

**COLLEGE PARK**  
An American Baptist Church

**UNCLUTTERED**



**advent devotions**  
**2015**

## College Park Baptist Church Advent Devotions 2015

Advent is a time of waiting, of preparation, of anticipation – it is the time we look expectantly to the coming of God who is Emmanuel. It is a time of emptying oneself that God might find space to dwell in the very depths of our hearts, in our daily lives, in the hurting world we live in.

Our theme for this Advent season is *Uncluttered*. Over the next 27 days we will examine the busyness of our day-to-day lives, of our minds, of our hearts, of our spiritual practices, and we will consider ways that a simpler, less-cluttered approach might leave room for the gospel to transform us, for our creator to renew us, for the Spirit to meet us. We will practice emptying ourselves and making ourselves available to a living, active God.

This booklet is designed to guide you in the daily practice of reflection and examination. These reflections were written for College Park (and to be shared by College Park) by people who know and love and have ministered alongside our congregation. Each entry includes a **scripture**, **reflection**, **prayer** and an advent **action**. The action provides you with a concrete, spiritual response to the devotion – a challenge for embodying your prayer.

It is our hope that you might find much needed encouragement, challenge, blessing, calm, prodding, tugging as you journey through this advent season. It is our hope that you might encounter God in new ways each day.

## Advent Week 1: Hope

### November 29

*Philippians 2. 4-8*

*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

There is an old teaching about a scholar who studied Zen for many years but never attained enlightenment. After tremendous effort, the scholar sought out a Zen master for guidance. At their first encounter, the teacher offered the scholar a cup and slowly filled it with tea. The scholar, so busy imploring the teacher for wisdom, did not notice the tea until it began to spill over the sides onto the table. The scholar shouted, “Stop! Stop! The cup is full.” The Zen master replied, “You are like this cup. You seek wisdom, but you are too full to receive it.”

Our lives give us plenty to protect. We start out meek and dependent, but slowly take on identities, talents, degrees, jobs, children, partners, houses, iPads, and fears. It’s hard to say which comes first—the fear or the stuff—but we live in an age of plenty. It’s hard to look away from your own interests in this kind of environment. There’s a lot to build, a lot to protect.

The Philippian poem is a beautiful reminder that we fall into the love and grace of God. Each of us bears the Image of God, and in that we are complete. Still, we strive to prove ourselves, control our lives, and defend what secures us. That work obscures the Image of God; it makes us slaves to a life of perpetual self-interest. In more common language, we climb the ladder higher and higher only to find more rungs.

Instead, Jesus tells us, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more

than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25) The Philippian poem reminds us that our security in this world must come from the Image of God within us all. That is the kind of security that frees Nelson Mandela to say, “I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.” (The Dock Quote by Nelson Mandela on April 20, 1964) Imagine the daily practice of letting go that must have been required for Mandela to spend 26 years unjustly imprisoned. And yet, this is precisely the self-emptying act that made him a national hero and universal image of racial equality.

In Advent we await the Christ who came not to be great, but to be love and to be free. We commit ourselves to the hard work of letting go when we feel the need to hold ever tighter and work even harder. We trust God to bring light into the world, not through our striving, but through our being.

**Prayer:** Source of life and hope, free us of every feeling, thought, and possession that obscures your Image within. We ask for peace and courage, even as we consider emptiness. Soften our hearts that we may be humble enough to know your grace. In the name of Christ. Amen.

**Action:** Identify an aspect of your identity that you fear losing (parent, professional, partner, etc). Notice any ways that you feel or act defensively about that aspect of yourself throughout the day. Ask God to help you let go of that fear each day and transform it into something more life-giving.

*Derek Elkins is Protestant Chaplain at St. Norbert College in Green Bay, Wisconsin and Data and Analytics Manager for the NJ-STEP program through Rutgers University.*

## Advent Week 1: Hope

### November 30

*Luke 12. 32-33*

*‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.*

The first thing I thought of when I read the end of this passage was *Firefly*. The Sci-Fi/Western show became a cult classic in the early 2000s, and follows the crew of the spaceship named Firefly on their adventures as outlaws with hearts of (mostly) gold. A refrain in the show's theme song boldly asserts that, whatever else the forces of evil may do, “You can't take the sky from me.” Talk about an unfailing treasure in heaven!

That got me thinking about what it means to value things that can't be taken away from us, or destroyed, or lost, or consumed. I considered writing about how important it is to value non-material gifts and experiences at Christmas – encouraging you all not to worry so much about the food and the presents and the decorating, and to focus on time spent with family instead, and maybe to consider spending some of what you might have used for Christmas on helping someone in need.

All of those things are wonderful, of course! But I expect it wouldn't actually be *news* to many of us that it's a good idea to slow down, to focus less on acquiring things and more on loving people, to stress less and trust God more. We talk about it every year! I don't know anyone who *wants* Christmas to be a materially-driven, stressful, competitive, exhausting time of the year. So why do we find it so difficult to change the ways that we relate to the Christmas season, both individually and as a society?

That brings me to the idea of uncluttering. I am not very good at uncluttering. Or, to be more accurate, I'm not good at *keeping* things uncluttered. What I've learned is that the occasional productive burst of cleaning ultimately doesn't make much of a difference – the problem isn't that I don't *want* my room to be clean, or even that I never do anything to try to make it a little better. The problem is that I would rather give a few hours every so often to try to reign in the disaster zone than to look at the ways that my instinctive, daily, ordinary habits might need to change.

I don't think it's stretching the metaphor too far to say that our hearts and spirits often work like that too. So what would it look like to work on changing our instincts and our habits, in addition to one-time acts of generosity at Christmastime? I think our passage gives us two good places to start. First, Jesus describes giving in ways that show a willingness to really lose things, giving so

much that it's counter-cultural. Second, he tells us to focus the resources that we do have on the poor.

These are ways of being, not isolated activities or quick-fix antidotes to undesired Christmas consumerism. Give until you're weird, then focus your love on the folks with the least. I don't know what it would look like to replace our instincts to make sure we're always safe and dignified with these kinds of instincts – I do know that it would change Christmas, and more.

I encourage you to keep giving - to the poor, to the church, to friends, and to family, and to non-profits. But I also encourage you this Advent to think about the ways that you can develop habits of virtue and radical generosity within yourself, weaving them into the very fabric of your being. A few chapters later in Luke, Jesus will remind his disciples: “The Kingdom of God is within you.” And the transformation of the heart to be more like Christ's is truly treasure that no thief can steal, and no moth can destroy.

**Prayer:** Extravagantly giving and radically loving God, we thank you for your goodness. When we were all like lost sheep, you came to earth to rescue us from our wanderings, even at great cost to yourself. Teach us how to love others like you do, and how become people whose lives are defined by your way of generosity. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

**Action:** Think about something that makes you hesitant about the idea of fully embracing radical generosity. It may be a sense of fear, resentment, responsibility, or just of not knowing how to begin. Alone or with others, pray that God will show you a way forward in the path toward whatever life of giving Jesus is calling you to take, and that God will give all the people of College Park an ever-greater love for the poor.

*Kelli Joyce is currently working toward her Master of Theological Studies degree at Durham University in England.*

## Advent Week 1: Hope

### December 1

*Romans 12.1-2, NRSV*

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

#### *Discerning God's Will*

When I read these two brief verses, jam-packed with ideas, I have the suspicion that first-century-first-generation Christians were asking questions that still haunt 21<sup>st</sup> century followers of the Jesus Way:

- “Where will following Jesus take me in this world?”
- “How much of my life is my own and how much belongs to God?”
- “What do I do with the thoughts, attitudes and actions that are not yet “conformed” to Jesus’ teachings?”
- “I believe in Jesus and have accepted his “good news” that “the kingdom of God has come near.” Now what?”
- “Bottom line: “What is God’s will for my life?””

No doubt St. Paul was already hearing such questions in a church not yet a half-century old. They remain with us two thousand years(!) later. Paul’s response is well worth considering on our way through Advent:

First, following Jesus is a wholistic endeavor; it encompasses mind and spirit, internal transformation and external action, personal conversion and communal responsibility. We are, all of us, offering ourselves to God and to each other, but such transformation is no Jesus vaccination. It is a lifelong response to struggle for and with God’s grace. Maya Angelou once said that when somebody said to her, “I’m a Christian!” She would respond, “Already?”

