

PHILLIPS SEMINARY

2018 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



PHILLIPS SEMINARY

This 2018 Advent Devotional is our third time to offer this resource to you and the church. We could tell when planning for Advent was underway because we received several inquiries wondering if we were publishing an Advent devotional again for 2018.

Each phone call or email received brought a smile to my face. Knowing that the devotionals penned by members of the Phillips community are a sought-after resource by you and many others is evidence that the educational ministry taking place at Phillips Theological Seminary is relevant to many.

This Advent season, I pray this devotional speaks hope, peace, joy, and love into your life. I also pray it provides opportunities for you to be challenged in your faith journey and to see a scripture in a new light, while also helping you think about Jesus in different ways. May we approach this special season of the church with the vulnerability of a newborn baby.

This Advent devotional for you and your congregation is just one of the ways Phillips serves to build and sustain a more educated church. Theological education is a lifelong journey and the Phillips community is grateful to make this journey alongside you.

May each day's reading be a gift to you as much as it has been our gift to create it for you.

Blessings for the journey,



Geoffrey Brewster
Senior Director of Stewardship

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 2, 2018

Hope is a Good Thing

Luke 21:25-36

"Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Luke 21:28.

"Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane," Ellis "Red" Redding says to Andy Dufresne in the classic movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. The two friends are having this discussion in prison to which both of them have been sentenced for the better part of their lives with little promise of parole or freedom. To Red, played by Morgan Freeman, the thought of any kind of hope is crazy-making because it allows us to think that the terrible situations in which we find ourselves might not be the last word on our lives. And waiting for that last word, which may never come, can be devastating to our souls.

We might be tempted to see the results of such insanity in this speech by Jesus. First, he recounts the horrors and disasters of the coming of the Human One; then he proclaims these things signs of hope and redemption. "He's hoped for too much," we might shake our heads. "And now his thoughts make no sense."

Yet it may be that Jesus, like Andy, played by Tim Robbins, actually sees things more clearly than we do. For Jesus knows that we do not have to be defined by terror, or anxiety, or worry about things we can't control. We can, however, hold on to our best selves even when the sea roars and the powers of the heavens are shaken. And our best selves know there is more to God's creation than trouble. Our job is not to give into despair but to watch and see and know that God indeed redeems all things.

So, Andy responds, "Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies." Let it be so.

Dr. Nancy Claire Pittman

Interim President and

Stephen J. England Associate Professor of the Practice of Ministry

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 3, 2018

Hope in Anger

Psalm 90

For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. Psalm 90:7-8

“We don’t believe in an angry God, we believe in a loving God.” This statement or some variation of it has been said to me many times within the Christian spaces that I operate. There is this idea that God cannot love and be angry.

But, here’s the thing—have you ever been furious at someone you love? Do you know the immense weight of looking at someone and realizing that your anger would be so much less painful if you could just bring yourself to hate them? It’s the worst feeling that I could imagine and yet it’s one that is not uncommon.

Or, have you ever been on the other side of a loved one’s anger? An anger you knew was justified? Have you felt the need to make up for what you have done deep in your soul? Standing and asking for forgiveness from someone you love can be one of the most humbling and terrifying things you can do.

Anger is one of those emotions that can be scary. I know that I often try to suppress my anger because I, especially as someone who has perceived womanhood, am told that it somehow makes me a lesser person. My anger supposedly takes me away from the holy.

But here’s the thing. For me, there is a kind of hope to be found in the concept of an angry God. God contains multitudes just as I do—and some of the multitudes aren’t pretty or nice, just like some of me is certainly not pretty or nice. And the thing is, I am no less existing in the image of God when my anger comes forth because, God can get angry too.

Liz Ternes

Master of Divinity Student, Stewardship Student Intern

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 4, 2018

A New Family

Revelation 22:12-16

"It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." Revelation 22:16

Belonging to the house of David meant inheriting the promise of blessing for God's beloved people. Jesus, through Joseph, was descended from the royal line of King David, so he offered continuity with the ancient covenant hope of peace, compassion, and justice.

Recently, I hear more and more people becoming intrigued with their ancestry. Through services like DNA testing and ancestry websites people delight in discovering blood relations and reclaiming their historical family ties. Last summer, I attended a family reunion and reconnected with cousins who share the special bond of family connection. As I reflected with my family about our ancestors and our family history, I felt a sense of wholeness and grounding. These people share my blood. Holidays are a good time to prioritize connections with relatives. I hope you take time to connect with family for some quality time during this season of joy.

