

Joy
to the
World

2019 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF FORT WORTH



Advent Devotional

Because 2019 is the 300th anniversary of “**Joy to the World**” by Isaac Watts, we’ve chosen this beloved classic Christmas hymn as the basis for our FUMCFW Advent theme this year.

The first verse of the hymn has an important line that sets the tone for this year’s experience of Advent: “**Let every heart prepare Him room.**” Advent is a time for preparing our hearts once again to receive Christ into heart — the center — of our lives.

As we move through the Season of Advent, we invite you to deepen your *Joy to the World* Advent experience by following this daily weekly Advent Devotional.

By adding this special focus on Joy to our thoughts and prayers throughout the Advent Season, we prepare our hearts and minds for joyful celebration of Christ entering the world.

***Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
let earth receive her King;
let ev’ry heart prepare him room,
and heav’n and nature sing,
and heav’n and nature sing,
and heav’n, and heav’n and nature sing.***

***Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns:
let men their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.***

***No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.***

***He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.***

DECEMBER 1
Dr. Tim Bruster

2019 is the 300th anniversary of “**Joy to the World**” by Isaac Watts. The first verse of the hymn has an important line for the beginning of Advent: “**Let every heart prepare Him room.**” Advent is a time for preparing our hearts once again to receive Christ into heart — the center — of our lives.

At the beginning of this season, we often read the words of Isaiah 40:3-5 as a reminder that Advent is a season of preparation:

A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

The prophet Isaiah spoke to a people in exile offering them comfort and the promise of restoration. But, these words speak to us, as well, as individuals and as a community whose lives, like the wilderness are filled with mountains and valleys and uneven ground and rough places that can stand in the way of fully receiving Jesus into the center of our lives.

What are the valleys in your life? What are the low places? Almost every day I talk with people who are living in the valley — sometimes even the valley of the shadow of death. There are low spots in every life. What are yours? Do those valleys stand in the way of receiving Christ into the center of your living? Sometimes those valleys can even make us angry at God. Are there valleys in your way?

What are the mountains and hills in your life? What are the high points? Even success can be a stumbling block to receiving Christ into the center of our lives. After all, success can give us the illusion of complete self-sufficiency — even to the extent that we don’t recognize our need for Christ.

What are the uneven places in your life? Is there an unevenness in the consistency of your faith or in the practices of discipleship that draw you closer to Christ? Is your life so busy and distracted that Christ has been relegated to a little corner somewhere?

What are the rough places in your life? These are the areas that are tough to move through. These are the places where the going is very difficult. Are you experiencing rough places that are keeping you from placing Christ at the center?

Advent is a time of clearing room to receive Christ at the center and to experience the deep Joy of the Good News of Christmas.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let every heart prepare Him room!

DECEMBER 2
Charme Roberts

The Joy of Making Room

The famous line in “Joy to the World” — “let every heart prepare him room” — reminds me of an exercise I led in a small group years ago. I asked everyone to go home and count how many shirts, pants, and shoes they had. The point was of course to think about sharing more, buying less, and generally relieving of ourselves of the idea that more clothes or things would really bring us that much joy.

That exercise of cleaning out the closet and making more room, was easier for me than the idea of cleaning out the closet of my mind to make room for better stuff than is in there sometimes.

In my mind, for example, there is always a box full of unexamined ideas. Here I can pull out easy answers to hard questions and adorn them with the stuff in the other box labeled “false consensus syndrome.” (It’s really a thing). That’s the box containing the assumption that others agree with me, even if I don’t actually know that to be true.

These boxes take up too much space, and they are heavy and hard to move, and they can make a mess of my relationships.

How much better it would be to unclutter my mind a bit and leave room for more thoughtful questioning of what I think I know, and then perhaps more empathy and truth! Making room in my mind and heart for Jesus, means making room for changing, learning, changing, and repeating the cycle — so I can be a part of ‘joy to the world.’

