

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
NAZARETH – 2022



DECEMBER 1

Joy

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. (James 1:2-3)

This verse showed up in my life during one of the most difficult seasons I have ever endured. My dad had been diagnosed with terminal cancer two months prior, and I had just transferred schools leaving me with a feeling of extreme loneliness.

The Merriam Webster Dictionary's definition of joy states, "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires". Throughout my life, I had always been told to "choose joy", but quite honestly, I didn't know how to choose joy in this season of my life.

It was during a sermon at BASIC that I heard James 1:2-3 for the first time. The concept of choosing joy became a bit clearer to me, because while I was facing hardships in my life, joy could be found in the way the Lord was using those hardships to produce perseverance within me. However, that does not mean choosing joy was easy. It was, and still is, a daily battle.

Over the next few months, I entered into a season of extreme grief. My dad passed away, and we entered into a global pandemic, all within the same week. James 1:2-3 kept appearing in my life in many forms, such as through my Jesus Calling devotional on my dad's 50th birthday, and randomly in a conversation with a mentor. I was continually being reminded to choose joy in a time when I was still skeptical of how choosing joy was even a possibility.

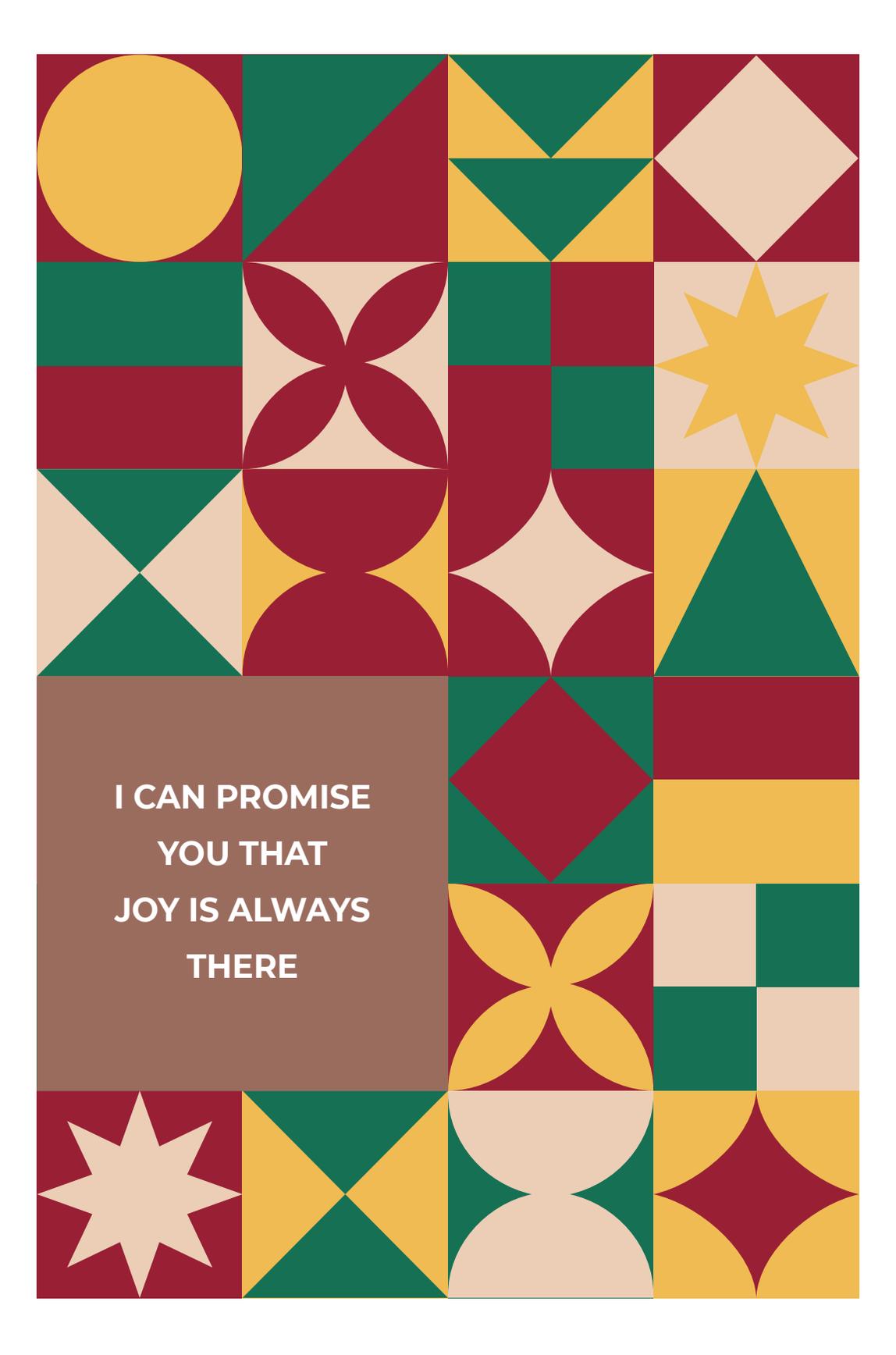
I have said it before, and I will say it again, choosing joy is not always easy. Grief, loss, heartbreak, and a plethora of other things can make it more difficult to choose joy, especially during the holiday season when it seems as though everyone else may be a bit more joyful.



However, choosing joy does not have to be about celebrating the good fortune or successes in our life, but rather finding joy in how the Lord is using our hardships. Sometimes we have to look a little harder to find joy, but I can promise you this, joy is always there.

Dear God, thank you for loving us unconditionally and for making it possible to find joy even in our darkest seasons. I pray for anyone who is experiencing trials, may they feel Your presence and love as they celebrate this holiday season. Lord, I pray that we may all find joy in our lives in some way each day, even on the days when choosing joy does not seem possible.

Brynn Van Der Beek



I CAN PROMISE
YOU THAT
JOY IS ALWAYS
THERE



DECEMBER 2

Joy

*You have turned my sorrow into joyful dancing. No longer am I sad and wearing sackcloth. I thank you from my heart, and I will never stop singing your praises, my Lord and my God.
(Psalm 20:11-12)*

It is October 31st and there are knocks at the front door, and standing there are little ones dressed in their Halloween costumes ready to trick-or-treat. What joy it is to see them all dressed up and laughing and enjoying the evening with friends and family. But, if you look in our house, Christmas movies are playing and two of the three Christmas trees are up and decorated. By November 2, we are in full Christmas spirit with all the decorations up, planning out the shopping, cookie baking, and enjoying the holiday fragrances with candles burning. I can visualize most of your expressions and what you may be thinking -- it is too early and it is not even Thanksgiving!

To give some background about the joy I find at Christmas and why I like to start planning very early, we go back seven years ago. This was a different Christmas for me. It was the first Christmas without my mom. I didn't want to decorate, I didn't want to shop, I didn't want to bake one cookie, I wanted NOTHING to do with it. I just wanted the whole Christmas season to pass while I was sleeping. How was I to find any joy in Christmas this season? My mom was the "Clark Griswold" of Christmas. She decorated the entire house while Christmas music was playing and she would sing and dance all day. As I write this, it brings a smile to my face because I can see her dancing. Yes, she wanted the decorations just perfect, the meals and cookies all perfectly made, but most importantly she wanted family to be together to celebrate Jesus' birth.

