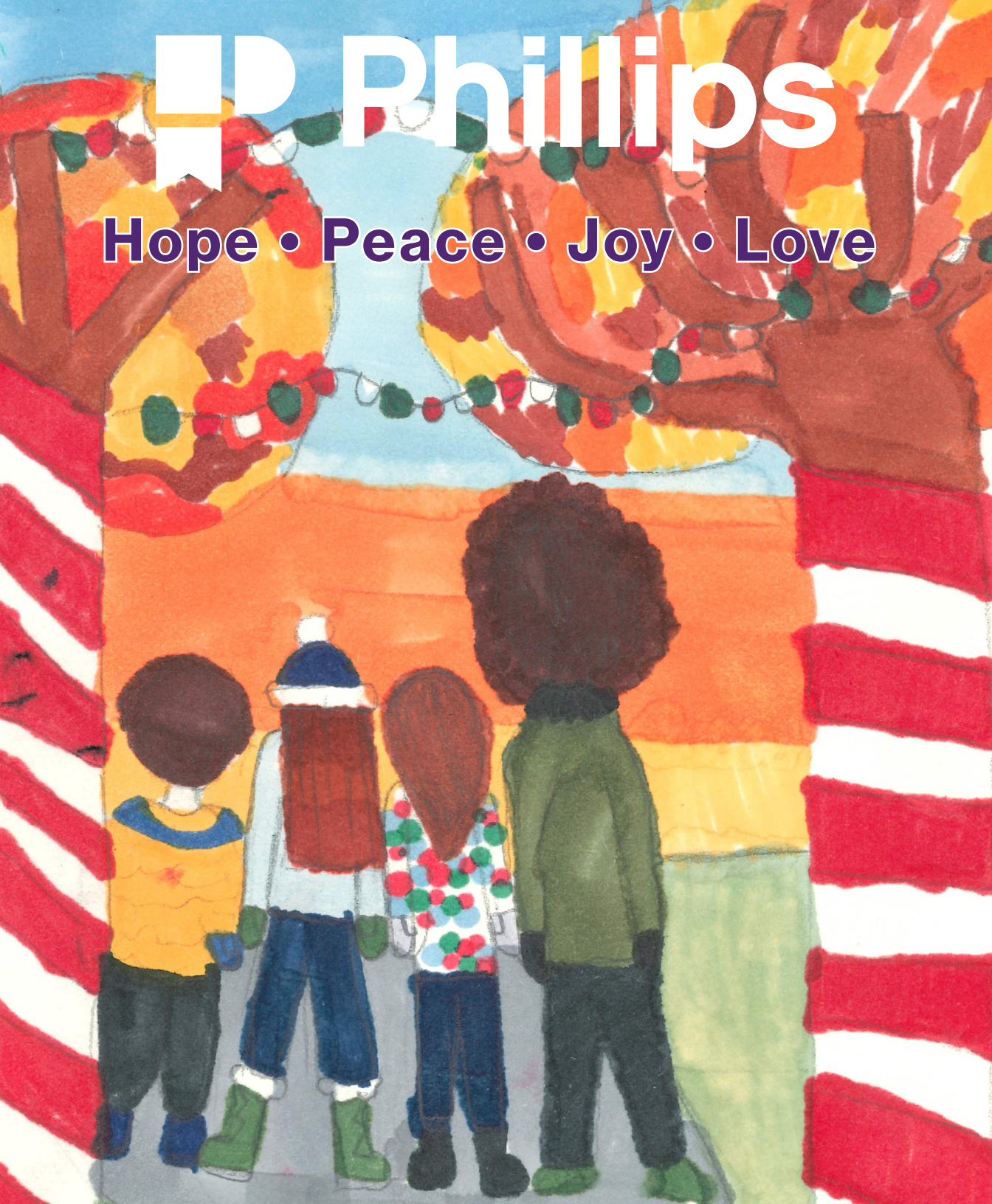


The logo consists of a stylized 'P' formed by two white shapes: a square on the left and a semi-circle on the right, both with a yellow-to-orange gradient.

# Phillips

**Hope • Peace • Joy • Love**







This year, we have one writer for each week in Advent. The four writers are:

**Week One**, HOPE: the Rev. Dr. F. Douglas Powe Jr., President and Mouzon Biggs, Jr. Professor of Methodist Studies

**Week Two**, PEACE: the Rev. Mike Miller, Alum, Senior Minister at Marion Christian Church

**Week Three**, JOY: the Rev. Jenny Wynn, Director of Advancement

**Week Four**, LOVE: the Rev. Dr. Allie Utley, Assistant Professor of Liturgy and Practical Theology.

The devotional is an important part of our goal to support and educate the whole church. We value your contribution to the life of Phillips Theological Seminary and consider you a part of the Phillips community.

