

I believe even when
My body limps in its frailty and
When I am soar in my strength.

I believe even when
I am muddled in my confusion and
When I am decisive in my clarity.

I believe even when
I stray in the wilderness and
When I stay God's course.

I believe even when
I starve with emptiness and
When I rest in abundance.

I believe even when
I dread the future with uncertainty and
When I drive forward with confidence.

I believe even when
A star shows the way and
When a shepherd kneels in prayer.

I believe even when
A baby is born in a stable and
When He rules as King.

I believe even when
I think I don't and
Then I remember, I remember
His Gift. And I believe.

*Dear God, thank you for the gift of your Son, the strength of our belief.
Thank you for the way that you help us to work through the contradictions
and doubts in our lives and to remember that belief. Amen.*

Bonnie Byland

I Believe When It's Hard to Believe

*I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.
—Psalm 130:5*

**It is hard to believe even when...
in many ways we are disenfranchised by the world.**

It is hard to believe even when... you are bombarded by all the things of this world – money, power, big houses, fancy cars, nice clothes, expensive perfumes and, yes, even elaborate Christmas gifts. We often think that these “things” are what we need to make life full and complete.

It is hard to believe even when... everywhere you look the world is faced with natural disasters, climate changes, famine, lack of medical care, and yes, a world-wide pandemic.

It is hard to believe even when... social injustice looms large, prejudice of color, status, sexual identity, socioeconomic disparity, not only here, but all around the world.

It is hard to believe even when... you suffer a life-changing loss. Loss of employment, loss of home, loss of health, loss of independence, loss of a loved one, and now the loss of even gathering with one another without fear.

All of us, yes all of us, struggle to believe at one time or another during our lives. We all face situations when it is difficult, yes, even “hard” to be a faithful Christian. However, when we truly believe in the birth of Jesus Christ, suddenly it is so much easier to believe. A god who would humble himself and come to live as we do makes it easy to believe even when ...

We often feel overwhelmed by expectations, disasters, and the injustice around us. When we struggle to believe, remind us that you have a plan and a hope for us that is good. Remind us that you are in control. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Susan Johnston

Waiting

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to know and believe what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. —Romans 12: 2

What we have experienced becomes a living part of us if we accept it with an attitude of growth.

Only we can know and reflect on these moments of transformation in our life.

Once there, the **hope** never leaves us and the experience will come again:

To open us to new possibilities

To stretch us

To diminish our boundaries

To teach us to love better

In times of despair or times of joy, we **wait** patiently for this encounter to return.

You, Oh God, sent your messenger to Mary with the news of a child to be born. Not knowing what her future might hold, she opened her life to all the possibilities. In this Advent season, teach us to grow and open ourselves to the love you have for us. Amen.

Jean Clark

The Prince of Peace

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this. —Isaiah 9:6-7 KJV

Picture it! Louisiana in 2020 was going to be my year! I was going to do things I have never done before. I was making big plans! I was not going to use my son Devin as an excuse not to go to concerts, retreats or live comedy shows anymore! I said to myself, "I'm getting out of this house if the last thing I do. Tracy Morgan, I'll be seeing you at Paragon Casino Resort Saturday March 14, 2020. Whooo Hooo!" I spoke those words to myself on January 31, 2020.

Then March 2020 unfolded like a scene from a horror movie. A mysterious virus spread across the world killing millions of people. Only a few weeks later Gov. John Bel Edwards issued a state-wide mandate that shut down all large gatherings, events and even schools. The mandate included a two week stay-at-home order for all people of Louisiana. This was done as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of the dreaded virus into the entire state of Louisiana. COVID-19 had attacked my little world!

Fear gripped me, my peace and joy left me, and I fell into a dark abyss. I feared leaving my house to go to the mailbox, and I didn't have the courage to go to the store. All the promises I had made to myself about getting out of the house and living my life to the fullest had turned into staying inside, being alive but barely living. I wondered what could be done about something that was completely out of my control? How could I overcome this fear and get my peace and joy back?

I did the only thing I knew how to do. I began to pray to God. I asked Him to restore my peace and joy. I truly began to believe that even in the middle of a world-wide pandemic I could still live life to the fullest. I knew things would be a little different. Now, there are rules that I must follow in order to stay safe, and they also freed me from having to live in fear and darkness. I hold onto the promise of Isaiah 9:6, that Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Now I pray that all of God's children will cling tightly to the Prince of Peace and allow His peace to cover them.