At the same time, Jesus transforms our concept of family. The blood of the martyrs who poured out their lives for the covenant of peace, compassion, and justice connects all of us beyond our biological kinship groups. We become sisters and brothers; we become a family of faith through Jesus. The pedigrees, privileges, and entitlements of prestigious lineage become irrelevant in the light of the new birth. The division between those whom God has chosen to be a blessing and the rest of creation is dismantled.

May we lean toward the justice, compassion, and right-relation that is our hope in Christ Jesus. May we remain open to the mysterious high and holy calling that is greater than we can embrace today. May wonder expand our hearts and minds.

Dr. Kathleen McCallie

Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program,
Assistant Professor of Ministerial Leadership and Ethics

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 5, 2018

No Sign Needed

Luke 11:29-32

When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah."

Luke 11:29

I need to buy a new cable to charge my smartphone. Because I can, and I don't want to take time to physically go to a store to shop, I open the link to my usual online store and enter the words to find the best cable for my phone. I'm greeted with listings of reviews, stars, thumbs up and thumbs down, searching for a sign that will lead me to the perfect smartphone cable and at a bargain price.

We often look for signs to make a decision, to believe in something, to reject another thought. We make up signs where none exist to support what we already believe or want.

Signs, like those Jesus refers to in this passage, rather than serving as a confirmation of a life of faith, weaken faith. We can't prove faith, no matter how many signs we line up to back our beliefs. As Fred Craddock has written in his commentary on Luke, "Faith is more than response to evidence, and to the one who will not trust, final proof is never quite enough."

At this time in the church calendar we'll hear songs and texts pointing to signs that affirm what we've been taught to believe about Jesus. But at the core of the way of Jesus is a faith that doesn't seek proof or need signs from on high. The faith of Jesus and those who came before us should be enough to allow our continued trust in the promises of the Divine with us.

Kurt Gwartney

Senior Director of Seminary Relations

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 6, 2018

Angels and Parents

Luke 1:68-79

But you too, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give his people knowledge of a salvation in the forgiveness of their sins, through the bowels of the mercy of our God, in which the Daystar from on high will visit us to shine on those who sit in the darkness and the shadow of death to guide our feet in the way of peace. (Translation: Leonard J. Maluf) Luke 1:76-79

I don't know what to say. Speechless. Tongue-tied. The cat got her tongue. What if Gabriel got your tongue? Angels are fearsome creatures indeed. One never knows when Gabriel might show up with some particularly confounding message. Zechariah, soon-to-be father of John the Baptist, was struck by Gabriel's ornery temper when he expressed a moment of disbelief as Gabriel reported Zechariah's impending fatherhood. Wouldn't you? I mean, really.

Fast forward nine months. Zechariah has had time to ponder the extraordinary gift of his son, and his tongue is freed from his divinely effected silence the moment he writes out his son's true, God-given name. Unlike Gabriel, Zechariah seems not to be of a resentful nature.

What follows next is an ecstatic outpouring of praise to God for the historical salvation of Zechariah's people. His focus then orients toward his son, a blessing upon his son: "But you too, child..." The father proclaims his son as an agent of God's salvation, a salvation seen as forgiveness of sins, not escape from enemies, a forgiveness that comes from deep within the guts of God, a mercy akin to a mother's love.

Angels and parents... we give our love to Hope, to life, to the unspeakable. It's hard to keep us quiet when joy and hope infuse us.

Sandy Shapoval

Director of the Library

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 7, 2018

Finding Our Voice

Philippians 1:18b-26

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. Philippians 1:20

In my previous life (meaning before seminary and PhD work), I was a high school speech, debate, and drama teacher in Oklahoma and Texas. The goal of my work was to help students find a way to use their voice, whether creating and speaking their own thoughts or conveying those written by others to an audience. Many times, the work entailed encouraging students to speak louder and with confidence (i.e., boldly).

Paul's words to the Christians of Philippi are also words of encouragement for individuals and the Church to proclaim with boldness the message of Christ by speaking as well as using other corporeal functions associated with the physical body.

Oftentimes we use the analogy of the Church as the body of Christ manifested in the world and we refer to the Church as the hands and feet of Jesus serving the world. However, we frequently fail to remember that a part of Jesus' body was his voice, which he used to speak truth to power on behalf of those marginalized and oppressed by others within the systems and structure of a class-based society and imperial politics. Now, just as then, Christ's voice of love and inclusion need to be heard in the world.