Second, St. Paul warns us to resist worldly conformity for spiritual transformation in Christ. We Baptists have often promoted “worldliness” as personal morality (which is why I never learned to dance!) and surely that is part of it. But such conformity can also involve a more subtle “worldliness” reflected in the accumulation of material goods, or the acceptance of political and cultural practices that marginalize or “other-ize” persons who reflect the wrong color, the wrong politics, the wrong sexuality, or the wrong theology. What if instead of debating the so-called “war on Christmas,” we chose to resist the temptation to spend money at shops and shopping malls and offered that money to agencies that feed the hungry, house the homeless, or bind up the broken? We don’t need bone tired clerks wishing us “Merry Christmas” at the temples of mammon anyway!

Third, St. Paul seems to suggest that discerning the “will of God” involves a continued openness to matters of mind and heart, celebration and struggle that can produce genuine transformation in our lives. God’s will for us may be less that we get with one divinely predetermined plan, than that our experience of God’s grace is so life-altering that we are prepared to respond to life when the way is clear and when life takes the inevitable unexpected turn. Neither life nor spiritual renewal are easy, which is why we look for, and long for, grace.

**Prayer:** Transform us, O God, as we confront life’s unpredictable moments, when we celebrate to high heaven, or must cry out in grief. Give us the courage to be changed by your ever-present, though often unrecognized grace. Change us at every level of our lives, even if it takes a lifetime. By your Spirit, confirm our Advent hope, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

**Action:** This Advent, why not decide to reduce “holiday shopping” by a certain percentage and share those funds with a specific caregiving agency in church or community?

**Bill Leonard** is the *James and Marilyn Dunn Chair of Baptist Studies* and Professor of Church History at Wake Forest University School of Divinity.



## Advent Week 1: Hope

### December 2

*Luke 12.13-21, NRSV*

*Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’*

The pre-Christmas season isn’t the easiest time to be considering this parable. We have so much stuff, and many of us feel compelled by culture or habit to buy more stuff for others who may have no place to store more stuff. So—make do with less, and your life will most likely be simpler. Yes, we hear you, Jesus. We know it’s true, and we promise to try again this year to buy less and to enjoy others more.

But back up to the beginning of the passage, and consider the question that sparks the story. Instead of “tell my brother to share the inheritance,” what if “someone” had said, “Teacher, my brother and I haven’t spoken for years because of an argument we had over who should get Mom’s jewelry. Can you give me some advice on how to mend things with him?” Maybe Advent isn’t the easiest time to unclutter messy, painful family situations, but it’s on your mind anyway, and you’re reading this devotional guide, so you already intend to pray. So what about it? Is there a box of family junk sitting on a shelf in your memory somewhere, and could you—just as a start, mind you—ask Jesus to help you sort it and get rid of some of it?

**Prayer:** Teacher, will you help me make things right with \_\_\_\_\_?

**Action:** Write down whatever “stuff” there is between you and someone else in your family. Then imagine yourself letting go of it, as you pray the prayer above.

*Richard Vinson is Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies at Salem College in Winston-Salem, NC.*

## Advent Week 1: Hope

### December 3

*Luke 1:46-55, CEB*

*Mary said,*

*“With all my heart I glorify the Lord!*

*In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.*

*He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.*

*Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored  
because the mighty one has done great things for me.*

*Holy is his name.*

*He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next,  
who honors him as God.*

*He has shown strength with his arm.*

*He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.*

*He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty-handed.*

*He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,  
remembering his mercy,*

*just as he promised to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants forever.”*

Let us not be lulled by the beautiful phrases and the inspiring notes of Johann Sebastian Bach. Mary’s song, The Magnificat, is a stunning statement of Divine values and priorities, and a shocking refutation of human concerns. It is also a love song. Slowly. Read it slowly. Don’t get lost in the cadence and music.

It starts out personal: “*I glorify,*” “*I rejoice,*” “[God] has looked with favor..., [God] has done great things for *me.*” Who can’t get on board with that? In this season of lights, we sing with Mary, because we know how blessed we are. Every time we hear the Salvation Army bells and throw a dollar in the red kettle we are reminded God has indeed done great things: for Mary, for you, for me. But even in these early verses, there’s an undercurrent, the feeling of a strange wind stirring: “[God] has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.”

In the second part of the song, the wind of the Spirit blows stronger, breathing life into a whole new order, a whole new way of being, and it is spoken of in the past tense. It “has been” done, Mary sings, but like the babe she carries, it is still a birthing. Read between the lines to a whole new set of beatitudes: Blessed are the humble, blessed are the lowly, blessed are the hungry. And a whole new set of

woes: Woe unto those who are arrogant and proud, woe unto those who are powerful, woe unto those who are rich. Woe are we!

Mary's song, placed at the beginning of the Gospel, is a song of expectation, for God comes bearing hope. Hope for all who are overlooked, who long for a place at the table, who hunger for peace and justice. Hope that is fully human and fully divine. This is where God's will and human longing meet.

The Magnificat is a song of praise to the God who sees human suffering and takes it personally, who responds with love and mercy, who remembers and honors promises made generations ago. It is a song of calling. A calling to let go of striving for things that drain us but don't restore us, that deplete our time and energy without enhancing our lives or the lives of others. God is calling us to wake up, to feel the wind of the Spirit moving within our hearts and to join the holy labor, giving life to God's vision with all our talent, might, and resources.

God invites us to join Mary, to sing the song of a new reality, and to sing it with all our hearts and minds and souls.

**Prayer:** May I feel the wind of your Spirit on my heart and mind today, and may the song of your love guide my every action. Help me to bring your divine hope into every encounter. Amen

**Action:** Take time today to read Mary's song again. Read it slowly. Let the words and phrases sink deep into your spirit. Where is the wind of the Spirit carrying you today? Follow the example of Mary: embrace it, rejoice in it, and join the holy song.

*Vicki Lumpkin is Chaplain and Bereavement Coordinator for Hospice of Rockingham County in North Carolina.*

## Advent Week 1: Hope

### December 4

*Luke 6. 20-21, NRSV*

*Then he looked up at his disciples and said:*

*'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*'Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*

*'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

Having lived on four continents I have witnessed poverty and hunger in a variety of settings. During our years in Hungary I would make monthly visits to a village far from Budapest where our good friends Tibi and Natasha lived. These two Roma believers opened their modest home for a house church and welcomed overnight guests who came to encourage and mentor young believers and seekers. In an area of high unemployment they nonetheless offered their guests their own beds and what they could afford from their meager pantry. On one occasion we arrived mid-Saturday afternoon and immediately went to make home visits and pray with local believers. Following several of these we returned to Tibi's home for a worship service that lasted the traditional two hours! Usually following that worship we would sit down to a simple meal but on this particular visit Tibi sheepishly apologized for not having anything to offer us. He said simply, "Ralph, sometimes we fast even when we don't want to."

Poverty and hunger struck home for me that evening and into the next day. Oh, I was fine with skipping a couple of meals but I wondered how many days at the end of each month they "fasted" in such a manner. Yet they didn't complain or seek pity. They sang and prayed and absorbed Bible teaching even as their bellies screamed for sustenance. We Westerners are often distracted by the pursuit of food. We allow our relentless appetites and fear of hunger pangs to distract us from the kingdom nurturing we need so desperately.

The Advent season is often filled with an abundance of food that far exceeds our need. May we seek in this particular season to quell the temptation of abundance and free ourselves to far more beneficial spiritual nourishment.

**Prayer:** Father God, with the blessings of abundance come the temptations to over-state our bodies. Help us to recognize the point between meeting our physical needs and over-indulgence. Then guide us to be grateful and to employ our energy to growing in faith through contemplation, prayer and action that builds your kingdom! Amen.

**Action:** Skip the mid-morning, and/or mid-afternoon, and/or after-supper snacks and settle for three meals. When you feel your stomach churning from the missing

snack(s), thank God for the discipline you are showing this day and know that you can repeat it tomorrow!

*Ralph Stocks serves with his Wife, Tammy Stocks, as a CBF missionary to the Roma people in Romania.*

## Advent Week 1: Hope

### December 5

“All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception. Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void. The imagination is continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass.”

— Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

*Luke 4:17-19, NRSV*

<sup>17</sup> *and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

<sup>18</sup> *‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,*

<sup>19</sup> *to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’*

In recent days tragedy has shaken our world, tearing through the fabric of our hearts, of our trust. These events have left many with feelings of fear, anger, anxiety, and vulnerability. In such an environment of instability and mistrust, what does it take to overcome a skepticism of spirit that can so easily imprison the soul?

Jesus is handed a scroll in the synagogue, and from that scroll Jesus reads the words from Isaiah assigned for our reflection today, those words we find in chapter 4 of Luke. Before this, however, Luke’s Jesus finds himself in a wilderness, deprived of everything and anything to protect and sustain him. Jesus’s vulnerability gives way to the impulses of self-preservation that can so often invade a desperate heart. These creep into the narrative of Luke, voiced as temptation, and are sentiments that have found their way into the politics and the fear-laden ideologies of Facebook posts millennia later:

If only you would do this: turn this stone to bread - worship greed, control the growth and production of resources for your own benefit - you will be fed forever.

