



TRINITY CHURCH
ON TELFAIR SQUARE SINCE 1848

2020 Advent Devotional

Rev. Ben Gosden

And the congregation at

Trinity United Methodist Church

Savannah, GA

November 29th.....2 Cor. 4:17-18.....Allyson Morgan
November 30th.....Psalm 33:22.....Charles Caster
December 1st.....Hebrews 11:11.....Ardra Hartz
December 2nd.....1 Peter 5:10.....Kelly Crane
December 3rd.....Ephesians 1:18.....Ben Gosden
December 4th..... Jeremiah 29:11.....Katie Gosden
December 5th.....Romans 15:13.....Jessica Hensley
December 6th.....1 Peter 1:8-9.....Pat Youngquist
December 7th.....1 Cor 16:13.....Dawn Wilson
December 8th.....2 Peter 1:5-7.....Nathan Godley
December 9th.....2 Cor 5:7.....Ben Gosden
December 10th.....Ephesians 6:16.....Kelly Crane
December 11th.....Romans 10:17.....Ardra Hartz
December 12th.....Matthew 17:20.....Anne Heefner
December 13th.....Luke 1:14.....Jeanmarie Collins
December 14th..... Luke 2:10.....Tom Madron
December 15th.....Luke 24:52.....Helen Bradley
December 16th.....Psalm 100:2.....Jared Register
December 17th.....Philippians 4:4.....Beverly Madron
December 18th.....Luke 2:28-30.....Ardra Hartz
December 19th.....Psalm 98:4.....Linda Smith
December 20th.....1 John 4:7.....Andrew Cosey
December 21st.....Ephesians 4:2.....Ardra Hartz
December 22nd.....Romans 12:9-10.....Linda Smith
December 23rd.....1 Cor 13:13.....Connie Boole
December 24th.....John 3:16-17.....Ben Gosden

ADVENT WEEK 1

HOPE

VERB:

1: to cherish a desire with anticipation : to want something to happen or be true

2: to desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment

NOUN:

1: desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment

2: someone or something on which hopes are centered

November 29, 2020

First Sunday of Advent

17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 1 Corinthians 4:17-18(NIV)

When my daughter was born, some of the best advice I received was that everything in newborn world is temporary. That adorable coo - temporary. That seemingly never ending crying fit - temporary. The good and the more challenging moments are all temporary. This idea is not just applied to baby life, but we know that life happens in seasons. There is a time to cry and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance (Ecclesiastes 3). This verse in Corinthians alludes to this idea of the temporary: your light and troubles are momentary; however, it gives us a really beautiful word to move beyond the temporary to the eternal.

I recently listened to a conversation between Austin Channing Brown and Brenda Salter McNeil. In this conversation, Brown and McNeil discussed the difference between a hope rooted in optimism and hope rooted in faith. Their conversation left me with some truths that will stick with me. When we talk about hope, we sometimes mistakenly base our hope on what we currently see, which might leave us feeling hopeless or disappointed or filled with temporary, shallow happiness. That form of hope may feel like an emotional roller coaster. We've felt that a lot in 2020 while we look at data, make decisions, feel disappointed about missed experiences, and think about differences in our life this year compared to other years. The good news is that Corinthians 4:17-18 gives us a version of hope that is everlasting and eternal.

In the conversation between Austin Channing Brown and Brenda Salter McNeil, they suggest we should move beyond a hope whose foundation is in what we can currently see in the world and instead root our hope in faith, which is the evidence of things hoped for but not seen. As they say, we may not currently see our hopes and desires, but thankfully, Corinthians 4:17-18 calls us to look at what is unseen, to what far outweighs our current reality and situation. Knowing this, we can simultaneously be aware and acknowledge what we currently see (good and bad) and also believe and act according to how we are called based on the eternal hope promised by God. We can be filled with joy and hope based in our faith this holiday season and beyond.

Allyson Morgan

November 30, 2020

May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you. Psalm 33:22 (NIV)

The psalmist is waiting in hope for what God will provide to his people out of the abundance of God's love. In this advent season, we are reminded of how God provided the gift of his Son at a Christmas long past. Today we wait for Christmas to come in a few days and a week later for a new year to start. Many of us will be especially glad for this year to end.