We have hope in the unchanging, sacrificial love of God, love of each other, our congregations, and the love that fosters equality and justice in the world through the birth and life of Jesus.

We hope that as you encounter this booklet you are inspired to deepen your faith and renew your hope.

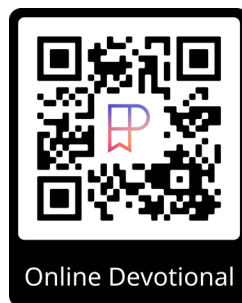
In Gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Malisa Pierce". The script is fluid and cursive.

Malisa Pierce

Assistant Vice President of Advancement

P.S. Remember, you can access daily Advent devotions on the Phillips Seminary website ([ptstulsa.edu/devotionals](http://ptstulsa.edu/devotionals)). We will also provide each devotion as a podcast that you may access through your preferred podcast provider.



# ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

November 30

*F. Douglas Powe Jr., PhD*

## Hope is Predicated on Truth

John 18:36-37

**Jesus answered, “You say that I am a King. For this I was born and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth.” John 18:37b**

Jesus shares with Pilate that he was “born and came into the world... to testify to the truth.” As Christians our hope during advent is in anticipating Jesus’ reign that looks nothing like what this world has seen. Jesus’ word choice about testifying to the truth should give us all pause.

Do we see our own missions like Jesus’ of testifying to the truth? Not the convenient answers being promoted by various interests around us, but the truth.

Testifying to the truth seems more challenging today because what I may see as the obvious truth to someone else is perceived as a political agenda. This text reminds us that hope is not a made-up belief, but is in fact predicated on the hard work of testifying to the truth.

This requires consistently seeking the truth even when we may not like what we learn. It means testifying to the truth which will put us at odds with others who prefer the truth to stay hidden.

This advent season, as we anticipate the arrival of Jesus, our hope should be predicated on testifying to the truth as Jesus did when facing Pilate. In a world where we easily dismiss the truth or want to manipulate the truth, testifying to the truth of our hope in Jesus’ reign being different from anything this world has ever seen or experienced is a part of our calling as Christians.

# ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 1

*F. Douglas Powe Jr., PhD*

## Hope is a New Reality

Isaiah 2:1-5

**He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Isaiah 2:4**

Can you imagine a world where there are no wars? It does seem unimaginable, especially since there is always a conflict happening someplace in the world.

In this text we read about the hope of one day the very weapons we use to do harm to one another become instruments of provision for one another. Our swords will till the ground, and our spears will help us to catch fish.

At first glance this seems unrealistic given what we have experienced throughout our lives. What catches my attention is in verse three when it talks about God teaching us God's ways. This new reality is not something that we can achieve ourselves but requires learning.

It involves learning, for example, a new way of being with one another that does not move toward violence. The good news is we already have a model for what this looks like from Jesus. The truth is it is even challenging for us as Christians to follow Jesus' model.

Advent is a time when we should anticipate a new reality. This reality moves us closer toward God's intent for instruments of destruction to become instruments of provision. Our hope for this new reality as Christians should move us to action now. We should model Jesus' behavior as individuals and communities of faith. One day we truly will say, "we no longer are training for war."



# ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 2

*F. Douglas Powe Jr., PhD*

## Hope is about Keeping Promises

Jeremiah 33:14-16

**The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Jeremiah 33:14**

We all at one time or another have experienced someone promising us something and we cling to the hope that one day the promise will be fulfilled. In this Jeremiah text, it begins with God saying, “the days are coming when I will fulfill my promise.”

For those who have been clinging to the hope of the promise being fulfilled this is a welcome relief. God is going to deliver the people from exile in Babylon, restore the Davidic king, and re-establish Jerusalem.

As you continue reading the text notice the details provided for how the promise will be fulfilled. God will bring forth a sprout from David’s line that will be good news to both Israel and Judah.

Sometimes when we are clinging to hope that a promise will be fulfilled, we need the type of details provided in this text. Simply repeating the promise no longer bolsters our hope. We need something more concrete to keep us moving forward so that our hope will come to fruition.

During this time of Advent consider what promises you have been making to others. If you intend to keep these promises (hopefully you do), then what are the details you can share so that those seeking fulfillment of the promise do not lose hope? Keeping promises goes a long way to helping all of us to maintain hopeful expectations.

# ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 3

*F. Douglas Powe Jr., PhD*

## Hope is about Evidence

Luke 21:29-31

**Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. Luke 21:29-30**

Most of us have watched some version of a crime or court drama to know that so much hinges on evidence. What is the evidence you have that my client was at the scene of the crime? We are focused on the evidence because it provides something tangible for us to hang our hats on when we have questions.