If only you would do this: worship glory and authority, power and might (spend on defense, bolster your military prowess, preemptively invade and engage in war)... you can have it all.

If only you would do this: worship security, worship protection (Build that wall. Keep others out).

And yet, Jesus rebukes these inclinations, cleansing his life of temptation toward self-preservation in favor of one of our scripture's most prominent themes, hospitality. Jesus opts to make room. Jesus clears **space for grace**.

Grace pours in, and mercy flows out. When Jesus reads the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue with fresh eyes and an infusion of grace, the words of the passage, and their intention are not limited or directed to those gathered in his presence, or to only a few in his own closed and safe circle, but Jesus suggests they apply rather to a boundless, expansive, ever-widening spiral of humanity. Grace risks in favor of love, in favor of compassion, in favor of inclusion. Grace becomes the essence of Jesus's ministry – making room for all.

What is the beauty of being grace-filled? At least in part it is that we are a little less filled with things that distract us from loving, from caring, from healing, from connection; we are in fact filled with the one thing that in all circumstances suggests we are not alone, and that love knows no bounds. As we prepare to welcome the Christ child, let us prepare to welcome a Spirit-filled grace into our lives and hearts, a grace that promises to yield new life.

**Prayer:** In the wake of tragedy and pain, when we are desperately reaching for anything to fill our questioning, confused and rent spirits, may we allow space for grace to flood us. May grace open our eyes, heal our wounds, free us from the imprisonments of greed, bigotry, hatred, and pride. May we find mercy and love boundlessly flowing through ourselves into this world, that the good news of God's love, of God's favor, would be the awareness of all, binding us closer to the kin-dom.

**Action:** Risk for love. Do something kind for someone you don't know or for someone you don't particularly like.

*Daryn Bunce Stylianopoulos is Associate Pastor of First Baptist Church, Needham in Massachusetts.*

## Advent Week 2: Peace

### December 6

Luke 3. 1-6, NRSV

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

*‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

Talk about a cluttered people. Talk about a cluttered *time*. While the list of names included here may seem boring and tedious, lurking just underneath them is vital information regarding what a miserable and oppressive time this was. Though Rome had ruled the area for over a hundred years, a Roman governor had only been living among them (in Jerusalem) since AD 6. Meanwhile, the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, had recently died, and his successor, Tiberius, had quickly proven himself a ruthless dictator. And if these conditions weren’t unfavorable enough for the denizens of Judea, Herod-the-Great’s sons, Herod Antipas and Philip, who had recently assumed power upon their father’s passing, were known to be self-serving errand boys at the behest of the Roman crown.

Which is to say: this was a charged political and social landscape where tensions were running high. Many Jewish resistance movements had already risen and failed. The everyday Jew in Judea harbored feelings of anger, resentment, aggression, helplessness, and resignation. Yet despite all of this, the Jewish people still found themselves longing for the old story to be true: the story their prophets had foretold of a Messiah rising from among them, conquering their enemies and delivering them from bondage.

Into this milieu, then, stepped this eccentric man named John, telling people they needed to repent of their sins and be dunked in the Jordan River to symbolize the change they were undergoing.

In light of College Park’s Advent theme this season, it strikes me that John’s call to repentance was, in many ways, a call to a de-cluttering of one’s life. John’s baptism was about bringing people face-to-face with everything going on inside



them. It was about people examining the feelings and emotions and expectations they had been harboring in this turbulent time. It was about sorting through everything they'd been thinking and hoping and wishing.

In short, John was calling people to make clear their hearts and minds and spirits so that they might be open and receptive and responsive to the good news of the gospel which was to follow. Which is why this very passage is so timely. We, ourselves, are living in a time of great social and political upheaval. Tensions are running high and emotions are charged. How, then, might creating space for individual examination and repentance—how might a time of softening ourselves and opening ourselves up—be precisely the way we can begin effecting real change in our own lives and in the world? How might journeying to the Jordan with John—how might going below the surface and sifting through the clutter deep down in the darkness—be a great way of preparing ourselves for the One we have been longing for all this time? The One who can truly deliver us and make us whole?

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, We are so consumed by the things going on around us and inside us. They distract us and divert our attention from you... from the wholeness to which you, in your grace, are calling us. We are burdened by the state of the world, and we are burdened by our own shortcomings. We fluctuate between anger and resignation, and we need your Spirit to deliver us. In your mercy, God, help us to see ourselves and the world with fresh eyes—with the eyes of your Spirit—that we might discern what is becoming in us and what is not. May your Spirit then empower us to hold onto that which is edifying and discard that which is not. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

**Action:** Write a one paragraph letter to John, telling him why you've followed him to the Jordan and what it is you feel you need to repent of. Moreover, tell him why you think repenting and undergoing this change is important—both for yourself and for the world.

*Austin Carty is Pastor of First Baptist Church, Corbin in Kentucky.*

## Advent Week 2: Peace

### December 7

*Colossians 3:16-17, NRSV*

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

- Christmas tree, trimmed and decorated
- Christmas décor outside
- Nativity's placed carefully throughout the house
- Christmas plates, napkins, dishtowels, candles
- Cute Christmas clothing for the child
- A calendar that fills up with Christmas programs meals, office and school events
- Finding places to rest and soak in the season...

Christmas is so cluttered and December feels like a race. As I write these thoughts it is early November and I am already creating lists for the coming season. Despite the clutteredness, December is my favorite month. I love driving around and looking at lights. I love the music. I love the bell ringers at store entrances. I love spending time with family and friends. I love the food, smells, and sights. I love the spirit that is in the air. And I find myself wanting to capture the smells, feelings, emotions, and bottle them up for just a bit longer each year. Which begs the question, how do we keep the Christmas Spirit alive all year? I think this text provides us with a good guide.

First, Live Thankfully. Be grateful for the people, places, and things provided in your life. Be grateful for a God who loves us unconditionally. When we live lives of gratitude toward God, the natural response is a desire to give thanks. No matter how big or small, be thankful. When we are thankful it makes us want to give to others. To provide a meal, share a cup of coffee, listen to a friend, write an encouraging note, drop some change in the bell ringer's jar, or give a warm hug.

Secondly, in order to keep the Christmas Spirit alive we should live in community. Much of Christmas is spent with other people as we worship with one another, attend family gatherings, and events. These experiences can be awkward, life-giving, fun, and meaningful. These experiences tie us together. And while they may clutter up your calendar, they are shared events that bind us together. Life is much better when it is lived together. So pay attention to who around you might need to be brought into your community. The Christmas Spirit is meant to be shared and lived together.

**Prayer:** God of today and tomorrow, thank you for your son who came to show us how to live and move and be. Thank you for giving us each other to share life with. Thank you for providing, for caring and walking alongside us. May we feel your presence with us this Advent season.

**Action:** December will come and go, and we will be left with January. How will you keep the Christmas Spirit alive?

*Marnie Ingram is Coordinator of Youth Programming with Passport Camp Inc in Birmingham, AL.*

## Advent Week 2: Peace

### December 8

*Ephesians 4.1-6*

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

*Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.* Nothing is more simple, more elemental, both voluntary and involuntary, bridging mind and body. *Inhale. Exhale.* In this stretch of my life, when tasks spill down long lists, when needs of people I love are myriad, when my mind must alternate between intense focus and splintered attention, breathing has become a core spiritual practice. Or more precisely, I'm learning to join breath patterns with words or images that lead to reflection and prayer.

*Inhale. Exhale.* Some passages of scripture spill into such intensity, extend so widely, and alternate so much between idealism and practicality, they resist explication. So it seems with today's passage – one of the soaring exhortations and affirmations of the New Testament letters. Perhaps you can grasp all those virtues, analyze all those forms of unity, and hold them clearly in your thoughts all at once. I can't. But I can slow myself down and breathe my way meditatively into scripture. *Inhale* "Lead a life," *Exhale* "of calling." (And again until it's time to let go of that thought). *Inhale* "Live with humility," *Exhale* "and gentleness." (Repeat) *Inhale* "Bearing with [insert name that springs to mind]," *Exhale* "bound by peace." (This one might take more repetition).

*Inhale. Exhale.* Truth is, sometimes breathing isn't simple. That wheeze as your friend exhales worries you. That congestion as your loved one inhales needs a remedy. Sometimes we need help to breathe. So, too, in community – we need help to slow down, help to declutter, help to find the centering Spirit that connects us to each other and to God. Today, breathe prayers for yourself and for others. And be assured—others are breathing prayers for you.