Dear God, Thank you for Jesus, The Promised One. During this time of change and uncertainty help us to remember that You are in control. Calm our fears and bring us out of the darkness and into your marvelous light. In Jesus name, Amen.

L. Darlene Dickson

I Believe

“Go out and stand before me on the mountain,” the LORD told Elijah. And as Elijah stood there, a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

*And the voice of God spoke, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”
—1 Kings 19: 11-13*

I believe when my devotionals aren't read, my prayers are not said, and my attention is drawn to everything but You. I believe.

I believe when the sun is shining, the clouds are rolling, and the dark is overwhelming. I believe.

I believe with each breath in and with each breath out. I release my dependence on myself, and I believe.

I believe when I look to the sky and feel the wind blowing by. I believe.

I believe when I see how fleeting life is and in the beauty of it just beginning. I believe.

I believe when the illusion of control is broken, and life isn't what it is supposed to be. I believe.

I believe.

Holy God, you often come to us in quiet and gentle ways. Too often we get distracted by the storms and chaos that swirls around us. In this Advent season, still our busy minds and quiet our rushing bodies, that we may hear the gentle words you speak to us. Help us to believe even in the storms of life. Amen.

Rhonda Tucker

I Believe When I Remember the Past

Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. —Psalm 80:7

In this season amid a pandemic, which has taken the lives of many and changed the lives of so many others, we find ourselves in a period of waiting. We first heard that it would be only a few weeks, so we waited; a few weeks turned into a few months, and again we waited. This period of waiting has often shifted to doubt, distrust, anger, more questions, and rebellion. We wait for someone to do something! We wait for someone to take action!

Psalm 80 echoes these longings and emotions of a community that was also facing calamity. The Israelites were a people who felt abandoned and rejected by Yahweh. God's people felt puzzled because this was not the Yahweh they remembered from the past. They remembered a God of action! The One who listened, gave ear, and attended to His people! They prayed and pleaded for the day His favor would be restored.

It is with hope that we remember who God is in our lives. May we not lose hope or turn away from Him. May we have peace as we wait!

O God, help us to still trust, believe, and have faith in you. May we never lose hope or forget you as Shepherd, Father, and Lord. May we praise you as we wait for the day of restoration. Amen.

Deacon Latrice Mallard

I Believe Even When the Dawn Seems Far Away

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering on the surface of the waters. —Genesis 1: 1-3

I believe even when...

You call me to be open.

I have put up wall after wall, closing myself off.

It's easier in here, inside a world I can pretend to control.

You call me to wade out into the chaos.

Your people are out there, and I can't hide here forever.

You call me to give up.

I can't have all that I want and be able to accept what You want for me.

I have to give up my plans and exchange them for ones I cannot see.

You call me to trust that You have a brighter dream ahead for me.

You call me to wait.

Growth is done in secret, too slow to see up close.

I want to be whole now. I want to measure up now.

Patience is a virtue and a challenge I don't want to face.

You call me to heal slowly this time, to heal right.

You call me to hope.

The night is so long and so empty, Lord.

You call me to believe even when dawn is far away.

Gracious God, sometimes our belief seems small and clouded. At times we want to hide away to avoid the struggles that seem to consume us. Grant us courage this Advent season, that even when we stand in the darkness, we can believe that we are held in the creator's hands. Amen.

Kristine Isenhower

Hear these statements of belief from members of our own congregation:

When I look to the sky and feel the wind blowing by, I know peace.

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me

When I am gripped by fear and life seems fragile, let me seek peace.

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me

When I fall to my knees and do not know what to believe,
let me pray for peace.

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me

Renew and restore us to yourself and to each other,
and let your peace be born anew.

Benediction

We wait for justice
but we do not wait to work for change;

We wait for restored health
but we do not wait to work towards healing;

We wait for wholeness
but we do not wait to work at binding brokenness;

We wait for peace
but we do not wait to work to eliminate hatred.

Go into your lives humming the tunes that keep that peace alive in you and that spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Raise your voices and say, "Do not be afraid!" Amen!