Another way to put it, we believe evidence can give us a degree of certainty that without it does not exist. In this text, Jesus uses the fig tree as an example of something tangible we can hang our hats on as evidence.

The evidence of summer coming is that the fig tree is sprouting leaves. When the leaves start sprouting it is a sign that summer is around the corner. We may not say it out loud, but we are often looking for evidence for the things in which we hope. We want a tangible sign like the sprouting leaves to let us know that it is around the corner.

Here is the thing, around the corner does not mean immediate. Jesus is talking about the sprouting fig leaves being evidence for the reign of God being near. While it is true that the reign of God is present now, it has not been fully realized. The evidence indicates God's reign is among us yet it may not be fully realized for a while.

Evidence is helpful in giving us something tangible to hold on to as we wait. We should not mistake evidence as a sign of something happening immediately. We should take it as a sign that even as a fig tree sprouts leaves, it will take a while for full leafing.

# ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 4

*F. Douglas Powe Jr., PhD*

## Hope is about Good News

Isaiah 40:9-11

**Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, do not fear... Isaiah 40:9**

I believe it is human nature to want to hear good news. If every day the only thing we heard was bad news or how awful things are it would grate on us quickly. We need to hear and experience good news so that we can have hope for the future.

This text in Isaiah begins with the sharing of good news for Zion and Jerusalem in exile under Babylonian rule. The news is so good that those who bring it are implored to “shout it” and make sure everyone hears something wonderful is happening and is going to happen.

Here is what I love about this text, it reads, “you who bring good news.” It does not yet say what the good news is. Twice it emphasizes “you who bring good news.” This means we are called to participate in creating hope for the future. We must share the good news that is happening so that others can hear it and have hope. In fact, we should be shouting the good news to make sure everyone hears it.

Of course, if we literally shout it, people will ignore us, but the point remains not to keep the good news quiet. I believe we are often reticent to share good news because it can feel like bragging. The key is that the good news is not about us, but about the way God cares for all of us. All of us!

We do indeed need to hear good news. We also need to be the purveyors of good news. We need to give hope to others that God truly does take care of us all. This is a message that is not shared enough in our world. This text reminds us that we are the ones who are called to share it.



# ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 5

*F. Douglas Powe Jr., PhD*

## Hope is for Everyone

Luke 1: 26-28

**And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”  
Luke 1:28**

Many of you have probably heard or read this text several times. The angel appears to Mary and greets her as “highly favored.” This is a strange greeting given by the standards of her day since she would not fall into a category of one typically considered favored. If you keep reading, even Mary wonders what kind of greeting Gabriel brings.

I think that Gabriel’s choice of words is not an accident. The greeting indicates being highly favored by God is not about status or economic means. It is a greeting that lets us know God sees everyone. God saw Mary who, by the world’s standards, did not fit how most would define someone highly favored.

If God sees Mary, then God sees us. Our hopes for the future are not wishful thinking because God sees us. We must be cautious not to think that because God sees us, our lives will be only wonderful. Just ask Mary!

The news that Gabriel shares later in the chapter about giving birth to Jesus probably did not feel like she was highly favored. It likely felt like the very opposite, but she realizes she who is the most unexpected of all has a place in God’s plan for the people.

I believe it is no accident that God chooses Mary. For me, it is indication that hope is not just for those who have status and means, but for everyone. Those who are trying to oppress others will often try to take away or diminish hope. This text reminds us that we should remain hopeful because God does see us. God highly favors those whom the world marginalizes or tries to make invisible.

# ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 6

*F. Douglas Powe Jr., PhD*

## Hope is about Trust

Daniel 3:19-30

**Nebuchadnezzar said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king’s command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.” Daniel 3:28**

Have you ever felt like you were in a dire situation? I am not sure it gets more dire than being thrown in a furnace so hot that even those doing the throwing die from the heat. I know when I have been in dire situations the tendency is to feel sorry for myself or to try and figure out how I ended up in this situation.

Rarely do I trust that all will be well given the situation I find myself in at the time. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego trust that no matter what happens, all will be well for them.

The three of them are not letting the situation define who they are or their outlook on life. They trust that they have been faithful to God and are not worried about the outcome of being in the furnace. In this instance God sends a protector to be with them so that the flames do them no harm.

I am not suggesting that when we personally face a dire situation that God will provide a solution in the way he did for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. I am suggesting that we should learn from them that hope is connected to our ability to trust that the future will work out. If we do not have trust in God, it is hard to have hope that something transformative can happen. Trust is needed.

Many of us face dire situations at some point in life. The question is, “Will we be able to trust that God will be with us during our trial? Can we maintain hope for transformation even when the furnace is hot?” When we have this kind of hope it means that we are not stuck defining our lives by the world’s standards. Our hope is built on things not seen.

# ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 7

Rev. Mike Miller

## Peace in the Valley

Ezekiel 37:1-14

**I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord. Ezekiel 37:14**

Advent is a season of waiting. It is a time to prepare ourselves for peace and new life coming into a very weary world. Ezekiel 37:1–14 gives us a vivid image that speaks powerfully to this theme of new life.

Addressing the despondent and displaced exiles in Babylon, Ezekiel speaks of a valley of bones that are not only dead, but long past the point of life. This imagery reflects how many people can feel during the holiday season. Cut off, forgotten, spiritually lifeless. But Advent reminds us that God does not abandon God's people in valleys alone. Instead, God sits with them in the valleys and promises restoration and new life.

In this scripture text, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy, and as he does, the bones come together, flesh forms, and breath enters. What once was dead stands alive again. This breath-Spirit of God is the same Spirit that hovered over the waters at creation, the same Spirit that filled Mary's womb, and the same Spirit that brought and continues to bring new life into our midst.

During Advent, we sit in the tension between the brokenness of the world and the promises of peace, hope, joy, and love. Ezekiel 37 reminds us that God brings life where there is death, hope where there is despair, joy where there is sadness, and love where there is hatred.

Our Advent journey reminds us that just as Jesus once came to a weary world, Jesus comes again and again into our lives to make everything new.

As we wait, we do not wait in fear. We wait in hope – trusting that the God who breathes life into dry bones is still at work, even in our valleys.

# ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 8

Rev. Mike Miller

## When Mountains Crumble in Advent

Isaiah 54:1-17

**For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you. Isaiah 54:10**

Advent is a time when we are to prepare our hearts to celebrate the coming of the Christ child. But sometimes in the middle of the busyness of our preparations for Christmas services and celebrations, the uncertainty we see in the world, and even sorrow that can surface during this season, Isaiah 54:10 offers a grounding truth: God's love is unshakable and no matter how busy or uncertain or sorrowful we are, God's love will always surround us.

Mountains and hills are some of the most stable features in nature and can represent the unshakable parts in our lives. Yet even if they were to crumble, God assures us that this divine love will not. Unfortunately we know that the seemingly unshakable parts of life can be easily disrupted. Relationships may fail, health may falter, finances can collapse, but in all of these moments, God speaks a profound truth: God's love for each of us remains unshaken.

Isaiah 54:10 is a powerful promise for those who feel as though their world is falling apart, especially during the holiday season. When we feel like our life is in a season of chaos or grief, this verse becomes an anchor. It shifts our focus from what is shaking around us to the one who remains steady. It reminds us that even in the storm, we are not abandoned. God's compassion is near, personal, and unrelenting.

So whether we find ourselves on a mountaintop of joy or in a valley of difficulty this Advent, hear God's words: "My love for you will not be shaken." Let this promise steady you. Let it soften your hurried soul and remind you that God's love and peace is always near. Let it draw you into the quiet awe of the season.

# ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 9

Rev. Mike Miller

## Peace in the Preparations

John 14:1-31

**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. John 14:27**

As Jesus prepared His disciples for His departure, He spoke these words in John 14:27. He knew fear and uncertainty would soon overwhelm them. And yet, in the midst of impending chaos, Jesus left them with peace. This peace wasn't the absence of conflict but the presence of calm in the storm. It is a settled assurance rooted in trust.

Advent invites us to prepare ourselves to receive that same peace. While the world around us may pulse with anxiety, and distractions, or self-imposed pressure to create the “perfect” Christmas Eve service, or to keep the peace between warring family members as the mediator, Jesus reminds us that there is peace.

This peace doesn't depend on circumstances. It's not earned through effort or found in a quiet room or when we do everything “right.” But it is a peace of presence. It is the peace that reminds us that no matter what is going on in the world and in our lives that we can look to Jesus and find peace.

As we wait in expectation for the coming of the Christ Child, may we also receive this gift of peace with open hearts. May we be reminded that this gift of peace is not here just for a moment, but is here for every season, every struggle, and every heart.

In the quiet of Advent, we pause to remember the promise of peace, not the fragile, fleeting kind the world offers, but the deep, enduring peace that comes from above.

# ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 10

Rev. Mike Miller

## The Call of Peace

Romans 12:17-21

**If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, love peaceably with all.**

**Romans 12:18**

This passage from Romans 12 has been one of my personal favorite scriptures along my faith journey. And it reminds me that if our journey as Christians and Christ followers is easy, I don't believe we are doing it right.

Paul's words here are challenging. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil... live at peace with everyone." These aren't passive instructions; they are active calls to peacemaking. Our call to be Christians is not a call to passivity: it is a call to action. This kind of peace that we are called to create with God isn't just the absence of conflict, but it is the intentional presence of grace, forgiveness, and humility.