***Prayer as Today's Action:*** Sit or stand comfortably. Pay attention to your balance. Relax your shoulders. Perhaps raise yourself a little straighter. *Inhale. Exhale.* Feel your connection to the earth. *Inhale. Exhale.* Give thanks for breath – whether raspy or clear, whether shallow or deep. *Inhale. Exhale.* Let your breath become prayer by finding a few words from today's Ephesians passage. You choose, or let the Spirit choose (if there's a difference).

Your prayer may be meditative. *Inhale* “One hope,” *Exhale* “one faith” (Repeat).

Your prayer may be intercessory. *Inhale* “For [insert name that comes to mind],  
*Exhale* “be above and through and in all” (Repeat).

Your prayer may be petitionary, *Inhale* “Every effort, loving Spirit,” *Exhale*,  
“toward unity” (Repeat).

Breathe. Pray. *Inhale. Exhale.*

*Diane Lipsett is Assistant Professor of Religion at Salem College and Minister of Faith Formation and Education at Knollwood Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, NC.*

## Advent Week 2: Peace

### December 9

*1 Thessalonians 5. 12-14, NRSV*

*But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.*

As a young minister, I thought that attending EVERY event that occurred around our church during the Christmas season was required. One week before Christmas, we attended four worship services, eight Sunday School class parties, two Mall singings, and a partridge in a pear tree! I was exhausted by the time Christmas week arrived.

Thankfully, as I have matured, I've learned that my attendance is not required. However, there are still plenty of activities that require the presence and leadership of your church staff. Being "in the spotlight" is draining and may rob them of the joy of the Season. Your church staff needs to know that you care for them and about them.

Pause right now and pray for each of them by name. Pray that that they will be wise enough to know where they should participate. Pray that the joy of the Manger will be in them this Advent Season.

The second part of this challenge from Paul is to care for one another. There is nothing better than "peace" among the fellowship. We arrive at peace by encouraging one another, gently holding one another accountable, helping one another, and being patient with one another. These actions only happen as we build upon the foundation of prayer. So, we come to peace with one another as we pray for one another and as we care for one another.

Pause right now and pray for three church members. Pray that they will become wise in their leadership. Pray that you will be patient with them as they lead. Pray that the joy of the Manger will be in them this Advent Season.

There is no better time than Advent to practice praying for your church staff and praying for one another. And as you pray, there is peace! Peace, this is such a grand aspiration. And, peace can be realized as we spend as much time in prayer this season as we spend in the Mall. Peace can be realized this season as we spend as much time BEING the church as going to the church.

Now pause once more. Slow down. Breathe. Enjoy the glory of Advent. And receive the joy of the Manger into your own life this Advent Season.

**Prayer:** Holy God, forgive us for making busyness an idol in our lives. Forgive us when we spend more time praying ABOUT our church leaders than praying FOR them. Forgive us when we are more concerned with the shortcomings of those around us and less concerned with encouraging one another. Help us to receive the baby of Bethlehem into our hearts and lives. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and bring us Peace on Earth, now and forever. Amen.

***Bo Prosser** is Coordinator of Organization Relationships for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship National.*

## Advent Week 2: Peace

### December 10

*1 Timothy 6.17-19, NRSV*

*As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.*

This fall I've found myself often engaging students with two seemingly unrelated concepts — *Privilege* and *Mindfulness* — but for those of us awaiting and seeking God's transforming presence in our lives and world, the two concepts very much go together.

I think few words right now set people on edge like *privilege*, but pointing out privilege is not an attack or accusation. We all have privilege of varying forms that give us advantages (often unnoticed) over other people. For example, it is far easier to be white in our society, and the slogan #BlackLivesMatter calls attention to the fact that far too often black lives don't matter, and that's not just. But there are many forms of privilege. I also have male privilege, straight privilege, education privilege, and even right-handed privilege.

You may be wondering if this biblical passage really speaks to you. If you're college educated and live a comfortable middle class existence, then it most certainly does. You are a global one-percenter. You may not feel rich by American standards, but remember that a billion people in this world are food insecure. I live in Alamance County, where 1 in 4 children are food insecure, and I suspect that Guilford County is not that different.

Having privilege is not the problem. Here in 1 Timothy, being rich is not the problem. The issue is what we do with it. Do we place our confidence (our faith) in our wealth and privilege, or trusting God, do we share our privilege with others?

For me, that's where Mindfulness comes in. Being Mindful is simply being aware — fully aware — of the present moment. You see, far too often, we don't even really recognize the present because we're too caught up in anxious worries about the past or future or we're too distracted by our phones and gadgets. Prayer and meditation can help us cultivate Mindfulness. They may seem like private individual disciplines, but meditation is proven to increase compassion and kindness for others.



One of the best Mindful disciplines is the practice of gratitude. Take a moment each day to be grateful for one or two blessings in your life. It will help you recognize your privilege and your blessings, and also make you more open to sharing those blessings with others. That sharing and generosity — that loving openness to others — is how we discover true wealth and true life.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, you are truly most merciful and compassionate, and we give thanks to you for all the riches and blessings in our lives. Make us more mindful of our blessings, more aware of our privilege, and open our hearts to those who are less fortunate among us. We pray for a more just and generous society. We pray for your beloved community fully present in our midst. And we pray that you would begin with us, and our acts of kindness and generosity, so that we may truly discover the life that really is life. Amen.

**Action:** Cultivate gratitude throughout this season, and practice a random act of kindness today for someone in your life.

*Joel Harter is Associate Chaplain for Protestant Life at Elon University.*

## Advent Week 2: Peace

### December 11

*Micah 6.8*

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Before we can get to our verse today, let me remind you what is going on in Micah Chapter 6. It seems that we have entered into a heated trial between God and some ungrateful people. The prophet, Micah, is representing God's case and reminding the community all that God had done for them. God has redeemed God's people from slavery so that they may know God's saving act. All their attention is on the wrong things...not paying attention to their relationship with God. Has that ever happened to you? Has your attention turned from God because of the ritual or busyness of life?

Christmas list of things to do: Christmas photos taken in hopes of one good enough to send as a Christmas Card, gifts to be purchased, food to be prepared, parties to attend, Sunday school lesson to be taught, Christmas trees picked and trimmed, and the list goes on. It gets easy to lose our relationship with God during the Advent Season, so easy that we may not even notice. I would even offer you permission to forget your to do list, but that would only cause fret and anxiety. So what if in performing our to do list, we become really present to these moments and use them to reconnect ourselves to the real issue at the heart of Christmas, our relationship with God. Let's connect the dots between what we are doing and why we are doing it.

As we read our verse, Micah 6:8, we see the response that God desires from God's people: to walk attentively and with a steadfast love in relationship with the One who created us. I am asking that in the clutter of this Advent season, you find ways to be mindful that God is present in all that you do.

**Prayer:** God of Advent, it is hard for us to let go of our "to do" lists but help us to find ways in which our "to do" lists draw us or remind us of our relationship with you.

**Action:** Take one item on your "to do" list and pray over it. See how God can use it to draw you closer in that moment.

*Kim Priddy is Associate Pastor of Missions at First Baptist Church, Greensboro.*

## Advent Week 2: Peace

### December 12

*Psalm 1:1-3, NRSV*

*Happy are those*

*who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
or sit in the seat of scoffers;  
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and on his law they meditate day and night.*

*They are like trees*

*planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.  
In all that they do, they prosper.*

I have seen lots of trees in my life from the majestic Redwoods in Northern California, the Black Forest trees in the Dakotas to the familiar Pine trees of my native Georgia. But there are three trees I think of when I hear this passage. In my childhood yard, there is a Dogwood that is still standing. I used to love to watch that tree bloom and see the life that came around it in the Spring. Since I grew up next to the lake this passage made sense to me as a boy about being firmly rooted like the Dogwood in my yard. That tree is resilient to winds and lawnmower accidents!

The other trees are the trees I see in my imagination every time I go outside at night and look up into the night sky. I imagine the stars making a constellation of the mythic trees in the Garden of Eden story. These two trees serve as iconoclastic reminders of our place in life in this the sacral universe to which all life on this planet belongs. One tree is of course the tree of life which is always both in reach and out of reach at the same time in the order of the sacral universe. The second is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—a tree we are indeed all familiar with! However, usually this tree gets notoriety for being ‘evil’, but this is only half of the value. When Adam and Eve ate of this tree they ‘became’ a part of both trees in all of its beauty and terror...they became alive, responsible and contributing! This myth records the birth of desire as theologian Scott Holland reminds us. Desire and longing—the very point of the Advent of the Christ!