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I Believe in ... Peace

The “great light” prophesied by Isaiah in today’s text is echoed in the first strains of John’s Gospel of good news: the light that brings peace—that saves the people from all that would extinguish it—has been there from the beginning. The Word is made flesh and dwells among us. This reign is now... will we believe it? Will we continue to put flesh on it, embodying the peace meant for all humanity?

*Holy One,
we thank you for the glimpses we catch
of your gift of peace on earth.
Even in the midst of fear,
of challenge, of struggle—
even when we aren’t sure that
goodwill among us can be found,
ignite the flame of peace within us,
that we might glow with its brilliance
from the inside out. Amen.*

(Light the candle of Peace and relight the candles of Hope, Love and Joy.)

Read Isaiah 9:2-7 and John 1:1-18

Litany of Peace

In times when humanity disappoints,
perhaps when even our own thoughts and behaviors disappoint,
it is an important act to call out, name and claim
the consequences of our wrongs.
And in times of distress, it is a prophetic act to call out, name and claim
our belief in peace for the world.

Family Movie: A Charlie Brown Christmas

Comfort, comfort my people! says your God. Speak compassionately to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended, that her penalty has been paid. —Isaiah 40:1-2

These words were written hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Isaiah was giving God’s people hope, reminding them that, even in captivity, God was with them and that there would be better days ahead. Hope is such a powerful force. It’s the belief in something happening and the confident expectation that it will.

We invite you to watch the classic Christmas movie that embodies hope: *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Where does Charlie Brown place his hope, and does this story leave you feeling hopeful?

*Loving God,
We have you,
And there is hope.
We have each other,
And there is hope.
We wait for Jesus,
With confident expectation,
And there is hope.
Amen.*

Dive Deeper into Hope: Film Suggestion for Grown-ups

Defiant Requiem, available on Amazon Prime (defiantrequiem.org)

Defiant Requiem highlights the most dramatic example of intellectual and artistic courage in the Theresienstadt (Terezín) Concentration Camp during World War II: the remarkable story of Rafael Schächter, a brilliant, young Czech conductor who was arrested and sent to Terezín in 1941. He demonstrated moral leadership under the most brutal circumstances, determined to sustain courage and hope for his fellow prisoners by enriching their souls through great music. His most extraordinary act was to recruit 150 prisoners and teach them Verdi’s Requiem by rote in a dank cellar using a single score, over multiple rehearsals, and after grueling days of forced labor. The Requiem was performed on 16 occasions for fellow prisoners. The last, most infamous performance occurred on June 23, 1944, before high-ranking SS officers from Berlin and the International Red Cross to support the charade that the prisoners were treated well and flourishing.

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I Believe in ... Love

In both the Gospel of Matthew and Isaiah, a messenger appears as a sign from God, heralding a new era. In each passage, the words “do not be afraid” appear... offering a clue that the messenger was referencing something that induced fear in the recipient. A new way of being together, of relating and loving takes courage—giving up the present order, so that a better day can be born.

*Holy One,
we thank you for the glimpses we catch
of your gift of daring love.
Even in the midst of fear,
of challenge, of struggle—
even when we cannot yet see a better day
when we will act
like the human family we are,
ignite the flame of love within us,
that we might glow with its brilliance
from the inside out. Amen.*

(Light the candle of Love and relight the candle of Hope.)

Read Isaiah 7:1-14 and Matthew 1:1-25

Litany of Love

In times when humanity disappoints,
perhaps when even our own thoughts and behaviors disappoint,
it is an important act to call out, name and claim
the consequences of our wrongs.

And in times of distress it is a prophetic act
to call out, name and claim **our belief that daring to
love each other as God loves us is a faithful response.**

Family Movie: *Frosty the Snowman*

Mary said, “With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my Savior.” —Luke 1:46-47

Mary has just learned that she is going to be the mother of Jesus, and she is overcome with joy. Joy is more than happiness. It goes deeper. When we’re happy, we smile with our faces. When we have joy, we smile with our hearts. Because joy runs so deep, it helps us get through the ups and downs of life.

Let’s look at some examples of real joy in *Frosty the Snowman*. How did the characters reach out to help each other? Reaching out and caring for and about others is one of the best ways to find joy. The one character who continues to think only about himself until the end is Professor Hinkle, and he is clearly the least joyous character. When was a time you did something for someone else? How did that make you feel?