As we reflect on the Peace of God this Advent, we're reminded that Jesus came not only to bring peace to us but also to make peace through us. Jesus was not born into a serene, peaceful world, but into one filled with injustice, fear, and political tension.

Still, Jesus chose peace and continues to call us to do the same. Our world is still so full of injustice, fear, and political polarization. Our call as Christians is to continue to create spaces of peace for all of God's beloved: which is all of us.

Advent is a season of expectation, wonder, and preparation — not only for the birth of Christ but for the transformation Jesus' coming brings. In a world marked by division, resentment, and conflict, Romans 12 calls us to something radically different: the way of peace.



# ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 11

Rev. Mike Miller

## Peace and Hope

Matthew 6:25-34

**Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Matthew 6:26**

In Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus invites us into a radical kind of trust that confronts our deepest anxieties about daily life. He tells us not to worry about what we will eat, drink, or wear. At first glance, that may feel unrealistic. After all, these are basic needs. But Jesus isn't dismissing our concerns; He's reorienting them.

He points us to nature, to the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. They don't stress or strive, yet God cares for them. Jesus reminds us that we are worth far more and if God provides for lesser things with such beauty and consistency, how much more will God provide for us? Jesus is teaching us to redirect our focus away from the stresses of life to a more peaceful way of living. And when we do this, perhaps our daily needs will fall into their proper place.

But it is not always easy to redirect our focus when life seems beyond our control. It is not easy to live in a state of peace when there are people legislating what we can and cannot do with our bodies, or who we are, or whom we love. It is hard to live in peace when we see families being torn apart by a callous and racist government.

But perhaps in these times, the peace Jesus brings is found in the hope that Jesus brings. That hope is that one day our world will better reflect how Jesus sees each one of us. That hope is that one day our world will reflect how Jesus cares for every one of us.

# ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 12

Rev. Mike Miller

## Advent Rest

Psalm 4

**In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety. Psalm 4:8 (NIV)**

It seems as if true peace is rare since our world is filled with constant noise, pressure, uncertainty, and hatred. It can be hard to feel peace as we move through our days because we tend to pick up what others are sending out into the world, whether it be positivity or negativity.

Often, it is in the darkness in our bedrooms that we begin to process the day. It is in the silence of the night when we realize what we have been carrying with us throughout the day. We can hyperfocus on all of the pressures and problems that we feel and have encountered. And for many of us, this leads to a feeling opposite that of peace.

But this psalm reminds me that God's peace is not found when problems are absent but God's peace is found when we rest in the presence of God. And in those moments when we rest with God, we are granted a glimpse of a life that is full of God's peace.

Advent invites us to reclaim that peace, the kind of peace that allows us to rest, not because everything is perfectly calm, but because we know God is in control. During Advent when we are busy with preparations for the season, we too often forget to rest in the presence of God.

This Advent, may we find stillness in our hearts, even when the world around us is loud and frantic. We can rest in the peace that God brings.

# ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 13

Rev. Mike Miller

## The Peace of Advent

2 Thessalonians 3:1-17

**Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways.  
The Lord be with all of you. 2 Thessalonians 3:16**

In the midst of Advent, when the world is often rushing toward Christmas with full-speed anticipation, this prayer in 2 Thessalonians 3:16 brings a gentle reminder that peace is not something we find by striving or planning, but something that God gifts to us, in every season and at all times.

This blessing over the Thessalonians is a prayer for divine peace to flood their hearts, not just in moments of quiet, but in every circumstance, whether in moments of joy or in trials. And as we await the coming of Christ, we, too, are invited to experience this peace. The Lord of peace is with us, and offers peace that isn't dependent on external circumstances.

Advent is a time of longing for the peace that Jesus brings into a broken world. The Prince of Peace came not as a distant figure, but as Emmanuel, God with us. His presence offers a peace that goes beyond mere tranquility. It's a peace that holds us steady in uncertainty, calms our hearts in worry, and reassures us in fear.

# ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 14

Rev. Jenny Wynn

## Going Out in Joy

Isaiah 55:1-13

**For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Isaiah 55:12**

As I write this devotional on joy, news is breaking of another school shooting. Two children died during Mass. How can I write about joy when I'm filled with sadness and anger over senseless violence?

Isaiah's words stare back at me: "For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (Isaiah 55:12).

Where is this joy? This peace? How do we go out in joy when nowhere seems safe, not even places where children worship?

Isaiah's prophetic words offered comfort to the exiles, who had been waiting and praying for something more, giving them perspective beyond the tyranny and violence of their world. The prophet envisioned a different kind of empire, a place of Shalom.

In Advent, we follow the same rhythm: we wait and long for peace. Isaiah 55 reminds us that our task is to come, listen, see, and seek God. We must break from the death-dealing ways of the empire and engage prophetic imagination that seeks to transform our current world.