Too often we hope for small and personal things. We hope the dentist will not find another cavity. We hope our finances work out better next year. However, I think we should hope for greater things. If there is one lesson we have learned this year, it is that our individual well-being is strongly tied to the well-being of the community around us. Also, that the well-being of our community is strongly influenced by the actions of individuals.

What great work of God are we waiting and hoping for this year? Are we willing to hope for God's love to produce a more just, equitable and peaceful world? Are we willing to wait for God's love to show us the place where we, as individuals, are being called to assist God's kingdom to come on earth? Will we pray for it? Will we do more than pray?

Charles Caster

December 1, 2020

¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she^[u] considered him faithful who had made the promise. Hebrews 11:11 (NRSV)

In this age of cyber-living, the age-old adage of Buyer Beware is even more applicable than it was back in ‘the old days’ of making in-person deals. But, there seems to be a great deal more anxiety: Can I trust this person? Is this a secure connection? Should I enter my payment data? Can I trust PayPal? Venmo? Will this deal be OK? Will I be OK? I know that you can identify..... But this verse from Hebrews makes an enormous statement: Sarah “considered him faithful who had made the promise.” These few words say so much: Sarah knew her God. God knew Sarah. There was no doubt whatsoever, in Sarah’s mind that what God said could be counted on to come to pass. Therefore, she was anxiety-free. This security is at the heart of the coming of Christ to our world as a child. All that we need to do is to know our God and to tap into the assurance that 1) God knows us and 2) God can be relied upon. Hang another ornament on the tree and whisper: “Thank you, God!”

Ardra Hartz

December 2, 2020

¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

1 Peter 5:10 (NRSV)

This has certainly been a season of suffering for many. I don't think ANYONE imagined in March when this pandemic began that we would not be in our church building for Easter and we certainly didn't think about Thanksgiving and Christmas being disrupted with social distancing guidelines. I have missed three college graduations, two weddings, a 70th birthday celebration, and countless other gatherings with friends and family. I am blessed to have my husband and mother here with me, but I miss the rest of my extended family. If only this verse would define exactly what "a little while" is.

This verse may not give the specifics of what a little while is but it does give us hope that God will once again come through. We will come out of this season of separation and isolation with God by our side. I can't wait till we are able to hug our loved ones again, visit with friends and family, and gather together for meals and fellowship.

Lord, As we wait on your timing help us be patient with ourselves and each other and use this time of suffering to strengthen our hope and trust in you.

Kelly Crane

December 3, 2020

¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,
Ephesians 1:18. (NRSV)

There are no brighter eyes this time of year than the eyes of children. The season can bring such wonder and awe. I wonder, though, where along the way you lose that light? At what point does the season become a never-ending list of things to do, buy, and events to attend? Paul has a memorable phrase here to the church in Ephesus – “I pray the eyes of your heart may be enlightened that you may know the hope to which God has called you.” In this crazy, COVID-filled year of chaos, maybe now is the exact time we can put away those things that bring the mood of this season down in order to focus on the things that will make our eyes and hearts light up! Instead of endless lists of things to DO, maybe we can imagine new ways to just BE – to be with those we love, to be with God, and to be with ourselves as we remember the most important part of this season doesn’t go under a tree or on a wish list. It’s already here and coming yet again – the hope of God that calls us to see that love, above all else, will win.

Lord, fill me with your hope to over-flowing. Let that hope pour out onto others as we share in a renewed sense of your love this season. AMEN.

Ben Gosden

December 4, 2020

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

This verse comes at a time when plans for my future life seem to be in a state of disruption. I know decisions need to be made which will affect me, my family, my spouse, and my health. With God’s help and through prayer I expect that I can come through the dark night of the soul, and once again believe in a positive and hopeful future. The way will be rough and I might falter, but there is solace in committing all plans to the Lord. Hope is there for us even when we have trouble discerning the light. This does not mean the we will be spared pain or suffering or hardship, but that God will see each of us through to a glorious conclusion. Thanks be to God!