In this Advent season, where we anticipate celebrating the incarnation, we wait on the voice of Christ to enter the world, first as a bold cry of life and then developing into spoken words telling us how to live in the kin-dom as God desires. Hands, feet, and voice are all needed to be disciples of Christ in the world. Hope comes from Paul's words encouraging us (both individually and collectively) to speak with boldness a message of good news that reflects and reveals Christ to others. May we find Christ's voice and speak boldly.

Dr. Lisa D. Barnett

Assistant Professor of the History of Christianity

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 8, 2018

Hope and Trust

Luke 9:1-6

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere. Luke 9:1-6

The words for "hope" in scripture often refer to trust, especially trust in the mercy and gifts of the Divine. The message of universal welcome—God loves all, without exception—is one such gift.

"Don't take anything with you." Jesus sends the apostles into the villages and towns of Judea, preaching universal welcome. He is telling them to not look like pilgrims.

First-century travelers carried a small bag with minimal needs and a staff to clamber along rough pathways or fend off night prowlers. These very necessary things marked one as an outsider—someone from another village, another tribe. As a traveler, one had a right to ask for food and hospitality. One had an expectation of welcome and generosity. And hosts had an obligation to listen with polite assent.

Jesus is telling his followers not to approach any home or village with travel supplies in hand. He is telling them to approach people as a neighbor—someone from nearby. Don't make pilgrimage, the right to claim hospitality, an obvious fact. Talk to others as if they are neighbors so they can hear universal welcome freely, without obligations.

Trust others to listen and respond—to engage and question and debate. If they don't want to talk or they don't like what they hear, don't let their disinterest or dismissal cling and poison the message. Shake off rejection as if it were dust—it's their loss.

Trust universal welcome—the message itself—to do the work.

Anna M. J. Holloway

Alumni Board President (2002)

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 9, 2018

From Peace to Joy

Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. Philippians 1:3-5

Paul uses “joy” in the salutation here as a greeting to the church at Philippi. In fact, he uses it several times within the letter. Paul was in prison when he wrote the letter to the Philippians. I don’t know about you, but I would have a hard time conjuring any joy in Paul’s situation.

Week two of Advent focuses on peace and week three is joy. In your life... does peace bring you joy or does joy bring you peace?

Peace can sometimes elude us because of life circumstances. It can seem that our peace is stolen from us by our preoccupied, negative, ruminating minds. Or is this just me?

There is a peace that can withstand our difficulties if only we will let it. A peace that sits deep within us even when we are overwhelmed with grief and discontent. Hope that Peace still exists even in the darkest times can keep us moving forward instead of being stuck or giving up. This peace is often ignited and conjured up by those that are traveling with us on this journey that have the ability to calm our spirits and sooth our souls.

This Advent season, rejoice in the coming of Jesus and allow peace to reign in your life. Have a peace-filled moment with friends and family and prepare for the joy to come.

Malisa Pierce

Stewardship Director

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 10, 2018

Struggling to Create

Romans 8:22-25

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now...

Romans 8:22

In Romans 8, Paul writes that he is “groaning inwardly” as he waits for adoption and redemption from God. Indeed, he says in verse 22, the whole creation is—and has been—groaning as in the pain of childbirth.

The story in John’s gospel where Jesus tells Nicodemus that salvation requires being “born again” has been interpreted as a requirement for a momentary encounter with the Holy One, after which the newly born one finds that she has been instantaneously changed. This interpretation of “born again” was fostered by men. Men do not give birth and for centuries, they were kept away from birthing rooms. In real life, birth is anything but instantaneous.

Birth is painful, messy, long, and dangerous for both mother and child. And it is hard work not just for the mother, but also for the midwife and those who attend, and for those who love the mother and wait to know that she and the baby she is birthing are alive and safe.

In Advent, we think of Mary of Nazareth, who birthed Jesus. His birth and his life, which she nurtured, are decisive events for those of us who have decided to follow the way of Jesus. Mary’s participation in the work of God was crucial, but God’s work and God’s creation are still ongoing. Humankind continues to participate in the process the Creator began, shaping not just humanity’s future, but also that of the Earth itself. The world God created cannot and will not remain static—creation continues this moment, as people choose to protect or to destroy the planet God placed in our care. How will we participate as God calls us to continue creation this season?