Our waiting isn't passive complacency but active engagement. We're called to work toward transformation. We go out in joy not because our world is perfect, but in anticipation of what it can become with God's help.

Even amid tragedy, we hold onto hope. Our joy comes from trusting that God's kingdom of peace is both promised and possible.

# ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 15

Rev. Jenny Wynn

## Joy in Hard Times

Philippians 4:4-7

**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Philippians 4:4**

During seminary I attended a women's retreat. The organizers invited us to pick a rock inscribed with a word. When I drew my rock, I was not pleased: my word was happy. I quietly traded it in, only to find my new word was cheerful. No better. Weeks later, in my Theological Reflection Group, our leader gave everyone a rock with a word. I looked down. Mine read: joy. Really?

Why would the words happy, cheerful, and joy bother anyone?

Many people struggle to hold on to joy during Advent. It's hard to rejoice in a consumer culture that insists the perfect holiday can be bought when you struggle from day to day to make ends meet. It's hard to hold onto joy when headlines are filled with violence and war.

In the confines of a prison, Paul offers insight on holding onto joy despite what is going on in the world around us. Paul writes to the church in Philippi: "Rejoice in the Lord always" (v. 4). How could Paul rejoice in prison?

Paul refused to give his captors power over his joy. His joy was not rooted in circumstance or external factors, but in faith and a living, ongoing relationship with God and with the faith community. Paul's joy was a joy that endured and sustained even in the hardest seasons.

How can a joy, grounded in faith, sustain you in this season?

# ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 16

Rev. Jenny Wynn

## A New Heart

Ezekiel 36:1-37

**A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.**

**Ezekiel 36:26**

It may be cliché, but when I read Ezekiel's words, I can't help but think of the Grinch. The Grinch is a curmudgeonly character whose heart is famously "two sizes too small." He hated everything about Christmas, so he plotted to steal Christmas.

When the Grinch realizes that Christmas couldn't be stolen because Christmas was more than food, presents, and decorations, his heart begins to grow. What strikes me the most is when Cindy Lou Who invites this former enemy to join their Christmas feast. In that moment, the Grinch must become vulnerable and release the protective barriers he had built around his wounded heart.

The Grinch had allowed hatred, distrust, and fear to isolate and harden him. Sound familiar? We live in times when it's easy to be consumed by fear and distrust. Our hearts can become numb to it all.

This is where Ezekiel's ancient promise becomes deeply personal. Speaking to God's people in exile, the prophet envisions complete heart transformation. God promises to remove hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh: hearts that beat for justice, hearts dedicated to God's dream for creation, hearts renewed in covenantal relationship with God.

This Advent, we are invited to examine our own hearts. Like the exiles in Ezekiel's time and like the Grinch in his mountain cave, we too can experience revival of our hearts. God can soften what has hardened, heal what has been wounded, and give us a vision of Shalom to work toward.

# ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 17

Rev. Jenny Wynn

## Tending Toward Justice

John 15:1-11

**I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. John 15:11**

As a child, I was heartbroken watching my dad remove flowers and tomatoes on brand new plants before planting. I couldn't understand why he would do this to the plant. Eventually, I learned about pinching, deadheading, and pruning. Each requires removing parts of plants at specific growth stages. This allows for redirection of energy for fuller growth and better tasting fruits. I learned careful tending leads to deep joy at harvest time.

John 15:1-12 uses the metaphor of a gardener and a vine to illustrate an abiding relationship with God and Christ that is rooted in love. This relationship produces fruitful discipleship. When the vine branches stop producing fruit, they need some pruning to redirect energy toward what truly matters, love.

In Advent, as we long for a fruitful future free from violence, scarcity, and death-dealing systems, we must ask: what needs pruning in our lives and communities? Perhaps our tendency to judge rather than love, our impulse to hoard resources instead of sharing with those in need, or our silence when facing injustice?

Pruning may be difficult, but when harvest comes, when everyone has enough, communities are healed and restored, joy is made complete. Just as my father's careful removal of early fruit led to abundant tomatoes, spiritual pruning redirects our energy toward love and justice, and toward cultivating the world that we seek.

Take time to notice moments when you're tempted to judge, hoard, or stay silent. In those moments, ask: "How can I redirect this energy toward love?" Let these redirections be your pruning practice.



# ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 18

Rev. Jenny Wynn

## More than Crumbs

Matthew 15:21-28

**She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Matthew 15: 27**

Mary Oliver wrote in her poem “Don’t Hesitate,” “Joy is not meant to be a crumb.” This wisdom echoes Matthew 15:21–28, where a Canaanite woman seeks mercy for herself and her daughter, who is tormented by a demon. She cries out loudly to Jesus. Her cries are met by Jesus’ silence. Annoyed the disciples urge him to send her away for being too loud.