But seven years ago, I was filled with anger, anger towards God, anger towards complete strangers that I would see having lunch, shopping, laughing and enjoying their time together. There was no more Black Friday shopping with my mom,



all-day cookie baking, decorating, and all the joy I found being with my mom at Christmas. Death is something we are never prepared for. The year my mom died, I was so focused on what I had lost and all the traditions that would no longer be the same, that I lost my joy.

I knew I had to turn my focus to God in order to carry on the Christmas traditions that brought my mother such joy. She would want this! A Bible verse that helped me get through the first year after she passed, and still to this day, is -- "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." 1 Thessalonians 5:18. There are so many blessings that I thank God for, and I have learned to find joy in all those blessings. I learned to find joy in the memories that I had of my mother and the happiness she shared with all the people she met; especially her family during the Christmas season!

So why do I decorate so early now for Christmas and begin spreading the joy of Christmas? Because I find a sense of peace, joy, and calmness, and I feel a little bit closer to my mom. Joy is all around you, so try to embrace it by opening your eyes, heart, and your arms to Jesus!

Angie Rath



DECEMBER 3

Love

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

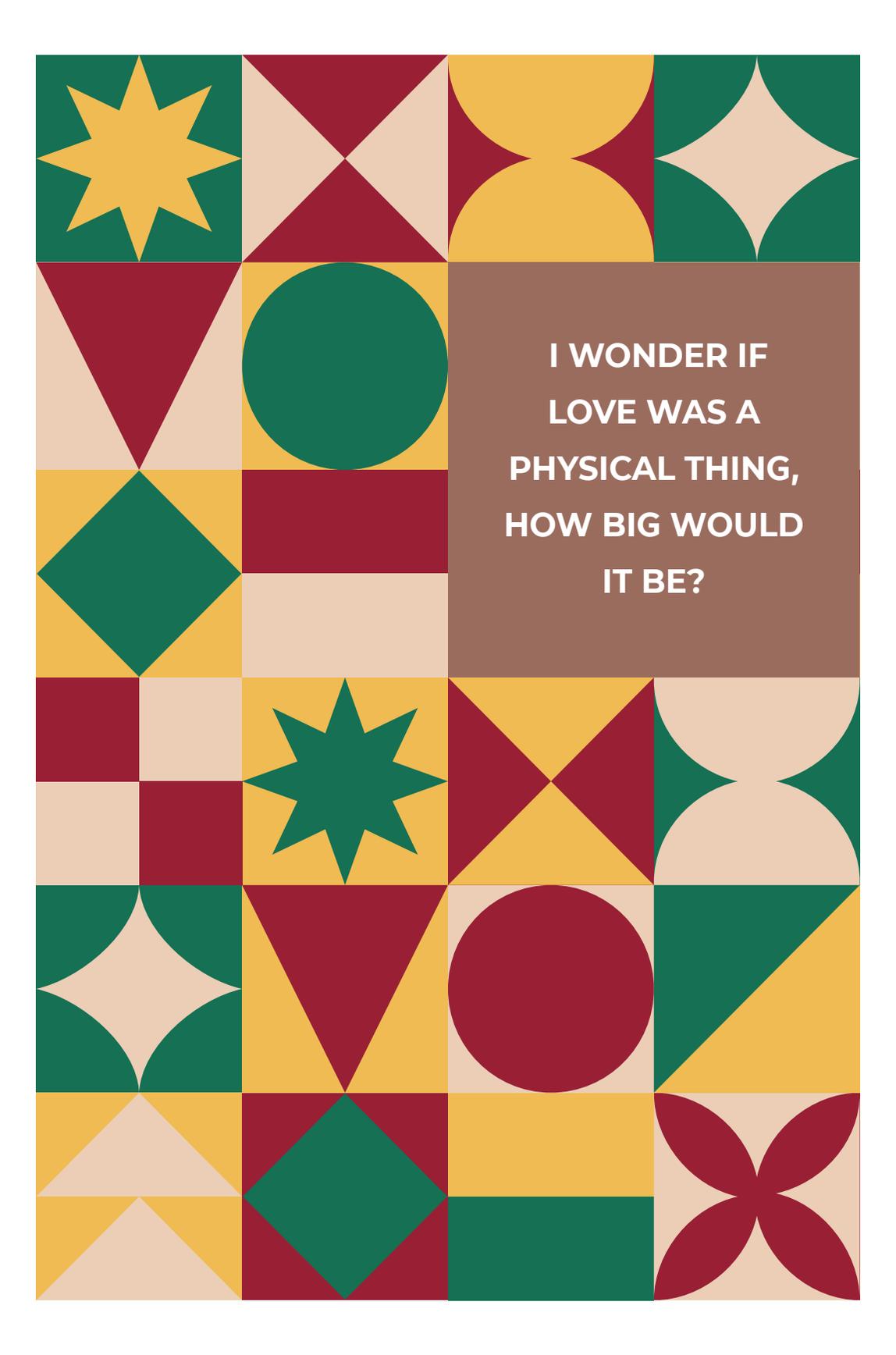
I experience love in many ways. Through quality time with my favorite people, through words of affirmation from my dear coworkers, through acts of service from my roommates when they take out all of our recycling, through physical touch when I hug a friend I haven't seen in awhile. Though I rarely experience love through receiving gifts. I think over time I have become numb to the weight of what it means to receive a gift.

Nowadays I try to consider the effort a gift giver puts into brainstorming the perfect gift for me. How they probably searched and searched for something suitable enough to communicate the care they have for me. And throughout my inner monologue about my gift giver, I remember the greatest gift that's ever existed.

How sweet and kind is our God. That our deserved outcome of sin is death, yet Jesus came and humbled Himself to receive that most gruesome death. He overcame this death, and promised life with us forever. We get to hang out with God, forever. We get to experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And even during our time here in the in between, God is kind and provides us with the Holy Spirit to experience these things NOW. Here and now we have access to the power in which these things are perfectly possible.

What a gift. I wonder if love was a physical thing, how big it would be?

Calli Tystahl



**I WONDER IF
LOVE WAS A
PHYSICAL THING,
HOW BIG WOULD
IT BE?**



DECEMBER 4

Peace

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

He did it again. When I wasn't sure how I was going to get through the day before me, with the stressful conflict that had been looming over me and invading my thoughts day after day, God gave me Scripture that instantly made me smile and feel that sense of calm that only comes from the peace of God.

The situation my husband and I were in the middle of involved a family member, and those are the hardest. They tear us apart inside and rob us of the peace God wants us to have. It was sabotaging my efforts to prepare for grandsons coming to visit because any quiet moment caused my thoughts to run rampant and rehash all that had happened. I replayed conversations and tried to imagine how this would work itself out.

I had reread Scripture and all God's promises. I had reminded myself to stay in the day, because today has enough problems of its own, (Matthew 6:34). I know in my head God doesn't want me obsessing about tomorrow, but that is easier said than done. I told myself God already knows how this situation will turn out, and I thanked Him in advance for what I know as truth; He works all things to the good of those who love Him, (Romans 8:28). Sadly, this wasn't the first conflict with this person, so why was this happening again?