Have you ever noticed a tree up close? Delicate, deadly, competitive, hard and sturdy. On the bark a tree houses everything from insects to parasites and bacteria to poison. Contrary to folklore, moss grows all the way around some trees! Under the soil the roots both feed the soil as well as ‘take from the soil and moisture around it’. Birds of all kinds nest in a tree...Thrashers, Bluebirds, Orioles, Hawks and Falcons. Woodpeckers come and eat insects. Worms eat the foliage. Some trees produce the fruit of poison, others the fruits we love to eat and others still the fruit of the air we breathe. The symbiosis of life and the dance

of good and evil occur every day in the long life of a tree. Maybe that is one inspiration behind the psalmist allegory of a tree to describe a blessed human being. Perhaps we can think of the mythic trees in Genesis as the universe that we belong too! We are a part of the radical rootedness, the trunk, the branches, the leaves. Maybe just maybe the symbol of a tree can hold all of life predator and prey, the rhythm of seasons, life and death, good and evil, desire and longing.

The psalmist claims blessed the one who delights in the 'law of the Lord'. Ask yourself this Advent what the 'Law of the Lord' is? There is much debate over what the 'Law of the Lord' is. Whatever your conclusion, hear the psalmist pronounce that we are 'blessed'. Ultimately, the text serves to invite us to our transformation—to an even deeper part of life in God in the sacral universe.

**Prayer:** Creator God, help me in this advent season, as I consider all that is happening in the world around us, not to be overwhelmed by the evil in the world. Instead, help me to see the things in your blessed creation that give life, that provide rootedness, that nourish the soul.

**Action:** Take a moment to consider what it is you desire and long for in this Advent season?

*David Carnish is Associate Manager of CPE at Penn State University.*

## Advent Week 3: Joy

### December 13

*Philippians 4.4-7, NRSV*

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

As I sit and reflect on this passage, it's autumn; a few weeks before the beginning of Advent. The smell of the season is thick in the air. The trees are inviting us to pause and gaze at their beauty. The falling leaves do their dance to the earth below and as they do, they seem to be gently reminding us to *let go*. That is a recurring invitation on the spiritual journey – *let go*. It's learning to exhale; to unclench our tight fists; to release our fear; to unclutter our lives; to surrender to the gracious love of the Beloved One.

In our passage today, Paul invites the community at Philippi – and all of us – to develop habits of rejoicing and prayer. “Do not worry about anything” he counsels them. Easier said than done! But there is great wisdom in that advice. Like Paul, the Sufi poet, Rumi, invites us to let go of our worrying and enter the gateway of God's delight.

*Be empty of worrying . . .  
why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open?  
Move outside the tangle of fear-thinking.*

Worrying drains us of our energy for life-giving experiences. It makes it difficult for us to notice that *the Lord is near*; we struggle to find our singing voice.

Learning to live a God-inhabited life is learning to let go; to surrender. Not to ignore or suppress, but to open ourselves completely to the Divine One who already knows what our hands and hearts and minds are full of. The Lord is near. God hears our requests and is ever-present on the journey with us. Emmanuel – God is with us. Learning to live a God-inhabited life is learning to find delight and joy in our daily lives. A joy that finds a voice not despite our particular struggles but through our struggles. When we let go, we create the space where our Beloved One can enlarge our capacity for delight and joy.

The word *rejoice* comes from the Anglo-French *rejois* which means *to welcome, to enjoy*. This Advent season offers us the same invitation it has so many times before – to prepare a space for the Jesus-child; to welcome and enjoy this God who journeys with us; to rejoice.

**Prayer:**

Loving One, teach me . . .  
to let go,  
to open myself fully to your presence,  
to rejoice.  
Amen.

**Action:** Write down 5 things that you are grateful for today.

*Monica Citty Hix is the Minister of Music at First Friends Quaker Meeting in Greensboro, NC where she lives. She also teaches piano and leads Spiritual Formation events for individuals and groups.*

## Advent Week 3: Joy

### December 14

*Matthew 6.25-30, NRSV*

*‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?’*

“Hey, where you going in such a hurry  
Don’t you think it’s time you realized  
There’s a whole lot more to life than work and worry  
All the sweetest things in life are free  
And they’re right before your eyes...”

Stop and Smell the Roses was a popular song penned by Mac Davis in the 1970’s. Its words remind us of our priorities, especially during this advent season. Do you have a Christmas to-do list? Does it grow before your eyes? When you lay down at night does your mind scroll through what you have to get done? Do you find yourself worrying, perhaps getting short with loved ones, eating more than you should, not exercising, or other negative coping behaviors? Today’s scripture reminds us of God’s provision for us. He cares deeply for His world and especially for us as His children. Why spend time worrying over tomorrow when we have today to enjoy?

In Romania the Christmas season begins the end of November. We have the usual hustle and bustle of gift buying and meal planning. However, it is balanced out by making family and friends a priority. We celebrate Christmas Day 1 and Christmas Day 2 (25<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup>). Businesses completely close. Public transportation slows down. The streets are quiet except for caroling groups that can be heard as they stroll to friends’ homes. Churches gather to worship and celebrate the Newborn Babe. It is a time of enjoying being together with others. There is less stress, less worry and more laughter, play, and celebration. How would your Advent be different if you slowed down, worried less, took time to contemplate the season, and celebrate the King?

**Prayer:** Dear God; Help us today to feel your great love. Help us today to rely on you for our needs. Help us today to reprioritize our Advent to-do list to the important points of You, family, and friends. Help us to stop and smell the roses of the day.

**Action:** Take a look at your Christmas to-do list. What can you remove? What can you do differently? Make this Advent season less about worry and stress and more about celebration.

*Tammy Stocks serves with her husband, Ralph Stocks, as a CBF missionary to the Roma people in Romania.*



## Advent Week 3: Joy

### December 15

*Matthew 11.28-30, NRSV*

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

My heart was full, cluttered with fear, dread, and frustration. My sister and I were exhausted and broken hearted. The appointment with the only doctor who could help us had been made months before from a few states away. After all the waiting and expensive travel, we were not even allowed to see him. Our baby, her baby, was not a candidate for the radical surgery we had hoped would to give her a real shot at life. With a few hours to wait before the shuttle returned to pick us up, we wandered the halls of John's Hopkins Hospital.

Advent anticipates a baby coming to save the world. Advent also often invites the anticipation of deep grief. For many the season is more something to survive than to celebrate. Collections of grief accumulate and threaten to overwhelm people at Christmas like shoppers after the Macy's Day Parade. Instead of expecting the wonder of the Christ child we anticipate hauling around heavy boxes choc full of sadness. We pull out packed away Rubbermaids that illuminate abandoned dreams, loved ones gone too soon, loneliness. The heaviness of the stored up collections of grief can and does hijack many hearts during the Advent season.

Wondering the halls of this hospital, I wondered if I would ever sing about joy in a world again? Then my sister and I, strolling our broken baby, turned a corner and saw the 20-foot statue of Jesus opening his arms to what use to be the front doors of the ancient building. At the bottom of his feet were these words: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

God's baby came to earth so that we might have life - abundant life - even in our brokenness. And that baby, our savior Jesus, offers to help us carry our heavy burdens! As we trust him with all that is weighing us down we can learn to breath again, stand up straight again - maybe even sing Joy to the World again.

**Prayer:** Dear God, please help me to trust you with all that is on my mind and heart today. Please help me understand how to let you carry some of the sadness I keep running into. Open my eyes to those around me who might need me to help them carry their sadness this season. Maybe show me a way to share a little encouragement with them. Help me give away your love this season of waiting, and to expect nothing in return. Thank you for always being near, for never

leaving me alone. Thank you for coming Lord Jesus, Amen.

**Action:** Give yourself a simple gift today. Make a list of things that threaten to steal your joy this season. It might be anxiety about money, or finding the right gift for a child. It might be something else, like who you will miss spending the holidays with. Put the list in a box. Then wrap it up and tie it with a bow. Then write: “Do not open until January.” It does not go under a tree. Put it somewhere you can see. This Christmas present to yourself is a challenge to choose joy this Advent. It is an acknowledgement that you need help carrying a few things. If you are having a hard time, pick the box up and move it to a new space in the room as an act of prayer saying, “Jesus carry this burden with me please. Thank you for being near.”

OR

Wrap up a box for someone who might need a little encouragement this Christmas. Put some paper and a pen inside, along with today’s verse. Explain how they might use the box and tell them you will be praying for them this Advent. Perhaps it will make their burden this season a bit lighter.