Jesus finally speaks, saying, “I was sent only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Undeterred, she kneels and pleads. His reply is harsh and cuts deep, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Nevertheless, she persisted. This outsider refused silencing, even by Jesus. With an expansive vision of God’s household, she fought for her and her daughter’s place in it. Her bold reply, “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” opened his eyes. He praised her faith. Her daughter was healed. This woman helps Jesus to see how wide God’s welcome extends.

In Advent, this brave woman teaches us. Standing between what was and what could be, she joined the endless chorus crying out to Emmanuel. She clung to a crumb of hope, believing her world and her daughter’s world could change.

Her voice joins countless others still crying for a different way, namely the way of justice. She reminds us never to settle for crumbs. God’s welcome, mercy, and joy were never meant to be mere crumbs for anyone.

# ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 19

Rev. Jenny Wynn

## Joy Breaks Through

Isaiah 52:7-9

**Break forth; shout together for joy, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem... Isaiah 52:9**

Advent draws us into a liminal space, a threshold between what is and what is yet to come. Advent invites us to voice our longings along with our bold declarations that our broken and fragmented world can be made whole.

Advent draws our attention to those who have existed and continue to exist in difficult and painful liminal spaces. It is into such places that the prophet Isaiah spoke. The prophet knew the deep pain that the Judeans in exile voiced when they cried, “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me” (Isaiah 49:14).

Yet into this despair, God speaks words of hope, words brimming with joy. Isaiah responds to their fears with profound assurance that God was still moving, still working toward renewal. “Break forth; shout together for joy, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem (v. 9).”

This is Advent’s promise: our whispered prayers in uncertainty are not the end of the story. We are not alone, God still has need of us, not as passive waiters, but as joyful, active participants working for the peace we long to see through acts of compassion, justice, and love.

Where might God be calling you to participate in bringing wholeness to broken places this Advent?

# ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 20

Rev. Jenny Wynn

## Between Memory and Hope

Psalm 126

**Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.**

**Psalm 126:2a**

Rituals are an important part of our faith. They provide structure and meaning in our lives while helping to manage anxiety and stress. When we feel disoriented, rituals can help reorient us to what matters most.

Rituals connect us to our faith story. They remind us of who we are, where we have been, and where we are going. Most importantly, rituals remind us of God's presence in our lives and that we belong to God.

Psalm 126 reflects a period after exile. Joy erupts in the Psalm as the community looks back on their deliverance. The psalm goes beyond an exercise in longing for "the good old days." It remembers the joy of the past, but it also orients the readers toward anticipating joy. It engages both rituals of celebration and lament, using them to point to an ever-present God who meets us in our sorrow and our joy.

How can you engage in the rituals embodied in this psalm by acknowledging the pain while also celebrating what has been lived?

You might consider lighting a candle and naming a loss that you have experienced this year, then name a hope for the coming year. As you engage in these rituals, remember that you are not alone.

Remember the promise of the psalmist: "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves (v. 6)."

# ADVENT WEEK FOUR: LOVE

December 21

Rev. Allie Utley, PhD

## The Origins of Love Incarnate

John 1:1-18

**“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John 1:1**

The poetic first verse of the Gospel is something of an origin story. We often read this passage on or around Christmas as we celebrate the birth of Jesus: God taking the form of a baby. Christ comes to us, fragile, small, dependent.

But the writer of John reminds us that Jesus' life doesn't begin at Christmas; it reaches all the way back to the beginning of the cosmos. His very being is eternally woven together in the very being of God our creator.

In advent, we wait for the coming of the Son of God through whom the love of God was, is, and will be revealed. That doesn't mean the Hebrew people didn't know God's love, or that Jesus is the only way God makes love known. But one reason I claim Christianity as my faith is that I am moved by this mystery: that God would become human, that God would take on vulnerability, temptation, even suffering.

In Christ's coming, God draws close not only to reveal love, but to know our lives fully. There is no part of you, no part of me, that is hidden from that knowing love. This knowing can make us feel loved, but it can also make us feel vulnerable and exposed.

Advent is a season of anticipation and preparation. What might it look like to open ourselves to that love and to allow ourselves to be truly known?

# ADVENT WEEK FOUR: LOVE

December 22

Rev. Allie Utley, PhD

## The Turning

Luke 1:46b-55

...indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.  
Luke 1:50

There is a group of researchers at Samford Center for Worship and the Arts studying the experiences of young people in worship. According to their website, “the purpose of the Young People and Christian Worship (YPCW) study is to listen deeply to how young people, including teenagers and emerging adults (aged 13–29), experience public Christian worship in a range of liturgical contexts – Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical, and charismatic.”