God had showed me through Scripture earlier in the week, that I had to give all negative thoughts over to the Spirit. I tried to fix my thoughts on what is true, honorable, and right, pure, lovely and admirable as I thought about the person who was causing me so much stress, (Philippians 4: 8), so why was I still all knotted up inside?



I had turned it over to God last night and slept better than I thought possible, but here I am again in my quiet morning time with God, letting the situation invade my thoughts. That's when God put Philippians 4:4-9 in front of me as suggested scripture for my devotion that day in New Morning Mercies, by Paul David Tripp, (A devotional I highly recommend). For years I have coveted my morning quiet time with the Lord, and He never fails to supply me with the Scripture I need to tackle whatever is before me that day. The current issue we were dealing with was a deeply rooted one, and to God's credit, He had been sending me many Scripture verses on a daily basis; but the situation had intensified, and so had my inability to keep it out of my thoughts.

Today, though, when I read these familiar verses from Philippians 4, I instantly felt it; that peace that goes beyond understanding. I knew I needed to write about it. I will mention here I committed to Mallory I would write something for this year's Advent Devotional, but today was the deadline and I had nothing. I now know God had His own plan. He knew I had to experience this deep conflict in order to experience His peace in a whole new way. Writing this devotion today was the last thing I thought would happen, but I am praying it will help others who are struggling as I have been. God's peace is amazing! It binds our wounds, clears our thoughts, and sustains us through whatever we are going through.

God is so good! Never, ever buy into Satan's lies that God is absent from your struggles or doesn't care. He does care and He loves us more than any human is capable. Sometimes, we must walk through the deep valley to appreciate the peace that comes from clinging to His hand that will never let go. If something is robbing you of your joy, and causing you to doubt God's love, read Philippians 4:4-9, and rejoice! Jesus humbled Himself and came to this earth as a baby, which we celebrate every year at Christmas. He lived and died and rose again to redeem us and declare victory over Satan. And He is coming again soon! Then we will experience peace and joy beyond anything we can imagine.

Lord, thank you for your peace that exceeds all understanding.

Becky McBurney



DECEMBER 5

Hope

Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin. (Zechariah 4:10)

As we prepare to close out a difficult year in 2022, I have come to realize more than ever all the small things that have become bigger for me. From eating in a restaurant to seeing a movie, to physically being able to hug or shake hands with a friend, I no longer discount the small aspects of life that were once so accessible. The past two and a half years have helped me to recognize those small things, and the large impact they can have in my life.

I can take note of the small things. I can rejoice and be grateful for food to eat, for a warm, comfortable place to rest my feet and my head at night, or simply for the breath in my lungs. I can also realize that these small little things I often did not even notice are in fact blessings!

I was reading some of the materials I had saved from the year I was diagnosed with cancer back in 2009. I vividly recall the loss of one of my favorite baseball personalities, Sparky Anderson back in 2010 shortly after completing my treatments. The baseball world lost one of its most prized possessions the day he passed. Sparky Anderson was the prototypical manager for me. He was a no nonsense, hard-nosed, motivator that was beloved by fans and his players.

While he was one of the winningest managers of all-time, there were also plenty of losses. That's just how baseball works -- even the absolute best teams lose at least 50 games a year in a 162-game schedule, and for much of his career, Sparky did not handle the losses well. They ate him up inside, gnawed at him and caused him to lose sleep.

Finally, in 1989 with his Detroit Tigers team struggling, Sparky finally broke. Mental and physical exhaustion forced him to spend time away from his team in May of that year.



During that period, he realized that he had to find a way to move on after losses if he wanted to continue managing. He needed something to HOPE for! When he returned to his team, he promised his wife that he would follow the advice she offered him;

"All she asked was for me to give each day a chance. If a bad day comes along, just battle the day. A bad day lasts only 24 hours. If you can get through that bad one, a good day might follow. Take each day one at a time. Then leave it for what it is." - S. Anderson

I took that advice to heart as well when I read it as I was struggling with the mental and physical exhaustion that accompanied my cancer treatments as I spent time away from my family, my students, and staff. It was a good lesson that when we base our happiness on the outcome (which we almost always can't control) rather than the process (which we can control) we leave ourselves vulnerable to problems. Life does not need to be completely perfect for us to find something to smile about. When we appreciate the smaller things, we also can then rejoice even more in the big things when they come. Life deserves more celebration, for both the great and the small.

We all have individual talents and messages in our hearts that can be shared to help bring joy and happiness to others during challenging times. The world is just waiting for us to share them... Many might ask, "So what difference will my work make in encouraging others?" God's answer:

"Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin." (Zech. 4:10)

Dear Heavenly Father, please help us to begin... Just BEGIN! What seems small to each of us might be huge to someone else! Things may not always go our way, or we might not feel well, but together, with YOU we can find a way to battle through it with tomorrow being a fresh start offering us some HOPE taking one day at a time. In Your name we pray. Amen

David Welter



DECEMBER 6

Waiting

The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still. (Exodus 14:14)

Since I can remember, my entire life has revolved around sports. While I was not always the most talented person or the most athletically gifted person, I loved working hard with a group of people around me. After many years of being an average athlete in football, basketball, and baseball, I found my true calling in running track. My senior year of high school I excelled on my team, and was able to be more competitive than I had ever been in any sport. This led me to pursue a collegiate track career where I was able to find success.

As a sprinter, I loved all aspects of running; the practices, the competitions, the competitiveness... all of it. However, there was always one moment that stuck out to me on meet day. To start a sprint race, the starter would have 3 commands...

"Runners to your mark." The athletes go through a routine until they are comfortably resting in their blocks, knees on the ground.

"Set." The sprinters get into the position they want to be in when the race begins, and anticipate the gun.

"Bang." The gun goes off and the race begins.

It was an amazing experience every single time I competed. When the starter instructed us to get into the blocks, I would step over the blocks and not only would my nerves reach an all-time high, but so would my confidence. I knew that I had done everything I needed to do so I could be ready for this moment. With every step I took, I would grow more confident in what was coming next. As my feet would touch the blocks, my mind would go silent and the crowd noise would drown out. As the starter said, "Set," everything melted away. My nerves were gone, my worries were gone, my anxiety was gone, and I was just existing.



As I waited and anticipated the gun going off, nothing else mattered. In this moment of tension where I had prepared myself for what was coming, but did not know when it would arrive, I was at peace. This moment was a gift from God.

Waiting, when done correctly, can be the most peaceful time of our lives. When we sit and wait for God's calling, we can exist in His love and be completely calm in the fact that He is all around us. We can work hard and prepare ourselves as much as we want, but while waiting, we must also exist in the peace that God knows what is next and what is best for us. While I never knew what was going to unfold after the gun went off, I was at complete peace as I sat in my blocks, waiting for what was next.

I encourage you to take a deep breath, look around, and experience the peace that exists around you. As we sit in a chaotic time where the waiting can feel like it is never going to end, take time to find the peace of God. Experience His creation through time with friends, taking a walk through nature, or a warm cup of coffee next to a fire. God is in the chaos, and God is in the waiting.