DECEMBER 3
Rev. Jim Abel

Prepare Him Room — Hopeful Joy

Isaiah paints this picture: God’s people were in exile. They were suffering. They were hopeless. The psalmist also captured their hopelessness: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps...our captors demanded songs of joy... How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137)

But new hope springs forth. There is one coming on whom the spirit of wisdom and understanding will rest. He will judge the needy with righteousness...The wolf will live with the lamb...Refugees will return home.

When the outlook is bleak, God brings change, sometimes to endure, sometimes to flourish but always offering God’s love and joy. Change can come in unexpected ways...even as a baby. Hope, love, and joy came with a baby who eventually became Redeemer and Lord.

Invite Christ to heal your hurts and enrich your joy. Then you may discover hope for the living of these days. And you, too, can sing the songs of the Lord and repeat the sounding joy! Christmas blessings to all.

DECEMBER 4
Jenny Spidell

According to one of my seminary professors, “The birth of a child is God’s initiative to set everything right in the world.” The Christ child was perhaps the first child who was destined to set things right in the world, but “hopeful joy,” to me and Dr. Sprinkle, means that Jesus was just the first of many. We have the opportunity to learn from our mistakes, and with every new child that comes into this world we get a chance to raise them better. We can nurture the next generation towards what it looks like to have genuine wholeness in community not fragmented with -isms. We can work towards what it looks like to love *all* thy neighbors authentically, not just because it’s the ‘Christian’ thing to do, but because we want to.

For me, hopeful joy means waking up each day recognizing the new opportunity in front of me to make changes, to push boundaries, to show God’s love to someone that others deem unworthy. Hopeful joy is imagining a healthier, less polluted, home for my children. Hopeful joy is dreaming of an economy that strives for the flourishing of all created things instead of feeding into our addiction to consumerism. Hopeful joy is envisioning a United Methodist Church that isn’t content to let others do the work, but is willing to take risks to achieve what we mean when we say “thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Hopeful joy exists in the uncomfy spaces, in the places that get us outside our comfort zone. We can’t afford to wait for someone else to make the changes we’re hopeful for. In this season of Advent, as we approach the birth of the Christ child, what are you hopeful for? What do you see in the world around you that you wish was different? But also ask yourself: What can I do to change it?

DECEMBER 5
Rev. Phyllis Barren

“Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.” — Psalm 98:1

I love the Christmas season. I get very excited decorating my house and putting up 4 Christmas trees. I treasure all the Christmas parties and spending time with family and friends. I drive around all the different neighborhoods and go to Holiday in the Park to see the lights. However, my favorite part of Christmas is the **music**.

Music has been a part of creation since the beginning of time. Birds sing their songs. Trees rustle and strain with the blowing of the wind. Seas pound or gently lap in rhythmic waves on the shores. In the human experience, music resonates with the depths of our souls.

With all its melodies and harmonies, rhythms and refrains, music is a fitting expression of our love toward God. To keep our hearts tender, we too need to remember the Lord’s goodness, and one way to ensure we do not forget is to sing of his gracious love.

Singing of the holy, almighty, creator God reminds us who God is and who we are in relationship with a loving God.

Psalm 98 is an expression of jubilant, joyful praise. With trumpets blasting, hands clapping, and people singing and shouting for joy, there is a great celebration of all the wonderful things God has done — and all creation joins in!

In this Christmas season we can bring joy to this world by singing and telling others about the newborn Child.

Every day our lives can show that we are bringing joyful Praise to God. Our lives are the music that tells the story of the redemption and hope we have in Christ. Through our lives others hear the joyful music of what living in relationship with a loving God is all about. And hopefully they will want to be a part of that music too.

What music will your life express for the Lord today?