*Loving God,
Thank you for the gift of joy –
For the joy of simplicity,
For the joy of working together,
For the joy of helping others,
For the joy of being alive!
Amen.*

Dive Deeper into Joy: Film Suggestion for Grown-ups

Following the Ninth, available on YouTube

Filmed on four continents, this documentary film looks at the global impact of Beethoven’s hymn to humanity, his battle cry of freedom, his Ninth Symphony. The Ninth was at Tianamen Square in the Spring of 1989 during the student revolt. The same year, when the Berlin Wall came down, the Ninth was there to amplify the celebrations. Under the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, women marched on torture prisons with the Ode to Joy as inspiration. And in Japan, the Ninth was there to repair and heal after the devastating Tsunami of 2011. *Following The Ninth* is both inspirational and hard-hitting, and a testament of hope.

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Alice

“So do not be afraid, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” Matthew 10:26–31 NIV



I believe even when, month after month, year after year, my hopes are dashed.

I believe even when the vitamins, procedures, and remedies do no good.

I believe even when the doctors can find no answers.

I believe even when I puncture my own skin night after night with over 500 needles.

I believe even when day after day, our 20 eggs dwindle down to one viable embryo.

I believe even when I’m doubled over with nausea.

I believe even when, after 10 hours of labor there has been no progress.

I believe even when my temperature rises and your heartbeat lowers.

I believe even when the scalpel cuts.

I believe especially when I see your smile.

Oh God, you know us so very well. You knew us before we took our first breath, and you have a plan and a purpose for us that is for good. May we trust this Advent season that you not only hold us in your hand, but you call us beloved. Amen

Molly Means

Hear these statements of belief from members of our own congregation:

Holy is the ground we stand on, holy is the silence
We listen for the echoes of Your love.

Sculpted by the Master’s hands we yearn to be held and loved
We hunger for the embrace of Your love.

In the beauty of a blue sky or the cold of the rain
We stand in wonder and awe of Your love.

Come Lord Jesus, come
We welcome you in love.

Benediction

We wait for justice
but we do not wait to work for change;

We wait for restored health
but we do not wait to work towards healing;

We wait for wholeness
but we do not wait to work at binding brokenness;

We wait for peace
but we do not wait to work to eliminate hatred.

Go into your lives humming the tunes that keep that love alive in you and that spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Raise your voices and say, “Do not be afraid!” Amen!

Advent Evening

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." —Luke 2:8-12

Listen! Silence is calling.

Moon casts no shadow and owl rests from her hunt.

Orion's belt shimmers in the black sky.

Do the stars ring like tiny bells?

Listen! Holy is the ground you stand upon.

Holy is the silence.

Touch the quiet, breathe the calm, absorb the turning of the universe.

Listen! The trees hold their breath.

Keep watch with your heart. Drink with your eyes.

Feel the atoms of love shimmering around you.

Listen! Do you hear angels singing?

Holy God, still our hearts this Advent season. Help us to see the "holy" in all that you have created. We listen for your voice. Amen.

Betty Schroeder

I Believe Even When I Feel Disconnected

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. —John 15: 5

I believe even when....I feel DISCONNECTED. The pandemic has dragged on long enough now where even I, as an introverted person who enjoys her alone time, am feeling disconnected. I know that most of us have felt that way at some point in 2020. We have felt disconnected from each other...our families, our community, our coworkers, and our church family. For me, the disconnect has now extended to feeling disconnected from God. But what is the GOOD NEWS? God is Emmanuel, God With Us. He is not disconnected from us! And the other good news is that even though I "feel" disconnected, I know that I am actually not. I know in my heart that all I have to do is call on God and He'll be there for me. He will always be there. He is my Rock. God is connected to us in many mysterious ways. During this Advent season, we are reminded of the most tangible way in which God has connected with us. He sent His Son to dwell on this earth with us, to live among us, to be fully human, to grow into a man who taught us the way, and who teaches us still today. The ultimate connection! God's Son is born to us again as we celebrate this Advent and Christmas season ... yes, even in the year 2020. Hallelujah!