Katie Gosden

December 5, 2020

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Romans 15:13 (NIV)

In 2009, my husband Anthony was diagnosed with a very rare and aggressive form of cancer at the age of 36. We learned that he had a small-cell lung cancer that occurs outside of the lungs. All of it was terrifying. What I remember with great clarity was the oncologist saying, "Unfortunately, I can't give you any success rates from this kind of cancer because there are so few cases reported. We just don't have the data."

I love this verse because it is a solid reminder to me that we cannot rely on the actual truth of our circumstances to bring us hope. That hope comes from the power of the Holy Spirit. This verse in Romans reminds me of the peace that comes as I trust in Him. He is the God of Hope!

I also love the version of this verse from The Message:

Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!

May we remember that such hope comes from the Prince of Peace. May we see that the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit is very real and is very powerful. In this season of Advent, may we be particularly mindful of those around us who might be in the midst of circumstances that feel seemingly devoid of hope so that we can show up for them, surround them in prayer, reach out with words of encouragement, and help shoulder their burdens. In our own lives and struggles, may we lean in extra hard to His words, put our trust in Him, and soak in the promise, "The peace of God...will guard your hearts and your minds."

Jessica Hensley

ADVENT WEEK 2

FAITH

Noun:

1: allegiance to duty or a person

2: belief and trust in and loyalty to God

3: something that is believed especially with strong conviction

December 6, 2020

Second Sunday of Advent

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:8-9 (NIV)

Although I was baptized and confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church, from my teen years into my 30s I never went to church or had much thought of God. One might say that I lost my faith. After some personal struggles, I decided to give church a try as nothing else in my life seemed to offer solutions. Maybe God could help. My first Christmas season in the church, a week before Christmas, my father died suddenly of a heart attack. I had talked to him in the morning and received a phone call that evening that he was gone. He was only 66, much too young to leave me. I was grateful at the time, and am today, that I was in a community of faith during this difficult time. I received many cards from members of my new church community. Many of the names I could not even place with a face. But what I understood in a very deep way, was the meaning of Christmas, Emmanuel, which means God is with us. I didn't know God was with me because I could not see God. I knew by faith that God was with me in my sorrow. I had an indescribable peace I had never experienced before. I was, as Peter describes, receiving the outcome of my faith, salvation for my soul.

Most loving God, we thank you for the gift of faith. That although we do not see you, we know you are at work in our lives. We know the meaning of Emmanuel; God is with us. As we approach Christmas and the birth of Jesus, keep us faithful to your call to share your love and our faith with others. So that those who do not see may also believe. Amen.

Pat Youngquist

December 7, 2020

“Be on your guard: stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.” 1 Corinthians 16:13 (NIV)

In this season, particularly this year, we as Christians have definitely had our faith tested. We have had to adapt and learn new ways to worship together, while not actually together. To figure out this new normal, and how to still be present in the world while being safe, we need to be courageous, strong, and out in the world making our presence known, like we are all called to do, showing people the love of Christ. I know things right now are scary, however, I am sure that Mary was scared while carrying baby Jesus. Her faith and courage gave us the greatest gift we could have ever received. We have to be strong like Mary by getting into our community, helping those in need, and letting our light shine while bringing joy to others. Sometimes doing what scares you, brings you and those around you, the greatest gifts and joys.

Many Blessings,

Dawn Wilson

December 8, 2020

⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 2 Peter 1:5-7 (NIV)

Thoughtfully reflecting on the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem and the quiet story of the birth of Jesus in the manger elicits a response of faith. Seeing how Joseph and Mary patiently and obediently trust in God's presence in their lives helps us to know that God is also with us and cares about our journey through life. Faith is a gift that God gives to all of us.

The words of 2 Peter remind us that embracing goodness strengthens our faith and allows the grace of God to flourish in our lives. We would not think of planting a garden in sandy or salty soil. Likewise faith flourishes in a heart that is rich with goodness and love. As we embrace goodness and practice self control, we create a place for faith to flourish and grow.