Dr. Ellen Blue

Mouzon Biggs, Jr. Professor of the History of Christianity
and United Methodist Studies

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 11, 2018

Well Connected

Isaiah 19:18-25

On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. Isaiah 19:23

I'm from central Illinois. My hometown, Bloomington, is right in the middle of the state, along Interstate 74. It's the home of the Illinois State University Redbirds. West on 74, about 40 miles from Bloomington, is Peoria, home of the Bradley University Braves. There is an intense rivalry between the two teams, so intense, in fact, it is called the "War on 74." It is a big deal in the area whenever these teams, connected by I-74, competed. They are tough competitors, with a history of pre-game trash talking and very enthusiastic crowds.

Over the years, the games have been fiercely fought, and the teams have taken turns coming out the victors. The "War on 74" has also done some really good things for the communities the teams represent. The games have helped raise money to fight breast cancer and support the Children's Hospital of Illinois and the Boys and Girls Club. When the players stand with community leaders to present the money to local organizations, there is no evidence of rivalry, only joy... the "war" is over. In those moments, I-74 doesn't connect rivals, it connects friends.

This passage from Isaiah gives us a vision of a world in which nations that used to be enemies are connected, not by war and mutual contempt, but by a highway. The highway allows the people from each country to travel back and forth freely without fear. They are connected, though, by much more than a highway; they are connected because they all belong to God.

This is God's desire for the world. Human beings were created for community, not for war, hateful rhetoric, isolation, and division. We were created to love and care for each other. Let this season be a reminder that we belong to each other as we belong to God.

Rev. Kelley Becker

Alumni Board Member (2014)

Pastor, Disciples Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Bartlesville, Oklahoma

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 12, 2018

The Work of Peace May Be Offensive to Some

Luke 7:18-30

When the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'" Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Luke 7:20-23

Notice how Jesus refrains from answering their question. Instead, he describes the work he has been doing and invites John the Baptist's followers to consider the evidence and draw their own conclusions. The implication: actions are much more important than words.

This is a passage I have read many, many times. Yet, this time a new realization occurred to me. By declaring "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" Jesus was indicating that many WERE taking offense at him! According to the text, Jesus has been healing the sick, facilitating wholeness, and easing pain and suffering. But, by empowering the lowly, strengthening the weak, and fortifying the downtrodden, he was offending the powers that be.

Over the centuries, we have sanitized Jesus. We have taken the radical, social-activist Jesus who challenged power structures, defied injustice, and inverted social norms and we have repackaged him as a mild and gentle shepherd who wandered the dusty landscape speaking kind words. Maybe we want an inoffensive Jesus so that we can avoid the situations around us that plead for us to offend the powerful, defy the status quo, challenge abuses, and resist corruption.

This passage reminds us that Jesus was often offensive. If indeed we take seriously the call to emulate Jesus, then don't we have to be willing to offend? The historical, radical, social-activist Jesus calls us to action. In the spirit of Advent, let us take up the work of healing the sick, facilitating wholeness, and easing pain and suffering—even if it means we might be offensive to some.

MaryAnn Morris

Director of Admissions and Student Services

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 13, 2018

Sharing From Our Abundance

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” 2 Corinthians 8:12-15

We don't have to look far to see examples of suffering. Homelessness, food insecurity, the need for affordable healthcare, and the effects of discrimination and loneliness are prevalent among the neighbors in our communities, our nation, and our world.

Acknowledging and responding to the needs of others is at the heart of the teachings of Jesus. At the time of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Christians in Jerusalem were suffering. Experiencing a poverty that most of us will never know, Paul cared deeply about improving their lives. He encouraged the Corinthians to give generously to ease their neighbors' burden. He didn't ask that they bring undue suffering upon themselves, but instead, that they use their abundance to make a difference.

And he encourages each of us to do the same today. While it's true that we all have a finite supply of resources, we live in a nation of abundance. This causes me to do some personal reflection. Do I recognize my abundance? Do I hold on tightly to my surplus for fear of scarcity in my own life? Do I embrace the call to give in ways that relieve physical suffering, share Christ's love and bring hope?

How can I live out Paul's message today? By paying attention to the resources I have and how I use them. By being willing to have less and share more. By doing obvious things like feeding the hungry and donating school supplies but also by serving through organizations that share hope. By spending time with the lonely and homebound, by being a listening presence to someone whose struggle is different from my own, and by praying for their comfort.