God, as we go throughout our daily lives waiting and longing for you to move, would you reveal your calm, steady voice and allow us to feel your peace. Amen.

Derrick Akers



DECEMBER 7

Love

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. (Psalm 86:15)

Advent is a wonderful time of year to experience fellowship with others! It is often during these hours spent with friends, colleagues, and family that I experience God's love most fully.

Before serving on the staff of a synod, I used to be a parish pastor in a small town in Minnesota. I clearly remember one Advent evening in which I was invited to spend an evening with the congregation's oldest member, his cousin, and his daughter. There was snow on the ground and a bright shining moon. The family lived a little ways out in the country, and the house was decorated beautifully for the season. They were of Norwegian heritage, and we spent the night eating delicious foods I'd never had before, including sweets like rommegrot (Norwegian cream pudding). Love filled the room and overflowed our hearts; love for God, for one another, and the gift of our time together.

All too often, the pace of the holidays can lead us all to rush and hurry. But that night was at a much slower pace. It was an evening of conversation and story-telling over endless mugs of decaf coffee. Advent is a time of preparation, and in addition to spiritual practices like prayer and worship, we can also get ready for the joy of Jesus' birth by slowing down and spending meaningful time with other people. God's love is gracious, steadfast and faithful; may you experience that love through a variety of pathways this special season!

Merciful Creator, your love is steadfast, and we encounter it in so many ways. As we get ready for Christmas, remind us to slow down and savor the fellowship and love of the people in our lives. Remind us that we've all been created in your image, help us to see your reflection in all those whom we encounter. Amen.

Emily Carson



**GOD'S LOVE
IS GRACIOUS,
STEADFAST,
AND FAITHFUL.**



DECEMBER 8

Peace

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends human understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 4:6-7)*

Late on an April evening in 1988, I was on a flight from Chicago to Waterloo. We were approximately over Dubuque when suddenly I heard a loud metallic sound, saw sparks flying from an engine, felt the plane lurch, and soon could smell jet fuel. As I sat in disbelief, the pilot informed us that we had lost an engine and would be flying and then, hopefully landing on just the one remaining engine. I could hardly find words to pray to God; but as Romans 8:26 says, the Spirit prays for us / me when we don't know what to say. I remember the sense of calm and composure that I felt in the midst of my fear, knowing that "whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8).

When we reached Waterloo, the pilot managed a safe landing as far as possible – from the terminal and with fire trucks standing nearby! I was grateful to him and to God for this outcome (particularly since Helen and I were to celebrate our 25th anniversary at a public reception that very next day), but also for His presence when the outcome was still in doubt!

When we think of peace, we sometimes picture an idyllic time, free of all cares and concerns. But God's peace is even more precious when it comes in the midst of danger and fear. The danger and fear may remain, and the outcome may not always be the one we would have chosen, but we know that God is our refuge in the midst of any circumstance or situation.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your loving presence in all times of our lives. Comfort our souls and give us peace.

David Duncan



**GOD IS OUR
REFUGE IN THE
MIDST OF ANY
CIRCUMSTANCE.**



DECEMBER 9

Peace

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. (Ephesians 4:29)

As I write this, it's currently July 14th, and we are in the dog days of summer. While I could be sitting out on my patio watching beautiful July sunsets, I typically find myself enjoying the air-conditioning, from my comfy sofa, scrolling through my Facebook news-feed. While scrolling, I look at everyone's pool parties with friends, glamorous vacations, more pool parties with friends, baseball games, more pool parties with friends, local hometown days, and MORE pool parties with friends. And that is when it hit me. After about the 10th picture of pool parties with friends, I realized I was not at peace on social media. I had nothing to be envious about. I too participated in pool parties with friends. My summer, along with my husband and kids, was being filled with vacations, friends, and summertime fun. BUT, why did it feel like everyone else was having more pool parties than me?

It's not anything new. Books and studies have been written on the impacts social media has on our lives. But it was in the pool party moments, during the dog days of summer, that I had to come to peace with social media in my life. That's when I started reflecting on two questions.

1. How do I find inner peace when spending time on social media?
2. When I share things on social media, could someone in my audience feel discontent with their life?

Let me tackle question one first. Some sources show that more than 4.6 billion users are on social media around the world. As long as I am using social media, there will be messages presented that make me question who I am and where I stand.



This is where I need God. First, I need to be reminded that God made me for a purpose and in His image. He also blessed me with family and friends who lift me up and bring me great joy and peace. Therefore, if I truly find gratitude for the life He has given me, I will have the strength to find the inner peace to manage the messages the world sends me. This is hard work, and some days I'm better at it than others. It takes discipline and a lot of leaning into God daily.

Second, what messages do I give my audience on the social media platform? I too share moments in my life of vacations, sporting events, and parties. I love to share exciting moments in my life with my family and friends. However, do I need to reevaluate the message I'm giving? Does my message come across as bragging or self-indulging? Could I start changing the culture of my personal social media account by taking more time to be more intentional about what message I send to my friends? This Advent season, I invite you to practice peace on social media. Take time to be in prayer with God to determine ways in which you can find peace in the messages you receive from the world, as well as ways in which you can promote peace to those you influence.

Dear God, thank you for making us in Your image, and giving us our own unique personalities and life. Help us to be equipped with your word so we may be at peace with our own lives, and not be set back by the messages this world sends us. Help us use our words and social media platforms to be a light, rather than send messages of doubt to others. Amen.

Mallory Jensen



DECEMBER 10

Waiting

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. (John 13:34)

Almost three years ago now, our marriage suffered a rough season. My husband (Ben) started suffering from extreme physical anxiety and panic attacks a few years earlier. His medication was no longer effective, which resulted in him not being able to help out as much with our daughter, hold a job, or do housework. The different medications his psychologist gave him caused a range of personality changes; which scared me.

For about 6 months, I was not in my Bible regularly and was instead expressing to those around me my frustrations and struggles: working full time, getting our daughter to and from daycare, and all the housework. Those that I talked to repeatedly expressed how I "deserved better", so I secretly started divorce papers and splitting funds. Ben could tell something was off because I was pulling away more and more. By the end of the week I had pushed him away enough that he left for his parent's house. The next day I got the locks changed. My heart was far from God's wishes for our family, I was set on "deserving better".

My wonderful mother-in-law suggested we try marriage counseling and I agreed to go to a few sessions. The first session I was absolutely set on having him sign the papers, but by the end of the session I felt a tug at my heart that said, "Wait". Those I was allowing to guide my decisions, told me that I was just scared of how he would react, challenge accepted! So the next session I was once again on a single minded agenda to have him sign the divorce papers, yet once again by the end I felt that tug that said, "Wait".



Then I started biblical counseling through the Harbor Center of Biblical Counseling virtually, which is the best decision I could have made. I was reminded that our marriage/relationship wasn't about all I do, or all he does (or doesn't) do: we are to love others just as God first loved us! I allowed God to soften my heart again toward Ben, and in a little less than 3 months he was back home. It took a lot of time and effort, on both of our parts, to mend our relationship, trust God fully, and trust each other again.