Prayer: Dear God, as I journey through this advent season, help me like Joseph and Mary on their journey to Bethlehem to trust and follow with faith. Stir in my heart and mind the awareness of your love that I might live as a person of grace and love. Amen.

Nathan Godley

December 9, 2020

⁷ *For we live by faith, not by sight.* 2 Corinthians 5:7 (NIV)

Have you ever found yourself stumbling around in the dark searching for a light that might help you see? Maybe it's that late night bathroom run or pulling into your dark driveway realizing you forgot to turn the flood lights on. As you search for a light, have you ever noticed what eventually happens – your eyes adjust to the darkness and you're able to see a little better! In a similar way, our faith helps our vision adjust to the darkness around us. The darkness of fear and chaos may not be entirely gone, but we can see a little better when our faith adjusts our vision in the darkness. As this season unfolds, I pray that whatever darkness you may be experiencing can be lessened, if not made to disappear, as your eyes of faith help you navigate knowing God is walking alongside you the entire way.

Lord, let me fix my eyes upon you so that my vision can be more clear in these dark days of fear. And help me help others see you more clearly so that, together, we can walk in your ways.

AMEN

Ben Gosden

December 10, 2020

¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.
Ephesians 6:16 (NRSV)

This verse is so fitting for such a time as this. I don't typically use The Message translation as my first choice, but I do reference it for clarity. In this example, it becomes crystal clear what God would have us do.

Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting you'll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out. Ephesians 6:13-18 (MSG)

I definitely have more than I can handle sometimes. One thing that has become an anchor for me in my spiritual journey is a small group I am part of on Thursday mornings. I have met with these faithful women since the beginning of this pandemic. They are part of my shield of faith. We lift each other, laugh together, cry together, and sometimes even disagree. In the end, however, these wonderful women are helping me grow in my faith. They are truly my sisters in Christ and I am better for knowing them.

Kelly Crane

December 11, 2020

¹⁷ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. Romans 10:17 (NRSV)

She had a friend named Mandy. Mandy was Catholic. She was in her mid-30's and had two children. She had attended Mass her entire life; she was firm in her faith. But Mandy's new friend spoke so 'personally' about God and God's help and direction, God's examples in Christ as he lived /taught/ interacted. Mandy was a bit awestruck. The only scripture she had ever heard was what was in the Missal or what the priest said in the homily. ...So her friend decided to buy her a Catholic version of the Living Bible (Which contained extra books called the Apocrypha.) She wrapped it up and tied a bow and gave it to Mandy, and she said: "Start at Matthew 1 and just read it!" ...A few months later, Mandy, out of the blue one day, said to her friend after the Wednesday night volleyball game: "You know what you told me about having a personal relationship with Jesus? Well, I did that." And she smiled an enormous smile. So did Mandy's friend. Read it all for yourself, and the Christmas presents will just keep on coming!

Ardra Hartz

December 12, 2020

He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. Matthew 17:20 (NRSV)

What if nothing was impossible for Us? How would we live differently if we really believed that nothing would be impossible?

We are meant to move mountains — to see the impossible occur through the exercise of faith. If we are not seeing mountains move, we are living beneath our means. We are living as paupers when we have millions in our heavenly bank.

With the Lord we plead, “Increase our faith” and we do not let God go until he blesses us with an answer. It is a request he loves to grant.

Jesus really does mean for us to move mountains. He wants us to live in the bold joy of knowing that nothing will be impossible for us.

Anne Heefner

ADVENT WEEK 3

JOY

VERB:

To experience great pleasure or delight

NOUN:

1a: the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.

b: the expression or exhibition of such emotion.