Father, thank you for being near even when I don't feel You. Thank you for being near even when I have not drawn near. I want to remain connected to you always; help me know Your presence. And thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Kathy King

I Believe in God's Presence

"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the LORD. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." —Isaiah 55: 8-10

I believe in God's presence even when I do not fully understand what God is asking me to do. At this time of year, I begin to obsess about our food ministry's big holiday event - The Great Turkey Giveaway. This year will be the 10th annual event. When I "heard" God's call to open a food pantry at our church, I did not fully understand. After all, I had no knowledge of opening or running a food pantry. Obstacles were everywhere. Many hurdles needed jumping and much convincing, asking, and at times begging, was necessary. I told my story over and over. Some people were clearly uncomfortable with me talking about how God told me to "feed my sheep." At times, I felt very alone in the process. Most people do not go around speaking about a call from God. But I persevered, even when I did not know what the outcome would be. All I knew was that God had clearly spoken to me and God was with me every step of the way. Since the reality of running a food pantry requires many hands and feet, money, and food, of course, I met with multiple potential volunteers and donors all while the food pantry was not even in existence. It was still just a vision. But God touched many people's hearts and opened their eyes and ears to envision the possibilities. During that first Giveaway event ten years ago, we had the funds to give away 100 turkeys. This year, we will give away at least 550 turkeys along with everything a family might need to prepare a holiday meal. Over the years, our feeding ministry has touched countless lives. Those who received food, as well as those who gave food, have all been touched. One might even say that our annual Great Turkey Giveaway is now a holiday tradition for our church. I still do not fully understand the extent of God's call, but I truly believe I was called to keep giving food to those in need. That persistent thought - "feed my sheep" - is still there. I know that God will always be with me as we live out this calling. Thanks be to God for allowing us to be in His service. Do I love Jesus? Yes, Lord, I do. Then "feed my sheep." (John 21:17)

Holy God, we do not always understand your ways or the plans you have for us. In this Advent Season help us to listen to your voice that calls us to be like you. Help us always, to see your face in those who are in need, and to offer ourselves where we are able. Amen.

Theresa Sandifer

Lost Without Love

I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. —Philippians 1: 9 – 10

One of the things that I remember most vividly about my father is his comments about "baby's cheeks" - they are "just right for smack-a-roos." My father LOVED to kiss babies' cheeks. It was always the same: see a baby, make the comment. It was terribly embarrassing as a teenager to have a father who acted like that - who made comments like that. However, later in my life, as a mother, I began to understand just where my father's sentiments had come from. His love for me and my brothers, my mother and for life itself was so great that it spilled over into his love for all babies, all children, all people.

There is, perhaps, no emotion that evokes more response in and from people than love. Across the centuries, there is probably no emotion that has been more written about, sung about or thought about, than love. From the romantic lyrics of "Come What May" in the musical *Moulin Rouge* ("Come what may, come what may, I will love you 'till my dying day"), to the touching lines of the children's book "I'll Love You Forever" ("I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be"), to the faith-filled lines of the hymn, "Love Divine All Love's Excelling" ("Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art"), people are touched by the idea of love in each of its forms.

We as human beings long for love, are lost without love. As babies, we need to be held, kissed, snuggled and hugged. As teenagers, although most don't like to admit it, we still need hugging and holding. (One of my fondest memories is of my college-aged daughter climbing in her daddy's lap for some snuggles.) As we grow older, we still need that loving touch, and perhaps we understand more dramatically and deeply the significance of love in our lives and in the world.

Surely the One who created us, knows better than even we ourselves do how much we need love in our lives. Perhaps that is why our creator sent Jesus: to love us and to show us the way to love others. The words of one of my favorite Christmas hymns come to mind: "Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love divine, Love was born at Christmas; star and angels gave the sign."

Holy God, you know us Oh so well and call us your beloved. Let our own lives reflect your love to a world that longs for your coming. May your love be born anew again, this Advent season, in our hearts and lives. Amen.

Rev. Marie Williams

Advent Poem

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? —Matthew 6:25-27

I believe even when

the sky is a beautiful blue, or maybe even another hue
my foot has a bad nerve, or I am allowed to serve
that beautiful bee stung me, or my son is high in a tree
the entire area decides to flood, or my husband's finger is covered in

blood

my Mother has cancer in her lung, or when hymns of praise are being
sung

all of my body has an ache, or my son decides brownies to bake
my son calls to say he is in a wreck, or when we are watching Star

Trek

after a rain, the sky gives me a rainbow, or my son drops an engine on
his big toe

the outside is covered in ice, or my neighbor is being extremely nice
we are totally without power, or I see a magnificent flower
the bills are all due, or the baby's brand new
when we are cold, in the rain, in a tent,
or just waiting for the Season of Advent when a tiny Baby will save me
How can that possibly be?

the soldiers put him on a cross
and it is to be their great loss
because they know not who is the Boss

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for the beauty of creation, the blue of the sky, the gifts of music, and the joy of family and fellowship. We thank you too that in the difficulties of life, you are still with us to lead and guide us on our way. In this Advent season we thank you that you humbled yourself to become a tiny baby and in this gift of love we too are offered new life. Amen.