*Colleen Boroughs is co-founder and Vice President of Passport Camp Inc in Birmingham, AL.*

## Advent Week 3: Joy

### December 16

*John 1:1-5, New English Translation*

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God. The Word was with God in the beginning. All things were created by him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created. In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind. And the light shines on in the darkness, but the darkness has not mastered it.*

“Wine from water is not so small,  
But an even better magic trick  
Is that anything is here at all.  
So the challenging thing becomes  
Not to look for miracles  
But finding where there isn’t one.”  
--Peter Mayer, in his song “Holy Now”

I like to imagine that the writer of John’s gospel had read the other gospels as he sat down to write. How to describe this life? Who was this person who had turned their world upside down? Matthew, Mark, and Luke had told masterful stories describing the uniqueness of the life of Jesus. They told stories of Jesus being influenced by John’s preaching and call for repentance and baptism, stories of angel visitations, powerful dreams, and narrow escapes from murderous tyrants. Could a baby born in a barn amidst whispers of illegitimacy really contain the divine Spirit? If God’s dream for the world could be so powerfully present in this one life, what did that mean?

I imagine John musing aloud: “I’ll see your manger and raise you a supernova.” Of course, astronomers and cosmologists hadn’t yet peered through telescopes strong enough to see things that would come to be called supernovas. But John was looking through a life, and saw all the way back to the beginning. And he drew a line from one to the other. What God was doing in that manger was what God had been up to in shaping a world and calling it good. If that manger was good, so was sea salt and sweat.

Did you ever have an old cigar box (or its equivalent) with treasures inside-- like an acorn, a bird feather, a special rock, a snake skin, a marble, and just a hint of the smell of your favorite uncle or aunt? Remember how magical the finding of each object was, and the keeping of them? Maybe you still have that old cigar box. If so, lucky you. Many of us traded them in for walk-in closets, 401ks, and the anxieties associated with what is in each.

I imagine John fingering a sea shell, a feather, and a parchment with stories of Jesus, and then writing: “Without him not one thing was made.” The Spirit that had been glimpsed and felt in Jesus was in that shell and in that feather.

This year many people have been discovering wisdom in Marie Kondo's invitation to de-clutter. If you make it past the ironically cluttered title of the book, you find an invitation to turn in worry about too much stuff for joy in just a few.

I miss my old cigar box. Maybe I'll get another one, put in some simple treasures, and connect again to a world that is alive with Spirit.

**Prayer:** Holy God, awaken in us what thrills and frightens us: that day and night, up and down, then and **now** are drenched in your Spirit. Help us clear out whatever "stuff" keeps us from wonder.

**Action:** Let yourself be surprised by some small object in the world today (like the items in the image below). Pick it up, turn it over, and imagine the story of how it got there. Put it in your pocket, or put it back where you found it, then look and listen for what else it wants to help you notice. In your next three breaths, exhale "Thank you."



*Mark Jensen is the teaching professor of Pastoral Care and Pastoral Theology at Wake Forest University School of Divinity and Chaplain Supervisor at Wake Forest Baptist Health.*

## Advent Week 3: Joy

### December 17

#### *1 Corinthians 1.20-25*

*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

The decorated tree is still in the living room and the smell of cinnamon sticks wafts through the house. We've only managed to get through half of the baked treats that we prepared over Thanksgiving, and I haven't even finished the Christmas specials that have stacked up on the DVR. But here comes Paul preaching Christ crucified! How did we make this shift? Can't we hold onto the baby Jesus for at least a few more weeks? I'm not ready to make the journey from the manger to the cross just yet. It's the curse of knowledge, I suppose. Even the wise men who had an eye to the future didn't know the full story the way we know it. As we hold our candles high on Christmas Eve, we know that this light will be snuffed out at Calvary all too soon.

Paul doesn't stop at just preaching Christ crucified—he places it up against signs and wisdom to be something significantly different. Jews demanded that truth be confirmed through miraculous signs, and in Jesus we simply have a gospel preached. Gentiles demand truth through worldly wisdom, but there is none to be found at the foot of the cross. Paul is making an unsettling assertion: the gospel is foolishness. What is so foolish about the gospel?

My family is part of a Baptist church in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. It's a congregation with traditional worship and a brand new pipe organ. According to the folks who are researching the trajectory of religion in America, we are a dying church. Or at least we should be. Apparently churches like ours are losing ground (and members) to multi-campus suburban churches with coffee shops, pony rides, trampoline parks, and whatever other amenities they have to offer. And that's just for those who are actually searching for a faith community, because this research also tells us that more and more young people are losing interest in religion because they feel like it is no longer relevant; it has lost pace with scientific and sociological progress. Our church doesn't meet the wisdom or the "wow" test, but for some reason we're still on our corner of town, growing.

I wish I could claim any one reason why this is happening—why this congregation defies the trends. It seems that the church really isn't interested in making Christianity attractive and acceptable—at least by a worldly standard. When you

free yourself from creating a pre-packaged marketing campaign for Christ, then sharing the “foolish” gospel becomes remarkably simple. As Eugene Peterson translates Micah 6:8, “It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously — take God seriously.”

It’s ok to step back to the manger now. Pick up the baby Jesus and hold him tight. Yes, the story will go on, but as resurrection people the love that you simply preach with your life can give way to a transformational relationship with Jesus Christ for others. Don’t worry about tomorrow, and don’t take yourself too seriously. Share Christ’s love and discover God’s power and God’s wisdom.

**Prayer:** God, give me the wisdom to recognize truth when I hear it. Give me the courage to say the truth when I’m called to do so. Give me the faith to exercise power in ways that empower others. And keep me humble always. Amen.

**Action:** Think about the words you use today. Avoid sarcasm, and spend the day encouraging those around you.

*Daniel Ingram is Coordinator for IT, Registration, International Camps and Special Projects with Passport Camp Inc in Birmingham, AL.*

## Advent Week 3: Joy

### December 18

*Mark 10:23-27, NRSV*

*Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'*

To so many of us, who have so much stuff, this scripture may not sound like good news. This may be especially true as we approach the Christmas season, and once again try to think of things to give to people who often have few material needs! In a world where storage units are a growth industry, we realize how jarring Jesus can be! But what if, we heard these words as Good News!? What if, we heard these words as a call to let go of the stuff that is weighing us down!? For me, more and more the word, "Salvation" sounds like "Freedom!" What if, this scripture is Jesus calling us to let go of all of the baggage that we are carrying!? What if, our calling made clear, what we need to take with us!? Our stuff and our baggage can be material and emotional. More and more for me, taking hold of God means letting go of stuff and of baggage, in order to take hold of God. In this Advent season, as we prepare for Christ's coming, what does it mean to make room for him to come more fully into our lives!? What does it look like for me to do some deep cleaning!?

**Prayer:** God, with you all things are possible! Send your Spirit to do some deep cleaning in me! Empty my hands of those things that get in the way of serving you! Clean my heart of all resentment and unforgiveness that prevents me from showing your love to others! Set me free from all that binds me and holds me back from being the person that you created me to be! Amen!

**Action:** Clean house! What do you have that you have not used in the last five years!? Call the Habitat Restore, they pick up! Take those clothes to Good Will! Make a list of people you need to forgive! And remember to put yourself on the list!

*Frank Dew is founding pastor of New Creation Community Church and Chaplain of Greensboro Urban Ministry in Greensboro, NC.*

## Advent Week 3: Joy

### December 19

*Psalm 131, NRSV*

*A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,  
my eyes are not raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvellous for me.  
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother;  
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.*

*O Israel, hope in the Lord  
from this time on and for evermore.*

I love Christmas! I love the giving and the receiving! I love sharing good surprises with family and friends. There is no better time each year than the week of Christmas.

My main gift request of my adult children is an hour of table time to just talk with me about life, their lives, their dreams. My preference is that they don't spend money they don't have on things that I really don't need. Please don't think me noble or arrogant; this is just me trying to be real, simple, uncluttered!

This Psalm really sums up what is in my heart. I desire simplicity. My soul thirsts for the uncluttered life. I want to be still, to be quiet, to focus on the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christmas.

Too many of us need to wean ourselves from the busyness and noise of life. Too many of us need to wean ourselves from the complexities of life. Too many of us need to unclutter our minds and souls and to meet the Babe of Bethlehem again.

So, don't overindulge this Advent season. Don't over-decorate, over-eat, over-spend! Seek simplicity, perhaps the best gift under the tree is an hour around the table!

**Prayer:** God, help me to unclutter my life this Advent season. Help me to seek simplicity and to focus more on you and less on myself. Help me to spend more time with people I love.