Thank you Lord, for reminding us that we are to love one another as you first loved us, in our own homes and everyone we come in contact with. Amen.

Hollie Kahler



DECEMBER 11

Hope

*Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.
(Romans 12:12)*

For as long as I can remember I have always known what I wanted to do when I got older-I wanted to be a teacher and the younger the age the better. Everything I hoped for came to fruition and this fall, I will be entering my 35th year in education, with 30 of those spent teaching kindergarten.

I honestly love what I do. Seeing those light bulbs go off when my kids understand a concept makes my heart light up and smile. However, I must admit that the last few years have been extremely hard, so hard that I began feeling stuck. I wasn't sure that I was even making a difference any longer. I took this as a signal that maybe it was time for me to look for a change. Taking a leap of faith and hoping that I was making the correct decision for not only me, but for my students as well, I requested a job transfer. This was not only scary but hard thinking about the possibility of leaving a grade level that I loved.

As I hoped and prayed for this possible new chapter of my life to happen, I learned that I needed to be patient and that for me is never very easy! My answer took way too long (I said I wasn't patient) and I was quickly losing hope. At my lowest point this spring I always seemed to come back to this verse because it gave me hope, the hope to continue to pray and be patient.

Even when I had a difficult time being patient I somehow knew that having hope in our Lord I would be where He needed me to be. By having this hope and being constant in prayer I am happy to share that this fall I will be teaching first grade, and best of all I will be teaching in the same building as my sister. My hope is that I can touch each of my new students' lives at this new level. The following quote is something we all need to remember because hope no matter how long we need to wait for IS a good thing.



"Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies." - Andy Dufresne from *Shawshank Redemption*

Good and Gracious God, Thank you for the gift of hope. We pray for all those who are patiently waiting, or feel stuck, that they can find peace this Christmas season.

Janelle Kimpston



DECEMBER 12

Hope

*Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord.
(Psalm 31:24)*

I have always lived my life based on hope and faith! Without these two strong beliefs, I don't know where I would be today.

In my 64 years of life, there have been many occasions, too many to count, where I could have lost all hope and felt totally alone. My family has been through job losses, marriage woes, transfers to different cities and states, miscarriages, cancer, heart disease, deaths (young & old), and throughout all of these life changes and tragedies, I have had to hold on to hope, and I have held onto my faith that "God has this". I feel like hope and faith could be one in the same, and really, it all comes down to my "trust" in God. I always knew there was a higher power, and He would get me through anything as long as I believed.

My trust/hope in God was instilled in me at a very young age. I was brought up in the Methodist Church in Del Rio, Texas. I learned very early on, that life will throw you some curves, but God is steady; He will see you through. My mother had a very strong faith and she was a remarkable woman. I learned through her, that no matter how bad life can get at times, if you have hope that "tomorrow is a brighter day", you can make it through. There were many times when I could not comprehend how my mother could manage and get through some of the challenges that faced her.

My mother had come from England at the age 29 to marry my father in Texas. She left her home and a very close family of 11 siblings, and traveled to a foreign land. She left everything that was familiar to her behind. The life she and my father made was not easy – in fact, far from it. I could not understand how she did not pack her bags and leave her life in Texas and go home to her English family. But throughout, she remained loyal and



faithful and she instilled in her children that “her family of four children and her husband” came first, and through her faith in God, she was always hopeful. She was the most optimistic person I’ve ever known and I owe many of the values and beliefs I have today to her! I am always hopeful for a brighter tomorrow and I have faith that God will see me through any challenge that comes my way.

When everyone and everything around you lets you down, God remains steady. The verse I try to live by and it reminds me of my mother is Romans 12:12-13.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Julia Voss



DECEMBER 13

Joy

*And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.
(Nehemiah 8:10)*

One of the most joyful people I ever knew was my Great Aunt Maggie. She was my paternal grandmother's sister and best friend; and her husband, Francis, died the year I was born. So, I only ever knew her to live all alone in a tiny house just down the street from our church.

When she was young, Aunt Maggie contracted polio, which resulted in her needing to wear heavy braces on both of her legs and to be confined to a wheelchair. She was in a lot of pain, but she never showed it. She was lonely being stuck in her home, but no one would have ever guessed. Her circumstances were difficult, and it would have been easy for her to be grieved. But she wasn't. Instead, the joy of the Lord was her strength.

Every Sunday, we would visit her after church. Her kitchen was filled with good smells and even more laughter. She was cheerfully hospitable, and her best treat was "jello cake", which she made by poking holes in a cake with the handle of her mixing spoon after it had baked. Then, she'd prepare red jello, cool it slightly, and pour it all over the cake. Finally, she topped it with homemade whipped cream. It was no wonder she had a crowd at her house every Sunday!

At Christmastime, Aunt Maggie shared her joy by sending Francis out to be Santa to the farm kids. She'd get him all dressed up in the red suit, load his bag with peanut butter cups, and send him on his way – joyful as can be – even if this meant she was alone for hours every Christmas morning. When Francis died, she did the same with her son, Norman – who my brothers and I knew as Santa. As little kids, we were pretty sure that Santa didn't have a sleigh and reindeer. Instead, he drove an old green Ford pickup truck.



Aunt Maggie's joy was not dependent upon her circumstances. It came from knowing that Jesus was her Savior. And we can find unceasing joy in that same wonderful truth.

Dear Father in Heaven, help us to know that true joy in any circumstance comes from your loving Son. May Your joy be our strength. Amen.

Laura Sohl-Cryer



DECEMBER 14

Joy

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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11)

Joy just must be expressed. That was my experience.

It was a few minutes after mid-night, December 6, 1974, that our son, Matthew, arrived into this world and into our lives. He was our first child and my parents first grandchild. My heart was overflowing with joy. It took a couple of hours for Barb to get back to her room and for all the activity to settle down. I didn't care if it was three in the morning. I got on the phone and called my parents with the good news. I didn't think they would mind being awakened. I just had to share our joy.

Hope is the anticipation that something good will happen. Joy is what we experience when our hope is realized. This certainly was the experience of Barb and me. The birth of Matthew was the fulfillment of a shared hope. We were filled with joy. Our joy had to be shared.

During one's lifetime, we have many hopes. We experience joy when they are met and in turn are compelled to share our joy. Reflect on the following and add some of your own.

- You get a perfect score on a difficult test
- You are accepted at a prestigious university
- You marry a girl or guy of your dreams
- You get a promotion to a job position you only imagined
- Your chemotherapy worked and you are declared cancer free

There are some hopes for which only God can provide the solution. The most basic of these is our need to be reconciled to God. The joy that is ours when we behold God's answer was also accomplished by a birth – the birth of Jesus.



The hymn-writer says of the place of Jesus' birth, "The hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight." The angel put it this way, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord..." Luke 2:10-11

We receive God's answer to our deepest hope through faith. The hymn-writer continues:

"How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming; but, in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in."
(#279, ELW)

The joy produced by the birth of Jesus and the salvation he accomplished on our behalf also must be expressed. It is God's work in us. C. S. Lewis, the atheist turned Christian apologist after years of running away from God, entitled the story of his conversion, "Surprised by Joy." The same joy compels us and all believers to express our joy too by how we live and the verbal witness we give. May this be the experience of us all.