Daphne G. Grady

My Name is Joseph

Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion. But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint. —Isaiah 40: 30-31

There are so many things in life which we want very much, but when we first think of them, we're not ready for them. So, we have to wait, prepare ourselves, and pray they will come at last. My name is Joseph. My family prides itself on its descent from our great King David, but glory has gone from our house. My father was the carpenter of Nazareth, a village in Galilee. When he died, his shop came to me. I was the carpenter of Nazareth. What I had wanted and waited for had come and I was ready.

Now, Nazareth is small. It has few families. But at that time another family there traced its line to David also, and Mary was a daughter of that house. She was a lovely girl, my choice to be my bride. Now, as you know, negotiations in these affairs are complicated. It seemed as if I waited forever, but preparations were finally completed. We were betrothed in the time-honored Nazareth style. Marriage would come later, one year later. Till that time, Mary remained with her parents, and I was alone in my shop. I hated to think of a whole year of waiting but wait I must.

There was a bright spot though. Each day I saw her at the well drawing water with her friends. Then one day, she did not come with the others to draw water. Three days went by, and still Mary did not leave her house. I began to worry, afraid she had taken ill. I went to speak with Mary's father. He was hesitant and distant. Finally, however, after I pressed, he spoke.

Without a word I left him. I could hardly believe what I was told. I sat in my room alone. I tried to think. What could I do? How could we marry now? But how could I expose the woman I loved to shame? There was no answer. At last I slept. In my dream, I saw someone standing at the foot of my bed, someone bathed in a golden light. A quiet voice filled my small room. The words I heard were gentle and reassuring. They told me what I was to do.

When I awoke, I went to Mary's father a second time. We came to an agreement. The wedding would be small and would take place within a week. Mary and I entered the home that we would share with joy. Here her son would grow up. Here as his earthly father I would keep him safe. Soon he would be born, but still there were months to wait.

Lord Jesus, we long for your coming. The days pass slowly, but we wait with joyful expectation. Come soon. Amen.

Guy Johnson

God on the Mountain

You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father. —Matthew 5: 14-16

Americans have faced serious trials in the last ten months that may or may not have tested their faith in God. However, when a survivor of the Holocaust can say “I believe in God” even when enduring the horrors of genocide and the systematic persecution of their race, I know I want to have that same kind of faith. My own journey of faith has grown and faltered over my lifetime. Since the shutdown, due to the coronavirus in March, my candle has been flickering, growing stronger as conditions improved but then weakening again due to the political climate, racism, and the natural disasters of hurricanes and fires. Innocent lives have been snuffed out, homes and properties destroyed, and Americans have displayed a profound hatred toward others of conflicting political views. My faith was tested. What was happening and how could it be stopped? I know the answer is FAITH, faith that our God is always with us and will provide. I keep looking for simple words I can fall back on in difficult times to keep my faith strong and alive. Sometimes those words for me can be found in a song. Songs and hymns are often a source of comfort in times of need. As I remember the songs of my childhood, I feel my faith come alive and grow. One of those is a gospel song, called *God on the Mountain*, made popular by Lynda Randle. The lyrics are so true and simple:

*Life is easy, when you're up on the mountain
And you've got peace of mind, like you've never known
But things change, when you're down in the valley
Don't lose faith, for you're never alone.*

The second verse continues:

*We talk of faith way up on the mountain
But talk comes easy, when life's at its best
Now it's down in the valleys, trials and temptations
That's where your faith is really put to the test.*

The beautiful chorus finishes with:

*For the God on the mountain, is still God in the valley,
When things go wrong, He'll make them right
And the God of the good times, is still God in the bad times
The God of the day, is still God in the night.*

We thank you God for the gift of music and the way in which it can refresh us when we are discouraged. Remind us that whether we are up on the mountain top or down in the valley, you are with us, we are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Bobbi Marino

Another Wise Man

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, where is the one who is born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. —Matthew 2:1-2

Shimon Ben-Aaron is my name. I am not a prophet—there have been no prophets in Israel since the days of Zechariah—but I have studied the sacred writings for many years. When I came to understand many of their secrets, I began to speak in the forecourt of the Temple sharing my message with all who would stop to listen.