God blesses each of us with opportunities to share from our abundance. In doing so, we might be surprised at the cumulative difference we can make in our communities and our world. What do you have to share from your abundance today?

Sharon Russ

Assistant to Stewardship

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 14, 2018

Note to Paul: God Loves Grumpy Givers, Too

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 2 Corinthians 9:7

Advent is a time when we prepare to receive and celebrate yet again the generosity of God in our midst through Jesus, a generosity of love and life.

For many of us, the celebration centers around gift-giving at Christmas. Whether intended or not, this reciprocal activity often leads to a sense of obligation and competition. Whose gift is best? Most expensive? Most personal? Most appreciated by the recipient? Gifts can result in satisfaction or disappointment. Gift-giving can feel like a burden or a joy, or both.

In chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians, Paul talks straightforwardly to a gentile congregation about a collection he and Titus are taking up for Christians in need in Jerusalem. Several churches, including the one in Corinth, have already committed themselves to contribute.

As motivation, Paul creates a sort of competition between Corinth and Macedonia, which has already demonstrated tremendous generosity. He wants it both ways. He wants Corinth to remember its obligation and to give freely with great joy. It's a good cause, after all. Besides, his personal reputation is at stake.

We often want it both ways, too, in our preparations for Christmas. The reminders of our obligations are everywhere. Sometimes, our reputations as caring family members, co-workers, and neighbors are at stake. How can we rediscover the joys of giving freely?

Paul reminds the Corinthians and us that God provides abundantly. Although I resist the suggestion that provision is a reward for generosity, I appreciate the realization that our giving to one another is a way of participating in the boundless generosity of God, who loves us all—the cheerful and the grumpy, the one who has little and the one who has much, the one who meets every obligation and the one who falters. In sharing this love, we find joy and peace.

“Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15, adapted)

Rev. Susanna Weslie Southard

Director of Teaching with Technology,
Chaplain, and Instructor in Ministry Studies

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 15, 2018

What's in a Name?

Luke 1:57-66

"What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Luke 1:66

Every day, hundreds of thousands of babies are born into this world. The parents of these babies will spend countless hours contemplating, researching, and picking the perfect name for their child. Names are important. Names are rooted in history, tradition, identity and personality.

The pages of scriptures are laced with names enriched with meaning. Some names were given to mark the circumstances surrounding a person's birth or to describe specific character traits or gifts the child would grow up to have. Sometimes an individual was re-named. Changing a name signifies transforming a life, bringing a new identity and a new journey. Other names were given prophetically.

Take a moment to think about your name(s) and the story it tells about you. The power to name was one of the privileges given to Adam in the Garden of Eden. Today, we have the ability to define the world around us, to label reality and to determine people's perceptions of it with the power of a name.

In this season of Advent, we prepare for and anticipate the coming of Christ. We remember the birth of Jesus, who was also named "Immanuel," "God with us," and "Prince of Peace." Jesus has many names. Just like your names tell your story, the names of Jesus tell his story and serve as a description of who he was.

What is your favorite name for Jesus and what does that name mean to you?

Linda Tucker

Master of Divinity Student, Student Senate Member

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 16, 2018

Salvation in the Desert

Isaiah 12:2-6

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. Isaiah 12:3

The sun's sweltering rays have been unrelenting. The body, exhausted from this multi-day trek through the desert, lacks the energy for one more step. But then off in the distance, there it is—a blue flag. The promised symbol of a watering station. For those making the trek through the Arizona desert, desperate for opportunity, this small, blue flag, tattered by the desert wind, is salvation.

Can you imagine the euphoria experienced as the first drops of thirst-quenching water touch the tip of the tongue? In that instance, there is nothing more delightful. Every fiber of your being is liberated by the life-giving water.

Salvation. It is not just some theological construct attempting to explain how we can enter into right relationship with the Holy through Jesus. It is a tangible human experience found when life has you on the brink of death. It is the euphoric joy that wells up when a dead end becomes a way forward. It is the peace that passes all understanding, even in the midst of life's chaos.

Salvation. Drink deep from its well when given the opportunity my friends, for its waters will sustain you through the dark and barren places in life. AND engage in the work of creating watering stations for others. It is through this liberative work that Jesus is made known and hope is born.