In a recent survey, they found that one of the favorite songs among young people in the Roman Catholic and Mennonite traditions is *Canticle of the Turning*, a hymn text based on the song of Mary\*.

It inspires me that young people connect with Mary’s vision of a God who subverts the world order. From generation to generation, God casts down the proud and powerful and shows preferential love to the marginalized. From generation to generation, God promises that the tyrants of this world will fail and fall.

But even if we trust in this promise, we can struggle to see beyond the evils of our day. We might remember that Mary sings about the mighty work of God while she is still pregnant. She embodies expectancy and hope. Advent is a season of tension for us as well: God’s love is breaking in, and still, we wait for its fullness.

Where might you catch a glimpse of that turning today? And as you wait, how might you live as though God’s love is already reshaping the world?

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\*Emily Snider, “Young People and Christian Worship: Seeing the Liturgical Assembly through the Eyes of Teenagers and Emerging Adults” (Societas Liturgical, Paris, July 30, 2025).

# ADVENT WEEK FOUR: LOVE

December 23

Rev. Allie Utley, PhD

Who am I?

2 Samuel 7:18, 23-29

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and said, “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?”

2 Samuel 7:18

This chapter of 2 Samuel opens with King David pondering how to best play host to God: “Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.” David plans to build a house for the Lord. If you know your Bible well, you will not be surprised that God isn’t interested in a permanent dwelling place.

God declares to David, You will not build me a house; I will build you one. God promises to establish David’s family line, to make his name great, and to plant his people in a home of their own.

David’s response is a performance of humanity: “Who am I, O Lord God, that you have brought me this far?” He might have been wondering: Who am I to be held by your promises? Who am I to bear a legacy of faith? Who am I to be given a place in your unfolding story?

As we approach Christmas, many of us are thinking about homes and houses too. Where will we gather? For whom will we make space? What traditions will we tend? Making plans for Christmas brings up questions of place and identity.

I recently spoke with a group of young adults trying to navigate the pressure of holiday expectations: how to honor family traditions while creating their own rhythms, how to choose where to dwell and whom to prioritize.

Perhaps David’s story invites us to hold our own questions about home lightly. God reminds David – and us – that the truest “house” is the one God is building: a household of promise, presence, and peace that transcends cedar walls and travel plans.

# ADVENT WEEK FOUR: LOVE

December 24

Rev. Allie Utley, PhD

## You Are Family

Titus 3:4-7

**This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. Titus 3:6-7**

We are a people born of water and the Spirit. In our baptism we are claimed by God and grafted into a family of faith. One of my favorite songs for worship is Mark Miller's "Child of God."

In the last verse, he writes, "No matter what the world says... you are a child, you are a child of God... There is nothing and no one that can separate you from the truth that you're someone – you are family; you are meant to be a child of God."

Baptism is historically associated with the seasons of Lent/Easter/Pentecost rather than Advent/Christmas/Epiphany. But I love that the daily lectionary includes this passage about being heirs of God, being part of the family of God, because in Advent, we do think a lot about genealogies and generations. I think the inclusion of this passage invites us to think about the communities that hold us – our chosen families.

How might we draw closer to one another in this season of waiting? What relationships need tending, mending, or nurturing? How does belonging to God's family help us prepare to receive Christ's love? And how might this family work toward the fulfillment of God's kin-dom of love and justice?

In this season and the next, may your belonging be deep, your connections tender, and your waiting full of love.

That's a Christmas celebration comprising proclamation of God's justice-working actions and a celebration of what God is doing.

# ADVENT WEEK FOUR: LOVE

December 25

Rev. Allie Utley, PhD

## Pondering

Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20

**So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. Luke 2:16**

Can you imagine giving birth in an outdoor stall? And then, as you begin to recover, a group of shepherds show up and tell you that an angel told them that your baby is the Son of God and Messiah?

You aren't surprised by the announcement. The angel has come to you as well. But every time someone says it out loud – you are the mother of the Holy One – it feels shocking and overwhelming.

Can you imagine mothering this child? An all-powerful, all-knowing deity, now fully dependent on you for shelter, nourishment, care?

This is the mystery of Advent: God comes as a vulnerable baby. The Son of God is also the son of Mary. Then and now, God entrusts the work of love to human hands. God needs us – our arms to cradle, our voices to sing, our lives to bring grace and mercy to a weary world.



# NOTES

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## 2025 Advent Devotional Cover

*The Path to Christmas* by Eden Berman, 4th grade

*"When I think of Advent, I think of a lot of special memories with my family. One of my favorite things to do is walk around and look at Christmas lights together. It sometimes feels like we're walking in a magical other world. It's these little things each year that make Advent feel so special to me, like we're just walking in this magical in between."*

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