With good reason my words offended the great King Herod. Three times his guards arrested and beat me. After that third time they roughly threw me beyond the city gates where I lay for hours in the dust by the roadside.

Many passed by, carefully turning their faces away from me. A caravan of strangers in our land, however, stopped to give me aid. The leaders of the caravan were three learned students of the stars, who had come from beyond the eastern desert. Their investigations had revealed to them that a new King of the Jews, the Messiah, was about to be born. Wishing to honor the young child, they had come to Herod's palace to learn where they might find him. The old king had made a great show of finding the correct location, assuring them that he would also honor the new king. “The Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem, of King David's line,” I said. “That is what we were told,” they answered, “But where in Bethlehem will the baby be? Is there a palace there?” “Herod has a mansion on the hill overlooking the town, but you will not find descendants of David there,” I said, “the Romans are taking a census right now and by their law members of David's line are crowding into Bethlehem to be counted.”

Since I wished to pay homage to the baby Messiah also, the three scholars agreed to let me come with them to Bethlehem. We traveled through the night. The great star which had alerted them to the royal birth brightened the whole sky and lighted our way to the little town ahead. We went first to the inn in the town square. When he learned our purpose in coming, the inn keeper told us of a child recently born and

(continues on next page)

honored by town shepherds. In the stables behind the inn we found the baby. The three wise men honored the young Messiah with rich gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then they warned the child's parents of the threat they felt Herod posed for their son, but Joseph, the boy's earthly father, had already learned of this danger. We watched the family depart from Judea on their way to safety in Egypt.

When I saw the new king there in the manger, I had no gift to give except my love. In the years since that time, I have spread his story to everyone I meet everywhere I go. Perhaps that is my gift.

Once again, we await your coming. Help us to love you and our neighbors more fully. Come quickly, Lord. Amen.

Guy Johnson

Friday December 11, 2020

In Love

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him
—1 John 4:16

I am brought to my knees by a commercial on television. A newborn baby is placed on his mother's chest, his head turned toward her face. From his little wrinkled countenance, his eyes immediately scrutinize his mother's face, looking with intensity and love at the one in whom his search for hope and trust and life itself resides. I feel as if I am looking at a miracle and at a truth. We are born from love, we are made of love, and we search for love.

Everything good springs from love. All of creation comes from God's power and love. He was so in love with his creation that he sent Love itself in the form of his son. He wanted to show us the truth and power of love.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Jesus spoke these words, understanding that the creative force of the universe not only loved the creation but was love itself. The miracle and mystery of creation are testaments to the creator's unfathomable genius and love—from the beginning when massive exploding stars produced all the elements from which all matter is made, through the formation of

Hear these statements of belief from members of our own congregation:

Hear the good news of Joy, Emmanuel is coming
On the hills or in the valleys, God is with us.

Hear the good news of Joy, that a child is to be born
In our slumber and in our work, God is with us.

Hear the good news of Joy, that the angels sang so long ago
To Mary so meek and mild, and to us is Joy foretold

The ancient song still echoes on, of peace and joy to all the world.

Benediction

We wait for justice
but we do not wait to work for change;

We wait for restored health
but we do not wait to work towards healing;

We wait for wholeness
but we do not wait to work at binding brokenness;

We wait for peace
but we do not wait to work to eliminate hatred.

Go into your lives humming the tunes that keep that joy alive in you and that spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Raise your voices and say, "Do not be afraid!" Amen!

*Adapted from Worship Design Studio materials by Marcia McFee.
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I Believe in ... Joy

This week we turn to Luke's writing which is an account in two acts: the Gospel biography of Jesus and then the story of the early church—the "Jesus community." Whether you were a Jew or Gentile in those days, deciding to become a part of this illegal, early Christian movement could bring punishment for your allegiance. Surely the message in both Luke and Isaiah that the downcast, lowly, and oppressed would rise up is a welcome and inspirational account. Like the Jewish exiled people of Isaiah's time and like the early Christians, we also sometimes wonder where God is in our suffering. We long to hear the promise that a reason for joyful praise is the good news on the way!