Geoff Brewster

Senior Director of Stewardship

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 17, 2018

Joy for the Whole World

Hebrews 13:7-17

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Hebrews 13:8

Finding joy in life can be a challenge for most people. Although the Advent season promises “Joy to the World,” many Christians in the United States struggle to find meaning and purpose in their lives.

Our reliance on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram for instant gratification and virtual approval from others often leaves many emotionally empty. Yet, the Bible consistently claims joy for those who accept the coming of God’s presence.

The passage in Hebrews 13:7-17 provides a context for how Christians can find joy through their faith in Jesus Christ. The writer makes several audacious claims, the least of which is in verse 8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Joy has no expiration date! But the writer also insists that in order for us to experience joy we need faithful leaders who follow the ways of Jesus and model the Christian life.

Unfortunately, there lies the problem! The writer clearly understands the Hebrew tradition of hospitality. The expectation of the current Christian community is to follow Jesus’ example of inclusion. Simply stated, joy is best experienced when it is shared “outside the walls” of the community (vs. 12-13).

A colleague, the Rev. Alexis Carter wrote, “How do we find joy when some in leadership build walls, tear apart families, and deny refuge to strangers? What happens when the perspectives of our leaders show partiality and their personal agenda?” Although the Hebrew writer warns us of the potential abuse and resistance, the Joy of God has always been intended to be shared with the rest of the world, not with the privileged few.

Dr. John L. Thomas, Jr.

Associate Professor of Practical Theology

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 18, 2018

The Improbable Promise of Pawpaws

Isaiah 11:1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. Isaiah 11:1

A few years ago, we planted a couple of pawpaw trees at my parents' cabin in southwest Missouri. Two, because one tree alone wouldn't do. Unlike many species of fruit trees, which can pollinate themselves, pawpaws require the pollen of a genetically different tree. You need two for the proper pollination to occur and the fruit to set.

Pawpaw fruit are, from what I hear, a real delicacy—soft, custard like flesh with a delicate and indescribable flavor. I say “from what I hear” because I've never actually had one. Even though they are native to the Midwest, and are in fact North America's largest native fruit, pawpaws don't ship well, so they aren't commercially produced on a large scale.

Therefore, unless one has access to a pawpaw tree or a friend with a pawpaw tree, you're out of luck if you hope to taste pawpaw. Heck, even if you have access to a pawpaw tree, you might still be out of luck because they take a long time to produce fruit: four-to-eight years if you start from seed.

With that level of investment required for a single fruit, perhaps you can appreciate how dismayed we were when we discovered that one of our young pawpaw saplings had been sheared to the ground, presumably by hungry deer. And perhaps you can imagine how overjoyed we were when that pawpaw tree rebounded, sending up shoots from a stump. It was still a setback, but it wasn't the end.

While Isaiah and his 8th century BCE audience would likely not have been familiar with pawpaws, they doubtless would have understood the joy and relief when a tree, seemingly destroyed, sent up shoots from a stump. What a fitting image for the chosen peoples' covenant with their God—stretching out over years and centuries, testing the patience of both people and deity, and bringing forth improbable promise even at times when it looked like all life had been destroyed. This Advent, may we too cultivate patience in our longing, so that we may rejoice when life comes from destruction.

Dr. Sarah Morice Brubaker

Associate Professor of Theology

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 19, 2018

A Joyful Heart

Luke 7:31-35

"To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.' For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children." Luke 7:31-35

What brings you joy? Do you receive a boundless flow of joy at the birth of a loved one? How does joy feel, taste, smell and sound to you? Maybe your joy tastes like a juicy steak or feels like the warm embrace of parishioners. I believe that the moment joy is covering my mind, body, and soul the struggles of life seem futile. Therefore, I live to encounter joyful situations throughout my day.

The parable of Luke 7:31-35 deals with people who are in a place of frustration and complacency. God is seeking to help the people through John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, the people refuse to follow the guidance of either one. Instead, the people elect to complain and be bitter toward God's messengers of joy, hope, and peace.

The parable highlights the amount of effort the people go through to reject both messengers, John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. God is sending them different voices, but the people choose to stay in their misery. I've always been told that misery loves company. Unfortunately, our world is full of people who will rather complain about issues instead of trying to resolve them.

Like the text, many will go against John the Baptist and Jesus Christ just to complain about their current hurts, failures, disappointments, and pains. However, a joyful heart will seek to relieve the mind, body, and soul of thoughts and feelings that only provide heartache and pain.