2: a state of happiness or felicity

3: a source or cause of delight

December 13, 2020

Third Sunday of Advent

“And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at His birth.” Luke 1:14 (KJV)

On the theme of joy: It is certainly difficult to find joy these days, especially with the holidays approaching and the medical advice that people stay home and not have their traditional gatherings. So, I try to find ways to discover joy with the knowledge that my children are healthy, we all have shelter, warmth, food, and a way to communicate by phone or Zoom (though, technology is not my friend). I look for joy through beauty when I take my trusted, loyal dog on my walk. Sometimes it is through the changing of the leaves, people that smile with their eyes as I pass them by, young parents walking with strollers inhabited by new lives, new hope for the future. This past week, I was given the opportunity, because of a settlement over my accident, to give money to my daughter to cover a large expense that had been hanging over her for a good while. She kept telling me that she couldn't accept it, but, my response was that it brought me great joy to do this for her, so, in a sense, I was also doing that for myself. More and more, I believe that God expects us to find joy, not only out in the world, but for ourselves. I am reminded that God knows our needs and provides those opportunities to seek joy. I look to the days of acknowledging Christ's birth, which takes on new meaning for me this year. It makes me believe that the world will start fresh anew, and pure joy can be embraced.

Father, just as the Christ child brought joy to a damaged, fragile world over two thousand years ago, let it also be true for your children, now. Amen and Amen.

Jeanmarie Collins

December 14, 2020

But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. Luke 2:10 (NRSV)

Think about how this passage applies to you and the people around you. You might find it helpful to take your own Bible, whatever the translation, and read the entire section of Luke 2:8-20. This entire passage presents in a dramatic and almost visual form one of Luke's major themes. When people are going about their own business they sometimes find themselves, surprisingly, in the presence of God. The people to whom Jesus' birth is being revealed are shepherds. The focus on the shepherds is important for God is not being revealed to the rich and powerful. Rather, he is being revealed to the relatively poor Shepherds who were low on the occupational totem-pole. But they were the ones chosen to validate events that require public recognition. As a byproduct of this requirement Luke carefully records the reports of the shepherds to others about what they have seen and heard.

The "bottom line" is that a savior has come! This fact is not something of which to be afraid. Rather, even in the midst of the problems facing us today, it is an occasion of joy (Good news; happiness; wonderful news) for all people!

A Prayer of Hope

Send, O God, into the darkness of this troubled world the light of your Son. Let the star of your hope touch the minds of all people with the bright beams of mercy and truth; And so direct our steps that we may ever walk in the way revealed to us, as the shepherds of Bethlehem walked with joy to the manger where He dwelled, who now and ever reigns in our hearts, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (United Methodist Book of Worship p.227)

Tom Madron

December 15, 2020

Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Luke 24:52 (NIV)

The Gospel of Luke ends with great hope. Jesus is with the disciples, and he lifts his hands and blesses them and then he is “carried up to heaven.” The disciples worship him and return to Jerusalem with great joy. (Of course they had recently been devastated and confused when Jesus was crucified.)

So why in the world do the disciples experience joy at the loss, of their Savior? In 2020, we can certainly relate to loss as we’ve experienced a worldwide pandemic with sickness, death, fear, loneliness, and uncertainty. We’ve also endured bitter divisiveness in politics. Everything seems upside down.

The disciples must feel that life is upside down when they’re seemingly abandoned like orphans. Yet they rejoice because they finally see things clearly and are no longer afraid. Bible scholars interpret the ascension of Jesus as the completion of His earthly ministry and the start of His heavenly ministry. Which means we earthly beings have access to Jesus as our advocate. Wow! How epic is that to have Jesus as our advocate!? The disciples also rejoice because they begin their earthly ministry. We too are privileged to continue that ministry. Indeed, a reason for joy! So what seemed like an ending was actually the beginning.

Of course, sad good-byes, pain, and disappointments will continue. But the Gospel of Luke reminds us that, even during the darkest nights, there is hope. Not just hope, but JOY! How can we find joy during Advent?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, help us to see clearly and remember that despite outward appearances and bleak circumstances, hope and joy are internal. Thank you, God, for your Divine guidance as we strengthen this inner awareness. Amen.

Helen Bradley

December 16, 2020

Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Psalm 100:2 (NIV)

Psalm 100 or *Jubilate Deo (Rejoice in God)* is one of the most popular bodies of text used by choral composers across the globe. One only needs to do a quick online search to see numerous compositions with themes of rejoicing, praise, and gratefulness to God dating back to the early Renaissance. But why are we called to sing our praises to God? It is certainly not the only way to offer praise, but many would argue that it is the chief way to worship Him. Throughout its history, the church has used music to spread the gospel and offer its thanks and praise to God. From hymn singing to liturgical musical traditions, the worship service offers ample opportunities to give thanks to God through song.