Heavenly Father, Thank You for turning our hopes into joy. We pray that you use our joy to spread the good news to others.

Pastor Bob Ericson



DECEMBER 15

Hope

Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me. (Revelation 3:20)

In this Christmas season, Dorothea and I will be welcoming guests into our home and lives. Those on our guest list include my father; our children, spouses and grandchildren; neighbors and friends; even strangers for whom we plan on reaching out to care for in their hour of need. Another guest who will be "knocking on our door" is Jesus, who in his grace and mercy desires to come into our lives and bless us with God's eternal gifts of renewed faith, hope, forgiveness, salvation and hope. Who is this guest who desires to abide with us? Jesus is:

Good news of great joy for all people. Unto you is born The Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10)

You shall name him Jesus, for He will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21)

He shall be known as Emmanuel, which means "God is with us". (Matthew 1:23)

He came to be the light that shines in the darkness, that the darkness cannot overcome. (John 1:5)

He will be for all who receive him 'wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace...from this time forth and forevermore. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

We know that our family, neighbors, friends and the strangers we encounter will be a blessing as they come knocking and are welcomed into our home and lives. As Jesus comes to us as God's heavenly guest, I pray that you join Dorothea and I in welcoming Him in. Jesus desires to eat and abide with us, bringing with him the food from God that endures forever. The blessing of Jesus' life, light, hope and salvation is not limited.

Lord Jesus be our Guest and let your gifts be blessed. AMEN

Pastor Denny



**THE BLESSINGS
OF JESUS
ARE NOT
LIMITED**



DECEMBER 16

Hope

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:31)

Hope is a funny thing. Like the sighting of a high flying eagle, sometimes hope can be alluring, it can be all we see and all we have to hold on to. Sometimes hope has a name that finds comfort that finds safety; while other times hope slips, losing its clothes, its body, being stripped to bareness and solitude.

I love to golf, in fact nothing beats a golf course on a beautiful Iowa night. For those that love to admire God's touch of pure nature, I think a golf course ranks high next to any body of water or sinking sunset. The game of golf itself is infamous for its challenging demeanor and testy tempormisms.

"7 Iron or 8?" asked my friend as he sipped from his water bottle.

7 Iron was the club. With a little wind into our face and a tucked pin at the back of the green, today's Hole 8 was playing a tad long. My friend went first, I was second.

"Crud" he exclaimed, as we both eyed his grim ball-flight.

Trying to not repeat his mistake I pushed my small tee into the ground and took a couple practice swings before lining up my shot. I pulled both arms back and swung through the ball, sending it straight on line to the white pin that stuck in the ground roughly 151 yards away. Now as this ball soared in the air, I was thinking the same thing that you are now. A hole in one?

The ball crashed down landing a foot from the pin and rolling straight at it. Hope was at an all time high.

Until my Srixon golf ball lipped out of the hole leaving me speechless a hundred yards away.



See many times in life we can do nothing except hope and pray, putting our life in the Father's hands. For me it's always been God that provides comfort and hope. Whether reading scripture or talking to God, He is there and He is waiting. Waiting to push us through the challenges that stand in front of efficacious goals and opportunities. It's the pursuance of living through God that we can see how His work impacts our journey. Yes... Some days we hook it in the water, or if you're like me, slice it in the trees. But God is that one good drive, that one good putt that brings us back to the first tee hoping, ready to pursue another day in his name.

Lord, as we get closer to Christmas, hope and excitement is upon us. During this time, we ask for You to bring us peace and joy as we await Christmas Day.

Rhett Peters



DECEMBER 17

Joy

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

I think a common misconception has developed in regard to what joy is. Upon doing a base level amount of research, you would discover that joy can be defined as a feeling of great pleasure and happiness. This definition provides a straightforward answer, but also provokes a lot of questions, such as;

- What degree of happiness must be obtained to achieve joy?
- In what ways does joy transpire?
- When you experience joy are you always aware?
- Should we actively be seeking joy?
- Is there a difference between being joyful or simply reaching a level of contentment?

Many of these questions are often pondered, especially in our ever-changing culture where the focus of most industries is instant-gratification. Whether it's the food we prefer to eat, the entertainment and media we consume, or even the clothes we fashion ourselves with – humans crave the dopamine-rushes that these everyday decisions produce. These exact things have become the sources of satisfaction for many of us. And, it's the increased access to these "fraudulent pleasures" that are causing this misconception of joy. Which causes us to face a much heavier question; as generations go by, are we going to need more and more, in order to obtain this idea of joy?

I, personally, don't think so.

Joy is a lot like faith, and the power of Jesus's love. It is easy for us to try and chase it, and attempt to produce it for yourselves. In reality joy is seeking you. It comes in small doses.



If you don't look close enough, you might miss it. But once you realize it's there, you can feel its power embrace you. Just like Jesus's love, it's always there, you just have to accept it.

For me, I recognize that my most joyful moments are when I'm interacting with loved ones. I experience joy whenever I talk to my mom on the phone, or when I make my dad laugh. I feel joyful every time I get to go run with my friends, or talk about movies with my girlfriend. I can even recognize joy sometimes when I'm by myself writing, cooking, or cleaning.

Joy is poetic – sometimes it whispers and sometimes it shouts. Either way, all you have to do is listen. I encourage everyone to refrain from "joy-chasing", and allow God's beautiful miracles to appear naturally. I believe embracing these moments is not only life changing, but it's a behavior that is contagious. When you begin to appreciate and acknowledge the small joyous things in your everyday life, you might influence your family, then your friends, it might grow throughout your community, possibly the city, and then maybe (just maybe) we can change the world. Jesus's love is stronger than we could ever comprehend, and we are blessed to be the children of God. Now, that is something to be joyful about!

Dear God, we thank you for joy, especially the joy when we are with loved ones. Help us this season to enjoy our time with these people, and enjoy our time celebrating your birth.

Sam Madson



DECEMBER 18

Hope

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1: 3-4)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

As The Apostle Paul pointed out to the Corinthian Church, God provides each one of us with comfort and mercies in our affliction. I've had many examples of this in my own life.

In March 2014, my husband was diagnosed with cancer. I was so angry thinking why us, he's too young. And I'm too young to be a widow. I lived with anger and depression for quite some time. But as we went through the many appointments, I started to slowly see God's handy work in every aspect of our life.

God's gifts of mercy in our affliction:

Before his diagnosis we had a generic referral to see an orthopedic surgeon in Iowa City. After an inconclusive biopsy, the doctor advised surgery was still the best option. During the first post-op checkup we were told it was in fact cancer, but The Father of all mercies had it all worked out in advance. Of all doctors my husband could have been sent to, we were sent to that orthopedic surgeon who was one of only 40 doctors in the world that knew how to treat his cancer. What an absolute miracle! After some time of his clear diagnosis, I lost that connection to God. But our story was still being written.