Therefore, I encourage every reader during this Advent season to seek a joyful heart today and everyday hereon. A joyful heart will pull love out of hate. A joyful heart will see through failure to success. A joyful heart will elect peace over war. The world needs more people with a joyful heart to suppress the venom of destruction and complacency. When you find yourself complaining please think of what brings you joy and strive to get to A JOYFUL HEART!!!

Ulysses D. Allen

Recruiter

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 20, 2018

God Within

Jeremiah 31:31-34

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord. Jeremiah 31:33b-34a

John and I have been friends for years, linked by an understanding of God that is defined not only by reverence, but by dedication and commitment to service. And under the guise of "religion" we have both been under the heavy hand of rigid dogma and fundamentalist interpretation of spiritual writings.

A while back we were contemplating our religious histories, and had the chance to engage in a thought experiment: What if some life-form from another solar system sucked all of the religious tomes from the face of the earth? Would human beings still be able to believe in God? Without a book to point to, would we still be able feel, touch, describe, worship, emulate, and follow the God that we say we believe in?

I'm not sure Jeremiah was answering that exact question, but he does seem to say that God is pointing us in a direction of knowing God from within rather than knowing from without. If we hold God in our hearts rather than keep God trapped in our books and monuments and dogmas and traditions, then God truly is a living God.

We will no longer need to look for God on the outside, we will be able to know that God lives within each of us—everyone "from the least of (us) to the greatest." We will no longer need to insist that monuments to the Ten Commandments be placed on the courthouse lawn. We will no longer need to adorn our bumpers with stickers that ask what Jesus would do. We will no longer need to create "Religious Liberty Task Forces."

Instead, the joy we feel because of our worship of and reverence for God will be demonstrated by loving our neighbor, by speaking for justice, by striving for peace. That will be a joyous world indeed.

Rev. Marnie Leinberger

Alumni Board Member (2016)

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Pueblo, Colorado

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 21, 2018

Joy: Now and Later

Hebrews 10:32–39

Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward.

Hebrews 10:35

Patience is not a virtue that comes easy. Yet, in the season of Advent we are constantly reminded of the importance of waiting and living in the not-yet. As if that were not difficult enough, this passage from Hebrews discusses enduring hardships while you wait.

The writer discusses how the children of God have been persecuted and abused because they chose to do God's work. In the midst of their struggles, the writer encourages them to endure and reminds them that at the end of their endurance, a Godly promise awaits.

While some have taken passages like this to teach redemptive suffering, that teaching is quite dangerous. Note that the writer is not telling people to go suffer so that they can have joy on the other side. The writer is recognizing that, for those who seek to do the will of God in a world hostile to it, there will be difficulties.

The Gospel of Christ has always challenged oppressive power structures. Since people do not give up power easily, they will use that power to silence and punish those who fight the oppression benefitting the people in power. Yet as children of God fighting for what is right and just for all of God's children, we endure.

We fight not only because we will have joy later, but because participating in the reign of God is a joyous undertaking in and of itself. Working to bring forth justice makes God's world better, so we get to see little glimpses of hope in the here and now. We also celebrate in the promise that when all is said and done, there will be even greater joy in the future.

Dr. Annie Lockhart-Gilroy

Assistant Professor of Christian Education and Practical Theology

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 22, 2018

To See Joy Unseen

Luke 13:31-35

I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow... Luke 13:32

Today's New Testament reading, with its anticipation of political assassination and "lament," is an unconventional choice for a reflection on joy. No babies are born, nor nuptials exchanged. Our narrative begins with Pharisees seeking to preserve Jesus' life by ironically suggesting that he find safety in Judea.

Caustically rebuffing Herod, Jesus concedes that he needs to leave. His departure, however, is not about fleeing death. It's about service and fulfilling his call. Exorcising demons, healing, and gathering together the children of Jerusalem drive Jesus to Jerusalem. They generate a similar productive joy that the 70 experienced with their fruitful service (10:17).

Joy that solely looks backward or forward can blind and neuter. The parable of the sower (8:4-15) associates joy with rocky soil and believers who wither away without productive service. Joy neither guarantees success nor signals good soil. Yet, I believe Jesus' resoluteness lies, at least partially, in a joy experienced by serving and living-out his call. This co-acting joy contrasts Jesus' resolute service to the ephemeral, withering joy of rocky soil. It contrasts and conditions the wants and wishes of Herod (to kill Jesus), Pharisees (to save Jesus), and Jerusalem (to resist Jesus), to Jesus (to serve and gather together).