As we reflect this season on all the goodness in our lives, we are called to be grateful...through song or otherwise. Gratitude is an expression of indebtedness for what one has, and it can bring an immense amount of joy to reflect on the many blessings God has provided us large and small. Even in our childhood I'm sure many of you remember hearing, "Now what do you say?" with the tried-and-true response, "Thank you!" We can sometimes feel required to give thanks as an outward expression of our gratitude, but how often do we think about what gratitude does for us? In fact, it does quite a lot. Gratitude is a feeling, but research finds its significance as a practice, that is to purposely foster gratitude for all things: our faith, our loved ones, our fur family, nature, and all the positive things in our lives. We have so much to be thankful for this advent season. May we find joy in counting our blessings, offering praise to God through song, and reflecting on all the goodness afforded to us by God.

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for another beautiful advent season. As we reflect on your many blessings, may we find joy in all things large and small. Thank you for the joy we find in music. May we continue to find joyfulness in offering thanksgiving to you through song and spoken word. Amen.

Jared Register

December 17, 2020

Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say, Rejoice!
Philippians 4:4 (NRSV)

You gotta be kidding! Be glad? Rejoice? Haven't you been paying attention? We're in the middle of a pandemic of epic proportions. We have a politically divided country, and our church is on track to become multiple denominations because we can't agree on how to treat "the other"—whatever or whoever they might be. And we're supposed to rejoice? Be glad? C'mon....

Well—yes, we are....The verse says: rejoice—not in what is going on in the mechanisms of mortals, but in the Lord. Now that should open up a space (and a good sized space, too) for some joy, some glad. Start easy, start basic. Last time I checked, the sun came up this morning. . It came up because God made it so. Rejoice! Yes, it's simplistic. Corny, even. But every now and then, when all else fails, it helps to take W. S. Coffin's advice: "If you're at the edge of an abyss the only progressive step is backward!"

So, if we move backward, away from the current abyss that looms before us, away from everything that makes joy, rejoicing, gladness impossible, we can begin to recognize the forms that joy and rejoicing can take. Small, sly, even (maybe) stupid—but still jolts of joy, still gifts of glad. That first cup of coffee in the morning . . .the giggle of a child chasing bubbles....a lovely flower, the "welcome home" tailwag of a canine . . .the echo of a favorite hymn . . .You can take it from here with your own list of reasons to rejoice. (You'll probably need more room!) And don't forget where we are on the calendar—it's almost Christmas! And where we need to pause, review, rewind, reflect, remember: there is a reason to "be glad in the Lord always," regardless of what else is going on. It's almost Christmas! Thanks be to God for his gift that words, even words of joy and gladness, can't describe. Amen.

Beverly Madron

December 18, 2020

*Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:
“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss
your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation,
Luke 2:28-30 (NIV)*

Advent is that time of anticipation: Put up the tree; add lights and ornaments. Decorate the front door, the mantle, the whole house! Some people even put a wreath on the front of their car. What fun it all is. And what joy it brings; just ask those elves who decorated the Historic Trinity sanctuary for the season!! In the months before Jesus was born, those who knew, studied, believed, were assured by angels that God was on the way. Simeon was among these. If you have ever held a newborn, you can just revisit that magical moment and smile from the inside out. When Simeon took Jesus in his arms, he said what we have all felt: “ I have seen your salvation with my own eyes.” You may have heard that old saying that the birth of a baby is God’s statement of the opinion that the world should go on. Simeon has lived a L-O-N-G time. He had waited for a long time in very dire societal circumstances. But he rejoiced.... He was ‘gobsmacked’. He had seen the coming of the Lord with his own eyes. We can, too! So, we can be merry while we wait!