Fast forward a few years later. I would be facing my own health crisis that took me to rock bottom. To say I had come to the end of my rope was a complete understatement. I felt deserted by doctors, family, and friends. There I was pleading for something, someone to help me because I knew otherwise my family's life would be forever changed due to my own rash decisions. One exceptionally rough day after work on my drive home, I screamed at God telling him how angry I was to have had been dealt these cards and all I had tried had failed and He was it. If I was to be saved He better work fast. The next day He answered me, He met me in my affliction. God has brought me from the darkness to the light. That moment of his comfort brought my family to trust in Him and give our lives to Him. I now have the chance to tell others of His mercy because he shown me mercy

God, thank you for your endless love and patience for those who have yet to hear your voice and see your light. Thank you for leaving the 99 to rescue the one. Father I pray that all those who are afflicted are healed and allow themselves to receive your love and mercy. Father thank you for every moment of this life that you so selflessly knitted together.

Tasha Rogers



DECEMBER 19

Love

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. (Ephesians 2:13-14)

I grew up in a household where my dad was the rule maker. He set the rules, but they didn't apply to him. My dad said that we needed to go to church, Sunday school, and confirmation. Mom took us and Dad, for the most part, stayed home.

My response to his rule making was to rebel. I rebelled against my dad, and God's authority was collateral damage in that defiance. In my mind, the only people who needed church, and the Bible, were people who were dying, and at 18 I was not dying. I need to thank the Lord, for allowing me to live through my rebellious years so that I could get my act together and realize that I was dying and needed Jesus through the church.

When I look back at Sunday school and Confirmation, I am glad my dad made me go. But the thing I still don't understand is why he thought he did not need to. Years later I got married, had children, and was now in a position to make some rules. I realized I had a decision to make. Am I going to follow my dad's rules or set a different example? I wanted my children to go to church, Sunday school and Confirmation. I didn't think about them having a relationship with God because I didn't know anything about that. I decided that my children needed to do these things, BUT so did I. From that point I needed to get my act together and apply the rules to myself.

Now, I believe the Bible allows us to feel better about dying, and it surely does that, because in the Bible we learn that in knowing Jesus there is peace in the here and now and also in our dying and the life to come, with Jesus.



Lord, as we look forward to your coming. We ask that you would fill our mind with your knowledge of truth and grace, and as we journey through this life and look forward to the life within your kingdom, which we know surpasses all of our imagination, help us to know the peace that you give, and pass that peace on to those around us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Vern Oltrogge



DECEMBER 20

Love

The Greatest Commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these. (Mark 12:30-31)

For the longest time, I have heard these verses, and Mark 12:30 is the one that is so easy to understand, in my mind. I mean, Love God, Love Jesus. Done. Easy. I also thought I knew and understood Mark 12:31 with the same confidence: I believed it was most definitely the same thing as, "Do unto others as you would like done unto you." The good ol' Golden Rule. Have you heard it?

Some would argue possibly that they are one in the same, but as I've thought more and more about it as I was asked to write this devotional, I don't know if that's true or that I completely agree. I don't know if I always felt that way and the number one reason why: The Golden Rule never mentions Love.

In the Bible, references to "Loving your neighbor as yourself" is repeated around 8 times, depending on translations. It's so important to God that he felt it needed to be placed in our hands 8 separate times in the Bible. But why? I believe it's because Love is not a feeling; it's a CHOICE. And He expects us to make those choices for others, just like we should for ourselves, not because it's morally right, but because our Love for God and trust in Him should shine through our actions for others, as well as how we treat ourselves.

It's a choice we make every single day to get up and fuel our bodies. We choose if we are going to drink that coffee or that yummy cake; we choose to brush our teeth and take a shower. We choose to Love our bodies and take care of them, as much or as little as we want, and we receive back to our bodies what we give them.



We choose to pay for a stranger's coffee, and we choose to donate to charity. We choose to push someone else's cart into Hy-Vee from the parking lot, and we choose to hold open the door for the pregnant mom holding a toddler's hand out of the doctors' office. Those are small acts of Love for our Neighbors that we don't often think of, but are definitely small acts of Love that add up and matter, not as an act to try to earn our way into heaven (our salvation into heaven cannot be earned), but as a way of showing our God's love to others through us and through our actions.

In this Christmas season, I hope you choose to Love yourself, just as much as you love your neighbor. I hope if you decide to buy your nephew the latest and greatest video game that costs \$400, I hope you also say YES to buying yourself that \$5 book you've wanted to read for a while. I hope when you notice that your spouse made you an extra pot of coffee this morning, I hope you choose to clean up the dishes from last night's dinner, because not only do you love your spouse, but you also love the home you've created together. I hope that you do all of those things with your heart set on being the hands and feet of Christ.

For just this season, and maybe longer, I hope you Love Yourself Like You Love your Neighbor.

Heavenly Father, We ask that you give us the heart to love one another this Christmas season. Sometimes the choice is hard, but give us the strength to love others and ourselves. Amen.

Terri Packard



DECEMBER 21

Love

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another:
Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.
(John 13:34)*

When I was young, my mom shared some wisdom about what it takes to make a marriage successful. Surprisingly to me, the word love did not stand alone; the phrase sacrificial love was how she referred to what was required for lasting relationships. She explained that when you really love someone, you might be asked to surrender your own needs and desires to ensure that your spouse, whether deserving or not, is living the best life possible with you and with the family you share. Her faith in the Lord had taught her that. Looking back on my parents' 56 years together, I can see how they both lived lives filled with faith and sacrificial love for one another and for our family.

One story from their past serves as a solid example of my mom's undying loyalty and sacrificial love for my dad. In 1954 my parents' neighbors were moving to Nevada because the husband, Mr. C, had been offered a new job. He convinced my dad that he could get him work with good pay if he were willing to move. My mom, knowing that my dad was a hard worker and knowing that he wanted to try this new venture, agreed to go. They sold their home, packed up their blue Pontiac coupe with five kids squeezed in like sardines, and headed West. However, she had much to sacrifice.

First, Mom's parents and three of her siblings lived nearby, so that loving family support would be disrupted, which would be a big loss. My folks also had many friends that they parented alongside and socialized with. They, too, would be part of the cost of moving. Added to that was the fact that my mom was well into her sixth pregnancy at the time – nearly eight months in! Imagine moving to a new state away from family and not knowing who or where you would deliver your baby. That aspect of safekeeping alone would seem too important to give up. But, give it up, they did. Honestly, I don't know if I could have



sacrificed all those positive factors for the unknowns they were headed into. What I do know is that my parents were good communicators, so they must have talked about it. Clearly, they shared a great love for each other and did not want to be separated - no matter what. They also shared a strong faith that God would be walking beside them. So, my mother agreed to surrender family, friends, and a certain amount of security, and they went to Nevada hoping the job prospect would be positive.

My dad was indeed hired, but it turned out to be work which required he wear a mask all day in a hot factory in the desert, which he knew he could not endure. In less than a month, lo and behold, they were headed back to Wisconsin! Upon arriving, my parents had no place to live, requiring them to farm out their brood of kiddos to aunts and uncles for several weeks. Dad hastily found work again. My mother and father were frantic to reunite their family, for sure. The good news was that they quickly found a home, and baby number six, a healthy girl, arrived soon thereafter. That period must have been so very stressful for my mom, but whenever I heard the story, she told it with grace and humor, just shaking her head. My dad, who was always easy going and quiet, would lovingly smile at my mother during the telling of it. The lesson of their story is that it truly does take sacrificial love for relationships to survive and to thrive.