Joy feels great in times of glee and success, is nourished in times of growth and reflection, but is most needed amidst danger and disappointment. It is a co-acting joy that proclaims peace for all humanity (1:14; 2:10) and transforms rocky environments into good soil of hundred-fold produce.

Luke's text invites us to see [perceive] joy as co-actor and constituent characteristic of faith that reflects and refracts our "wants," "wishes," and "hopes" into calls to service. This Advent, I pray that we may see [perceive] joy rooted in our present through our service and responses to Christ Jesus.

Dr. Arthur F. Carter, Jr.

Assistant Professor of New Testament

ADVENT WEEK FOUR: LOVE

December 23, 2018

Turning the World Upside Down: Just Peace

Luke 1:39-55

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things... Luke 1:52-53a

In this passage, Mary delivers a prophetic message, traditionally known as “Mary’s song” or the Magnificat. In her words, we hear the echoes of past prophets presented in a new and dynamic way. Mary, like Jeremiah and Micah, reminds her people of all that God had done in the past to give them a reason to trust in the Holy and to work for God’s reign in their world.

Mary’s message challenged her ancient audience by proclaiming that God does not condone oppression nor does God side with the rich. She declared that, in the past, God had worked on the behalf of those whom society discarded, and God will do so again. She spoke about the world being turned upside down, about how God disturbs the status quo. She gave the powerless a reason to hope and the powerful a warning to change.

In first century Palestine, the majority of the population was hungry and struggling to survive. The peasants were being crushed by the mighty on their thrones in Rome and their deputies in the provinces. The highest religious authorities were more concerned with keeping the peace than with keeping the Torah. Mary’s song called those in charge to accountability; she spoke of God’s justice as a reality and not just a dream.

Mary’s message confronts us as well. It calls us to recognize that we are often the proud, the powerful, and the rich; to confess the ways that we participate in and benefit from the oppression of others. We must ask whether we are agents of God’s mercy, love, and justice, or are we more concerned with keeping our positions of privilege and maintaining the status quo.

In this season of Advent, let us join Mary in boldly proclaiming words of peace, hope, joy, and love. What would our world look like if the rich shared their wealth with the poor, if the mighty used their power to lift-up the lowly, and if all sat at a full banquet table every day?

Mary sang her song, and the world changed. Will we follow her example, realizing that speaking God’s just love into an unjust world is dangerous? If we do this, lives will be turned upside down, including our own.

Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Johnnie Eargle Cadieux Professor of Hebrew Bible

ADVENT: CHRISTMAS EVE

December 24, 2018

Hope, Peace, Joy, Love

The waiting is almost over as many of us gather in worship this night to welcome “God with us” into our midst. In the beautiful candlelight of our churches and the singing of familiar carols, we can find ourselves moving swiftly into Christmas. Before rushing into full celebration mode, we invite you to take a few moments to reflect on the season. You are invited to take this day and use this space to examine your 2018 Advent journey.

When did you create Hope this Advent season?

Where did you build Peace this Advent season?

How did you share Joy this Advent season?

Where did you celebrate God’s Love this Advent season?

PRAYER: On this night before Christmas, we’re challenged to live our lives following in the way of Jesus. Help us to be vulnerable to new paths in the coming year as we encourage each other to experience God’s call in our faith journeys. Amen.



PHILLIPS SEMINARY

> where faith leads

The 2018 Advent Devotional cover art is an original work from Sandy Shapoval, library director. She writes this about her inspiration for the drawing:

I have translated the traditional "A Partridge in a Pear Tree" image into Oklahoma vernacular. This is "A Greater Prairie Chicken in an Osage Orange Tree."

There are two problems with this translation. First both the greater and lesser prairie chickens make their living in grass habitats and are not known to even loaf in trees. Second, Oklahoma has lost most of the state's greater prairie chickens due to human interference in its habitat. The lesser prairie chicken can still be found in greater numbers in western Oklahoma, but conservationists are trying to draw attention to its dire habitat situation.

A halo encircles the bird, traditional symbol of Christ in the carol. God is our true love, and beginning with the Christ, gives us more each of the 12 days of the liturgical calendar. Notice the cruciform, red tree and the dawn unfolding in the sky that foretell Easter.

— Sandy Shapoval