*Bo Prosser is Coordinator of Organization Relationships for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship National.*



## Advent Week 4: Love

### December 20

*John 13.34-35, NRSV*

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'*

At this point in the season, how many items are left on your to-do list for the holidays? Mine is still missing quite a few check marks, to be certain. I'm a list-maker, and proud of it. I'm pretty sure it's a genetically inherited trait, as I come from a healthy line of list-lovers. Packing lists for trips, shopping lists, work checklists – I love them all, and most likely will have them color coordinated. I like to think that my lists are ways that I can keep some of the chaos of life at bay. If I can organize all my activities into neat color-coded lists, then maybe the day-to-day experience of getting it all done won't be quite so overwhelming or stressful. That's what I like to tell myself, at least.

The reality is that there's still just too much on my lists. They've become cluttered with line after line of things that I **need** to do, items I **need** to buy, and expectations I **need** to meet. My lists around the holidays are even longer and more pressing. Gift giving is one of my love languages; so every gift to be purchased for others is more than just a task to be accomplished. To me, those gifts are expressions of the depth of my love for my family and friends and should reflect each person's unique personality and desires. I like for my gifts to have meaning, and that can add emotional pressure to all that I **need** to get done during the season. Not to mention that, as a minister, Advent is one of the busiest times of the year. My November and December lists are impressively full.

But Jesus reminds me that they don't **need** to be. To borrow from the Beatles, Jesus tells me that all you and I really need is love. More important than finding matching wrapping paper is to love one another. More important than making sure everyone brings just the right dish to Christmas Eve dinner is to love one another. More important than having a perfectly trimmed tree is to love one another. More important than checking every item off the list is to love one another. Jesus sets us free from the whirlwind and clutter that this season can bring by reminding us what is truly needed. All we **need** to do is love one another. If we will love one another, then everyone will see how the love of God can transform our hearts, our lists, our lives, and our world. And isn't that what our world is waiting for?

**Prayer:** Loving God, you have told us what you require of us. In the life of Christ, you have shown us how you would have us to live. Help us to set aside the lists, tasks, and expectations that keep us distracted, busy, and tired. Remind us that all we really need to do, with each day we are given, is love you and love one another. Amen.

**Action:** Make a list today. If you already have one (or several if you're like me) for the holiday season, simply take a bold, bright marker and write "LOVE" at the top. If you are not a list-maker and don't have one already, make one. It doesn't need to have anything on it but the word "LOVE". Once you have made or edited your list, carry it with you today to remind you of the most important thing that you have to do. If we have "LOVE" at the top of the list, then everything else is secondary. When we seek to love others before we do anything else, we will honor God and our lives will point others to the way of faith.

*Jennifer Ingold Asbill is the Associate Pastor for Discipleship at Zebulon Baptist Church in Zebulon, NC.*

## Advent Week 4: Love

### December 21

*Matthew 22. 34-38, NRSV*

*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment.*

I have always understood Jesus’ answer to this lawyer’s question to be the answer that the lawyer expected. Jesus gave the same answer that any first century Jew would have given to the lawyer’s question. After all these years, Jesus’ answer works especially well for us. It provides for us a convenient example of the connection between our Christian faith and its Jewish roots. More than that, it gives us a concise synopsis of the essence of what it means to be a Christian. Loving God with one’s whole self is central to being Christian.

Jesus gives a great answer. Giving great answers is what we expect Jesus to do. Anytime you can answer a question from the lawyer of the Pharisees by quoting the Hebrew Bible you have to be feeling good.

The answer is not what troubles me. The question troubles me. *“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”* I am sure that it was a fine question when the lawyer first asked it with its own motive and purpose. As I read it now, I realize that it all too easily slips through all those years and becomes the kind of question that I would ask. Assuredly, the question is fraught with temptation for me. Asking about the “Greatest” commandment makes me wonder if my concern is one of religious exceptionalism or spiritual direction. Is my religion just one more thing that has to be biggest and the best, the latest and the greatest? Asking for one commandment, the greatest one to be sure, but just one, makes me wonder if I am in a hurry to be finished with my religious duty. Jesus, tell me the one thing that I really need to know so that I can move to the next item on my list of things that I have to do. Sorry, I only have time for one. I am tempted in both of these ways more often than I care to acknowledge.

However, the greatest temptation I face in this text is to think that the answer Jesus gives is just an answer. That it is an answer to a question that settles an issue, resolves a dispute or fills in a blank. Jesus’ answer does not settle anything or at least it should not. Like a plow running through fertile soil, it ought to turn over old perspectives and plant seeds that grow into new questions. What does it mean to love God with heart, soul and mind? What does that look like? Where will that take me? How many borders will I cross getting there? What sort of people will I encounter along the way? Jesus’ answer is something of an incubator. Questions hatch inside of it. Questions that give birth to faith and faithfulness within us, not

in the time it takes to answer a question, but in all the days, minutes and moments it takes us to live our lives.

**Prayer:** O God, thank you for the answers you have provided to me. I am grateful for the words, the people and the situations you have used to speak to me. I am grateful for answers that continue to grow and continue to grow me.

I am grateful for the questions you have answered and the ones you have brought to my mind. What does it mean to serve a God who wants to be loved by me? What does it mean that I am loved by such a God?

Finally, I am grateful that for my most perplexing, difficult and even truly frightening questions, you point me toward a child in a manger—Immanuel—giving me a radical demonstration of what love looks like when it is done with heart, soul and mind. Amen.

**Action:** The work of Advent involves recognizing the questions that have shaped our lives. It means acknowledging the good and bad ways that we have answered those questions or ignored them. Is there a question that is prominent in your life right now? Consider some ways that you might move toward an answer as you go through the day.

*Ed Sunday-Winters is Pastor of First Baptist Church, Phoenix City in Alabama.*

## Advent Week 4: Love

### December 22

*Deuteronomy 30. 15-18*

*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.*

This is Moses' locker room speech. After 40 years of lackluster practice, murmuring about Moses' Cushite wife, and complaining about bitter water and mildewy manna, it's game time and Coach Moses will remain on the sidelines in Moab while the Israelites cross the Jordan to run onto the field of the Promised Land.

Moses has one more chance to get the message across. And this is what he writes on the dry-erase board:

Dig deep, drill down, dial in, double down.

Go for it: put on the uniform of Torah and run out there under the banner of Love and choose Life.

“Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report” (Philippians 4:8): that's the program. And let all the other stuff go.

Maybe it's not that simple, but just for today let's pretend it is. That today, *this day* is Election Day and Sadie Hawkins Day and the remote is in our hands and we get to choose the channel. Pull the lever for “Life” and for the sweet goodness (Hebrew *tov*), the sugar in those green plants from Genesis 1, or pull the lever for Death and trouble. That's the stark choice Moses offers.

And what is the path of Life? For Moses, it's to make love of God and neighbor your entire mission. In Advent, let me suggest you practice the code of WWMD, “What would Mary do?” Mary about this time, in her final weeks, is too spaced out on body chemicals to be focused on anything other than devotion to the life of Christ. Deuteronomy is about “cleaving” and “being all-in” with heart, soul, and strength.

And there's also the part about “walking in his ways.” If only you could simply “choose” Life by tapping a touch screen. Sorry, pals; you have to *walk* it.

**Prayer:** Put me in, Coach. I pledge allegiance to Love. I open my heart wide, wider, *wider* to walk today in a Promised Land I've never seen before. Loosen my fixation with all my beautiful plans so that, like Mary, I might say, "According to your word, let it be" (Luke 1:38). In Jesus' name, Amen.

**Action:** Practice the uncluttered, Deuteronomy life. And your action today is this: do not consult your to-do list. Live without your calendar. Wake up this morning alert to an assignment you have not yet received. Your mission, should you decide to accept it, will reveal itself as a Good Samaritan moment. Walk through your day awake to God and let the Spirit surprise you.

*Greg Mobley is Professor of Christian Bible at Andover Newton Theological School and as Pastor of First Baptist Church, Needham in Massachusetts.*

## Advent Week 4: Love

### December 23

Matthew 19:14-15, NRSV

*Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.*

Children are exhausting. I spend a lot of my time trying to keep my daughter corralled when in public. I'm self-conscious about letting this giant energy suck that I live with drain the life forces of innocent bystanders, so I say a lot of "stay over heres" and "get out of theres" and "please stand by mes". I would no doubt have done exactly the same thing as these disciples did if my child ran up to Jesus: "Honey, please give this nice Messiah some space. Come on, sweetie, I'm sure the Son of God has somewhere to be, so let go of his cloak, please."