*Holy One,
we thank you for the glimpses we catch
of your gift of the depths of joy.
Even in the midst of fear,
of challenge, of struggle—
even when we are not sure of your presence,
ignite the flame of joy within us,
that we might glow with its brilliance
from the inside out. Amen.*

(Light the candle of Joy and relight the candles of Hope and Love.)

Read Isaiah 57:14-19 and Luke 1: 1-4; 26-56

Litany of Joy

In times when humanity disappoints,
perhaps when even our own thoughts and behaviors disappoint,
it is an important act to call out, name and claim
the consequences of our wrongs.

And in times of distress, it is a prophetic act to call out, name and claim
our belief in the promise of joy.

the galaxies, the mountains and the oceans of our precious planet, and the emergence of abundant and exuberant life.

In this season of Advent — even in the tumult that the year 2020 has brought to us — as we await once more the coming of the Messiah, how can we not feel ourselves enveloped by the hope and assurance that are promised to us by the immeasurable gift God has given — to become flesh and blood just like us and to live on this earth with us in a quest to show us what love is and what life can be.

Go outside. Listen to the song of the birds, breathe in the crisp air, look at the amazing structure of a bright orange pumpkin, gaze at the heavens in the silence of a black winter night, revel in the sounds of children playing, enjoy a cup of hot coffee. All of these things are gifts to us from the creator. How can we in turn not respond with love?

Come, Lord Jesus, come. We welcome you in love.

*O God Most High, help us to embrace the miracle of redeeming love that this Advent season celebrates. Enable us to see the unspeakable mystery of your breaking into our human world and humbly living here on this earth with us. We have no words to express our awe and reverence in the face of this towering miracle. Grant that our hearts and actions reflect the fathomless love that you offer us and that we live every day of this season and beyond as your witnesses and ambassadors to all people.
Amen*

Betty Schroeder

Advent Calendar

For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. —John 3: 16-17

I believe even when the world is and has been full of injustice. Instead of waking up pleased with my own lot and apathetic to others, I wake up and want to fight for a better world. Jesus said that the first and greatest commandment is to “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind ... And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22: 37, 39, KJV). Many, perhaps most, Christians can repeat these lines by rote, and yet we often fail to recognize their significance. These two commandments are together for a reason. The concept of loving the Lord is necessarily abstract and up for interpretation. But the task of loving our neighbor as ourselves is a call so clear that it is painful. Every day, we see neighbors who could use our love, and we look away.

In this world, loving is hard. It requires taking risks with no promise of reward. It requires helping those who may never be able to help back and confronting the forces promising a select few peace and prosperity.

Our collective failure to love has made this world unjust. I believe even when injustice surrounds us, because I think God wants us to see it in order to really see each other. Through these commandments, God offers us a path to real justice, peace and prosperity on earth as it is in heaven.

Holy God, we come this Advent season asking for our eyes to be opened to those around us. Move us to acts of love where we see the needs of those around us. Help us to love others as you have loved us. Amen.

Caleb Doan

Family Movie: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*

*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one.
—Ezekiel 36:26*

Let’s watch a movie that captures the essence of this lovely Bible verse. The Grinch tries to keep Christmas from coming, but can anything really stop Christmas? When the Grinch’s heart grew what else changed? Christmas is not about things. When we let go of what we think Christmas is “supposed” to be, we open our hearts to what Christmas already is – an amazing gift from a God who loves us very much.

*Loving God,
Thank you for the gift of Christmas.
Thank you for the gift of love.
Thank you for the gift of you.
Amen.*

Dive Deeper into Love: Film Suggestion for Grown-ups

Girls on the Wall, available to rent on Amazon

In this second week’s film, *Girls on the Wall*, the teenage girls of Warrenville Prison are not your average delinquents. Having “graduated” from juvie to prison, these are the kids most likely to remain in the correctional system their whole lives. They are also some of the sharpest and most irrepressible young women you’ll meet. When the girls of this heartland prison are given an unlikely shot at redemption — the chance to write and stage a musical based on their lives — they must relive their crimes, reclaim their humanity, and take a first step toward breaking free of the prison system.

*Adapted from Worship Design Studio materials by Marcia McFee.
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