Ardra Hartz

December 19, 2020

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Psalm 98:4 (NIV)

Did you know that the hymn we love to sing at Christmas, “Joy to the World,” was arranged by Lowell Mason? Lowell Mason moved to Savannah at the age of 20 and resided here for approximately 15 years. While here, he served as organist for Independent Presbyterian Church (1820-1827) and Superintendent of its Sunday School (1815-1827). He is known as the father of American church music and public school music. But, he was a young leader years ahead of his time, as documented below from the First Bryan Baptist website:

“During the period between 1788 and 1832, the first Sunday school for blacks was organized at the church in 1826 by Mr. Lowell Mason, who organized the first Sunday school in Savannah, at the Independent Presbyterian church. He was the first superintendent and was assisted by Messrs. George Coe, John Lewis and James Barr – all members of the Independent Presbyterian Church. This Sunday school was very successful and remained under supervision until December 1835, when the Presbyterian Church turn it over to First Bryan. It is still in operation.”

Another interesting fact is that the words written by Isaac Watts, an English Christian minister and hymn writer, were based on Psalm 98, which is actually about the second coming of Christ. I know the next time I hear or sing this hymn, it will take on new meaning for me!

Dear God, we find it so hard to comprehend the love you have for us—sending your only son, to die to save us from our sins. But, now we are anxiously awaiting His return when;

He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness, And wonders of His love.

Linda Smith

ADVENT WEEK 4

LOVE

VERB:

1: to hold dear

2: to like or desire actively, take pleasure in

NOUN:

1 Strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties

2 Unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another

December 20, 2020

Fourth Sunday of Advent

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” 1 John 4:7 (

When I was asked to write about this scripture, I heard God chuckle. Well, I think I did, anyway. In the past weeks, I hadn't been responding to God's nudges to reconcile some questions of faith and love. So no more nudges for me--rather, a strong and firm “Let's do this!”

This scripture spoke two Big Ideas to me that related directly to a disagreement I had had with a close relative right before the election. History tells us that John wrote this letter to some churches who were struggling in conflict because of false teachers. Whose words are Truth? Whose words are False? Wow! John gives a message as powerful for the first century Christians who read this letter as it is for us Christians twenty centuries later. First Big Idea: God is Love, so let's love one another. Second Big Idea: Anyone who loves is of God and knows God. So even if they look different, or believe, or worship, or live differently, I am supposed to love them, and know that they are of God and know God?

And here am I twenty centuries later in a conversation with a relative prior to our presidential election. Both of us grew up in Christian homes, profess to be Jesus followers, but are polar opposites in some of our beliefs. She considered some of my beliefs sinful and ones that no “real” Christian could hold. (Am I a false teacher in her view? I wonder.) When I offered to explain my position, however, she cut off the conversation saying she feared that any further discussion would hurt our family relationship. What did that mean? Was she afraid she couldn't love me anymore? And she couldn't follow John's instructions to us in his letter? Odd. Because I thought that talking was a way of loving and seeing our God in each of us. Is “agreeing to disagree the answer”? Does that “cliche” answer lead us to love each other as God loves us and enable us to see the God within each other?

One final thought I leave with you this Advent season is from Richard Rohr, in his November 25th daily meditation. He writes, “One way that our growth in love becomes stuck is when we identify so much with our group or country that it replaces our faith in the One God of all.”

And I close with a part of Rohr's November 25th daily prayer:
God of all races, Nations, and religions, You know that we cannot change others, nor can we change the past. But we can change ourselves. We can join You in changing our only and common future where Love “Reigns” The same over all.

Peggy Hilleary

December 21, 2020

with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, Ephesians 4:2 (NRSV)

When labor began for the birth of my firstborn, I went to St. Mary's Hospital, a Catholic supported medical center. It was Friday before Memorial Day in May. There was a full moon; the Labor and Delivery area was jammed full! I was lying on a gurney in the hallway, waiting for the next pain. Looking up, I saw a framed print on the wall, of Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem. She was riding on a donkey, and he was walking beside it. I remember thinking: How could she possibly have ridden a donkey in the condition that I am in? And my next thought was: Joseph was SO patient, so humble, and so gentle. He knew what the deal was; but he accepted his role in the arrival of the Messiah. It clearly was NOT all about him... In this 2020 year, of Covid-19 upheaval (daily life, school, jobs, even simple shopping) and in this highly tense, emotional election year when everyone within both political parties seem intent on being in an uproar, it is God's wish and desire that we return to calm and be completely humble and gentle, bearing with one another in love. (After all, it's not really all about us)... Let's let that be our best gift . It is the one that matters most.