Children are so much work. I signed up for it, but I won't assume that others have – or at least, that they haven't signed up for the work that *my* child takes. Because it's nonstop. Brushing her teeth, picking out her clothes, begging her to help around the house, redoing whatever chores she did around the house, giving her a bath, packing her snack for school, begging her to just sit still and eat her freaking dinner. Bringing my child to a social gathering feels like I'm bringing a construction foreman who will bark orders at anyone standing still to haul a load of bricks and start mixing the concrete.

In the divine reversal spiritual truths of the Gospel, however, it makes perfect sense that Jesus would want children to come to him. After all, that is how God came to us: as a child. The Advent season is a time when we worship God as a tiny, helpless bundle of flesh that needs everything and does nothing. That's usually not the aspect of the Christ-infant we focus on. We talk about promise and potential and new life. That's all true, too, of course. Just like when we were pregnant we sat around and talked about the promise of our child's potential and new life. No one talked about the constant work, though. We didn't sigh and pine for the sheer helplessness of our newborn infant who would require more energy and effort than any endeavor we'd ever undertaken.

What does it mean that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are defenseless and vulnerable? To the people who are the least conscious of the demands they make on others? To the most dependent and powerless among us? Are we really prepared for the radical reversal of spiritual power evident in God's appearance among us as a baby? Are we open to caring for God – losing sleep and sanity as we invest every aspect of our lives to the cultivation of spiritual wellbeing and growth in another?

As any parent or caregiver can attest, caring for a child of any age is exhausting. It's also life-changing in bountiful ways. This Advent, may we, like Jesus, be

open to the transformative possibilities of giving yourself to those who need our care.

**Prayer:** God, as you come to us as a child, may we be generous and open in caring for your holy presence among us.

**Action:** This week, do something for a child who you do not share parenting responsibilities for.

*Daniel Miles is Assistant Director of Spiritual Care at Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte, NC.*



## Advent Week 4: Love

### December 24

*Luke 2.15-20, NRSV*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

For our family, Christmas officially kicks off with our annual Christmas Eve, Eve Bunce Family Gathering. These gatherings are no small matter in number, in affair, especially in noise. 30 people in one house can make for a boisterous evening – 30 voices carrying on conversation over dinner, mass present openings with the youngest children, two rather rowdy games of Dirty Santa, followed by Family stockings. We joke that this gathering is the ultimate test for significant others, if they stick around after a Bunce Family Christmas (or two), that is a hopeful sign. Please don't misunderstand – I absolutely adore my family and would not want to kick off this full week of Christmas any other way.

There are a few notable moments during the evening when we intentionally quiet ourselves, though these moments are short-lived. We always sing and ask the blessing before the meal; before opening presents someone from the family reads the Christmas story (the Jesus version, not the Ralphie version); and before we pass out stockings, Granddaddy shares a short meditation on the meaning of Christmas. These moments – like stockings and Dirty Santa – are tradition for us and are observed in a similar way year after year. Last year, my niece Fayrah read aloud the Christmas story from Luke 2 – the same one you just read – and sitting in the quiet room that had just moments before been ringing back with the sounds of our own laughter, I couldn't help but notice Mary's silence.

It's actually quite easy to miss. At first it seems like a meaningless aside – just one verse tucked away at the end of this 20 verse section, but the tone of this one line is so different from the rest of the story it's odd that we overlook it. Maybe it is our own attempts to tame the chaos of the Christmas story that make Mary's silence go unnoticed. Our dignified nativity sets and our carols of silent night and away in a manger where all is calm and baby Jesus doesn't cry give a more refined appearance to this story than it deserves. Luke suggests that this holy night is anything but silent. If we want to honor Luke's story then we need nativity sets with shepherds in motion – with arms and faces that stretch out in excitement – shepherds who are not bowing but instead are running either to the stable to see the baby or away from it telling anyone who will listen what they have found – and we need a stable door that just won't shut for the visiting crowds, some who bring with them their own crying babies and curious children. Luke's story is not

calm – it's chaos. And it is in the midst of all this commotion that we find the young Mary who sits silently by her son – her body hunched forward in her chair exhausted from travel and labor and the demands of caring for a newborn – with heavy dark brown eyes that beg for sleep – but she doesn't sleep. Instead, she sits silently taking it all in – each little twitch as he sleeps peacefully in his makeshift crib – each cry that begs for his mother's warmth – each little half smile as she strokes his cheek – the smell of the room – the visitor's remarks, their ooos and ahhs and awwwws that issue like sweet blessings over her son – the wonder of other children as they gently hug or give him kisses. And Luke says, "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart."

Calvin Miller suggests, "We must look to Mary's example to know how to deal with the glorious impossibilities of God." In a season that is so full with its own chaos and commotion, I wonder if we wouldn't all benefit from Mary's example – to simply notice, to take in with intention the things happening around us – to understand, as Luke suggests, that silent attentiveness is as appropriate a response to the presence of God as the praising of Shepherds and the singing of Angels.

Amidst the chaos of life around her, Mary sits keenly aware of the holy presence of God in the room – a babe, her babe, wrapped in the vulnerable flesh of humanity, come to us a savior armed only with the innate love of a child. As we contemplate and then carry this story of Christmas forward into the New Year, let us remember that this is our calling too – to live with a keen awareness of God's presence in the world.

If the incarnation means anything to us, it is that our God, who on this holy night took on hands and feet and tears and hunger and laughter and gratitude – was then and continues to be now Emmanuel – God who is with us.<sup>1</sup> The incarnation means that God continues to be made new and made known to us in the ordinary – in the everyday – in the most unexpected places. The incarnation means that God is here now, present with us in the quiet and in the chaos. It is our calling to live with an awareness of that presence and like Mary to treasure it within ourselves.

**Prayer:** Incarnate God, we give thanks that you do not show up only in the places we deem to be holy or appropriate. Thank you for the ways your love spills over into the most ordinary places, onto the most unsuspecting people. Open our spirits and our hearts that we might live keenly aware of the moments when we are in those ordinary places – or are those unsuspecting people. Amen.

**Action:** There is so much about the world around us that we miss in our hurried days. Today, make a point of slowing down – of paying attention to the things around you. When you find yourself dismissing something as unimportant, pay particular attention to that thing. Look for something holy there that you may not have noticed at first.

*Lin Story-Bunce is Associate Pastor at College Park Church in Greensboro, NC.  
(Christmas Eve Reflection - December 24, 2014)*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.onbeing.org](http://www.onbeing.org), Krista Tippett – images of God embodied

## Advent Week 4: Love

### December 25

1 John 3.1-2, NRSV

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when God is revealed, we will be like God, for we will see God as God is.*

They got it on tape, the quintessential moment where I am clearly my mother's daughter. 24 Christmases ago, I was 3 and still the star of the show as the camera rolled during those present-opening moments that morning. Without pausing to take it all in, I went straight for the Disney train set. I pulled Mickey out of the conductor's spot and threw him. I grabbed Minnie and set her up royally in the lead. There. Much better.

That moment, showcasing my tiny feminist self, is immortalized on tape. Proof that it's in my blood. I was acting out of that feminism gene before I ever had any idea what that meant. Mom still has that Minnie; she keeps her displayed in what used to be my room. She loves that her feminism was built inherently into me. And I, sometimes disorientingly, keep catching myself acting just like my mom. I talk to the mirror, give a pretty fierce silent treatment, and sometimes snort when I laugh. I know where my love of gardening, children, and creating comes from.

There's profound relief, comfort, belonging in knowing the love that birthed us. When we have those moments, moments that remind us just how full of our parents we are, they may be disorienting or shocking or endearing, but they also remind us who we are.

As children of our parent God, we have moments when we recognize our joy or creativity or grief as characteristics of our God. We don't have to do or be anything other than our true selves, and in so being, we reflect our creator. Sometimes disorientingly, we remember what a bright light we are capable of shining, we remember the power of the words we carry, we remember we, like Mary, are God-bearers.

**Prayer:** Creator God, we are humbled that you chose to be a part of the human race. We are humbled that we belong to you. Help us live into those moments where we recognize your light inside us. Fill us up with joy, courage, and compassion. Compel us forward, unhindered by our insecurities, fear, falsities, toward wholeness where we find our identity wrapped up in you. Amen.

**Action:** Where are you longing for God to enter the world? Where do you wish God would be? What do you wish God would say? Write about this yearning. Wonder how you might be present and shine in those places. Maybe even wander out to those spaces, listening for what God is saying there, paying attention to the way your parent God is leading you there.

*Lesley-Ann Hix Tommey works as marketing associate at The Covenant School and is minister at Eunoia Christian Community in Charlottesville, VA.*