So, what does this love story have to do with Advent? So very much - "For God so loved the world!" God loves us so much that He was willing to send His only Son to walk the Earth and to die for the atonement of our sin, that we might have eternal life with Him. Jesus Christ, a gift of sacrificial love, offers us the grace and love we need but don't deserve. How blessed we are!

Dear Father in Heaven, thank You for the gift of Jesus, our Savior. Thank you for loving us beyond all measure. Please accept our often-imperfect love for You. Amen.

Teresa Martin



DECEMBER 23

Waiting

O Lord, be gracious to us; we wait for you. Be our arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble. (Isaiah 33:2)

In July 2020, we felt like it was a good time to pick up and move, interest rates were low and we needed an additional room because my second son was due the following month. In hind sight, it actually was not the best time to move. We listed our home for what felt like forever, even though it was only two weeks. We were watching our neighbors homes go in 1 or 2 days, while I felt like our home was never going to sell.

A friend of mine told me about burying a replica of St Joseph upside down in the yard to help real estate sell, I told my husband about this and he said "it's only been a week and you're already resorting to witchcraft?" For the record, I did NOT attempt this voodoo but thought it would be funny to share with him.

To say that patience is not a virtue of mine would be an understatement. Waiting for anything always feels 10 times longer than it actually is. We sold our home in less than two weeks and made an offer on our new home. Three weeks later, our buyers backed out. I was four days away from giving birth, which I was already stressed out about because I was attempting a natural birth after c-section. We got the call and I was devastated... two mortgages on the horizon AND I had to start staging my home again. Anxieties were real high.

I got deep in prayer. It seems like we always turn to God in desperation, but He feels our struggles in our waiting. Jesus knew what it was like to be human, including waiting. I told my husband, "I think it's going to be okay, they will change their minds."



A week later, my husband took the dogs for a walk and got the call from our realtor that they were back in. Even though it was only a week, it felt like YEARS. Waiting is so hard, and only true peace can come from Jesus. I learn this every time I'm faced with my impatience (which is often).

Dear Heavenly Father, you are a merciful and loving God of perfect character. You knew true suffering when you came here as Christ and you are always with us in our waiting. I pray that you would give us peace and understanding in all of our unique periods of waiting. You are the God of life, love, and light. Help us to know you and seek you as we wait.

Lisa Arenholz



DECEMBER 22

Love

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear Children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions or truth.
(1 John 3:16-18)*

Three examples from my childhood:

It was a Luther League New Year's Eve party in a neighboring town in far northern North Dakota. When we came home, my sister and I told our parents there was a car in the ditch when we left and it was still there as we came home. My dad got up and out in the cold, found the car in the snow packed ditch and rescued the inebriated man who asked my dad if he'd been celebrating too! Dad didn't tell him.

Mom occasionally left the eight of us kids to clean and do laundry for an impoverished neighbor family, so poor that they didn't even have a dresser or shelves to put the clean clothes away. The mother often has pneumonia in their drafty house, and she needed help.

When a neighbor, whom we scarcely knew, west of town with 7 young children lost everything in a house fire, my parents gave them some cash and the sofa from our living room. It was several months before the sofa was replaced. Fast forward decades: when the mother was dying of cancer, Mom was there even though she was not part of circle of friends.

Love can be inconvenient and time-consuming but Jesus states, love for God and our neighbor are the greatest commandments.

Dear Lord, open my eyes and heart to see the needs before me and make me willing to be your hands and feet. Amen

Helen Duncan



**OPEN MY EYES
AND MY HEART
TO THE NEEDS
BEFORE ME**



DECEMBER 24

Hope

*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.
(Matthew 13:31-32)*

These verses about faith have always held a special place in my heart. It is amazing that a mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. Faith can grow like that. Also, a mustard seed can become a tree, so that birds come and make their nest in its branches. That's what faith can be like when we share and nurture it.

I was blessed to be raised in a Christian home. My parents lived out and modeled their strong faith in many ways: We prayed together daily at mealtimes and were reminded to say our bedtime prayers; we attended Sunday Mass without fail; my siblings and I attended Catholic grade schools, and some went on to Catholic high schools; my father served as an usher, my mother would help with Christmas and youth programs, often baking cookies and casseroles when needed. My husband Ron's parents were people of faith, as well, sharing their love for the Lord in similar ways as my folks. Simple seeds of faith were planted for both of us, and they grew as we grew - bit by bit.

Over the years, Ron and I have attempted to plant seeds with our own children, trying to mirror our parents' sprinklings of faith. Now, as our children's children are learning about Jesus, we pray their faith grows, even if it is as tiny as a mustard seed.

We have hope! For example, about a year ago I was reading a Jesus story to our three-year-old granddaughter Emma. When I finished the book, I whispered in her ear: "Jesus loves you so much, sweet girl!"



Emma nodded and softly replied, "Nana, I gave my heart away." Immediately, I understood that her heart knows Jesus. People in her life had been planting seeds and cultivating her faith, and that faith had taken root. How thankful I was to know this!

My hope and prayers are that all those tiny mustard seeds of faith we share with others, whether family, friends, or strangers, will bloom and grow into beautiful and strong anchors of faith, hope, and love for Jesus.

Dear Lord, thank you for loving us enough to plant seeds of faith in our lives. Thank you for the hope that faith brings. Help us to give our hearts away – TO You- and to plant more seeds FOR You. Amen.

Teresa Martin



DECEMBER 25

Christmas Day

God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Christmas is an exciting day for me. For those of you who know me well, you know that I love everything about planning for this day. However, you may not be aware of the heaviness I feel once Christmas has arrived. For many years I've tried to pinpoint that feeling I have when Christmas is suddenly here. Is it all the planning that came to a crashing halt? Is it the reality of the amount of money I did or did not spend? Is it the thought that January is a few days away and I know what the next few months will bring? While I think all these things play into my heaviness, I think it's something more for me.

Christmas brings back a plethora of memories. I reminisce about the excitement I felt as a kid, and I also mourn how quickly another year has passed. 2022 has been a year of change. On a personal note, I experienced the reality of losing a family member, and walking through the grief process with my husband. And at Nazareth, we've been walking through many changes including the departure of our senior pastor in the fall.

However, even in both of these situations that may feel uncomfortable, I'm reminded through all the change that God is with us. Sometimes it takes change to see how God does work, and that gives us joy and hope for the promises He has for us in a new year. This Christmas remember that God is good and loves us so much, He sent His Son so we could have eternal life.

As you reflect on your Christmas and past year, I hope the one gift you hold on tightly to is FAITH. God says in Hebrews 11:1, *"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."* While 2023 is a gift we are waiting to open, I pray you have faith that He will do all things for the good, and He is capable of blessings we cannot imagine. Merry Christmas!

Mallory Jensen



**HAVE A
VERY MERRY
CHRISTMAS**

From Nazareth