Ardra Hartz

December 22, 2020

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Romans 12:9-10 NRSV

What is genuine love? In English, we only have one word for love, LOVE. The Greeks had 4 to 8 words, depending on which website you use. But, the Greek word used by Paul in Romans 12:9 is AGAPE. Agape is defined by britannica.com as, “the fatherly love of God for humans, as well as the human reciprocal love for God.” To the Greeks, Agape was the highest form of love. God’s love for us is incomprehensible because of our humanness.

Paul wrote, again, about love in I Corinthians 13. He gave us the attributes of love—patience and kindness. It’s not envious, boastful, arrogant, irritable, resentful or rude. It, also, doesn’t insist on its own way and rejoices in truth. Love is greater than faith or hope. Lastly, but most importantly, Love Never Ends! Because God is love, there was no beginning to or will never be an end to love. As we approach the start of a new year, let’s try to be more loving! How can we do that? This quote from C. S. Lewis may be the answer:

"God lends us a little of His reasoning powers and that is how we think: He puts a little of His love into us and that is how we love one another. When you teach a child writing, you hold its hand while it forms the letters: that is, it forms the letters because you are forming them. We love and reason because God loves and reasons and holds our hand while we do it." ~ C. S. Lewis

Linda Smith

December 23, 2020

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:13 (NRSC)

As Christmas nears I am always reminded of Henry Van Dyke's *The Story of the Other Wise Man*. It is a powerful story of how one Wise Man spent his life searching for the Christ Child. This "Fourth Wise Man" had sold all his possessions to purchase three exquisite jewels which he had planned to present to the Christ Child in Bethlehem. He missed his rendezvous with the other three Wise Men because he had compassion for a sick traveler. He missed finding Jesus in Bethlehem and then traveled on to Egypt searching for him there. All the while he is helping the sick, the hungry and the oppressed. Finally, after a life time of searching, he finds himself in Jerusalem with the one last remaining pearl just as Jesus of Nazareth is to be crucified. He believes he can save Jesus by giving the pearl in exchange for Jesus' life. However, on his way to Golgotha, he uses the pearl to save a young girl being taken away into slavery. He crumples in despair as he realizes he cannot save Jesus. After a mortal wound, he begins to hear voices. He cries out "When did I see you?" And he hears the words, "Truly I tell you. Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me. He loved God by loving others. In 1st Corinthians 13 Paul defines love by showing us examples of a loving character. If we don't love... speeches are just noise. If we don't love...our lives mean nothing.

Paul understood what Jesus had made clear... that above all the priority is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Henry VanDyke wrote "Who seeks for heaven alone to save his soul, may keep the path, but will not reach the goal; while he who walks in love may wander far, yet God will bring him where the blessed are."

Connie Boole

December 24, 2020

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. John 3:16-17

I'm trying to remember the first time I saw a guy stand on a street corner holding a sign making reference to John 3:16. So often that verse is treated as a warning to "turn or burn" that we forget about the accompanying words of John 3:17 – Jesus did not come to condemn, but to save. It's Christmas Eve and the lists are as complete as they're going to get. We're a week away from a new calendar year. And many of us are filled with emotions ranging somewhere between joy for the wonder of the season and fear over the ongoing global pandemic and other ills of our world we hear about on a daily basis. But, in this quiet moment, read these two verses again real slowly. In the midst of the turmoil and fear, the Christ child will be born anew in YOU. No matter what kind of year this has been for you, Jesus is coming to YOU with a word of hope – God loves YOU more than you could ever know. Nothing can change that word. It's a word that has the power to save us – even, maybe even especially, now. Merry Christmas. AMEN.

Ben Gosden

December 25, 2020

MERRY CHRISTMAS

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Isaiah 9:6