Prayer

God, you compose the melodies and harmonies of our lives, and you invite us to move in rhythm with you. May the song of our hearts be filled with joy and may the tune of our lives be pure and true. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 6
Rev. Kay Johnson

Psalm 98 as interpreted by Nan Merrill in *Psalms for Praying* is the psalm for this week in Advent. As I read it, I am reminded of her words in Psalm 106 which I use as part of my daily practice. She writes, “May we be bearers of joy.” What does it mean to be a bearer of Joy?

My pondering lead me to recognize that joy is not based on outcome. Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness usually comes from a positive result or an anticipated outcome i.e. fame, wealth or good fortune. Rather, joy comes from within when we forget ourselves, practice empathy for the neighbor and live in gratitude.

At “Room in the Inn,” we stand in circle with the guests as one of our guests says the blessing for the evening meal. These prayers are always about thanksgiving, appreciation and praise in the midst of many difficulties. In this circle, holding hands, I recognize that we are all connected to each other and to the Holy One. When visiting the Rocky Mountains, walking on a beach or looking at the stars at night, like the psalmist I am overcome by joy in the cosmos and how it is amazingly crafted and sustained! In all these settings, it seems to appear in those aha moments when I am conscious that the indwelling spirit of the Creator is present right here, right now. As author Judy Cannato writes, “The whole cosmos is a revelation of the Creator’s self-giving, which is love.

When the psalmist speaks of the spirit of the beloved, these words evoke such exuberance, they tumble off the page. Listen, make a joyful noise to Love’s eternal flame, break forth into joyful song and praise, the seas laugh, the waves clap their hands, the hills ring out with joy!! Why? The Beloved is steadfast, unconditional love and righteousness.”

Today, when most news is disturbing, the church and each one of us as the community of faith are called to be bearers of joy! Our message is counter intuitive and against the norm. And, Psalm 98 says it best, the Beloved radiates love to all the earth. All creation is held in that Love. Sing praises and shout for joy!

Prayer

Oh Beloved, our words of praise, and thanksgiving seem inadequate to the gift of joy which arrives unexpectedly. Open all of our senses to your presence and faithfulness to see the opportunities we have to be bearers of that joy to your world. Amen.

Question for journaling

How might we cultivate joy?

DECEMBER 7
Dr. David Grant

Seeing Through the Eyes of Faith

Religious faith is a way of seeing and experiencing the world. Christian faith involves seeing and experiencing the world as being graced by God, so that whatever befalls us is seen in a larger perspective than that of our own needs and pains. Christian faith is a *vision* on the world. And that vision begins in a story of the advent of Jesus Christ.

Advent is a season of anticipation of the coming of Christ. It is a Bible story about events long ago in a far-off land. But religiously, it is so much more than that. It’s about the continual coming of Christ into our lives today, the presence of God’s grace in Christ that reshapes the very way we see our world. Christmas is really about the continual occurrence of God’s presence in our lives which enables us to see with new eyes — eyes filled with joy and peace rather than despair and anger. Isaiah anticipates this new perspective when he envisions a time when “[Nations] shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” May the joy and peace we anticipate in Advent be the lenses through which you experience your life.

Prayer

Gracious God, remind us as we commemorate the event of Jesus’ birth so long ago, that you are present with us *now*, always and everywhere. May we see through the eyes of faith your pure unbounded grace that permeates all of creation and cradles us from our birth to our death. In the name of Jesus, whom we call the Christ, Amen.

Describe an experience that you’ve had in which the perspective of God’s grace has enabled you to see with new eyes.

DECEMBER 8
Rev. Tom McDermott

I'm in the TSA line at the airport — it's long and twisting and stretches clear to the end of the corridor. The sign above says "35-minute wait time" — my flight leaves in 45. I remember to breathe. It's shuffling hypnotically and I drift off, remembering the line at Velvet Taco the week before, music playing in the background. The employees spoke to each customer like they were seated with a friend, at a table, having a conversation about food, clothing styles, and hair color. "So, what kind of day are you having?" "Good morning, how ya' doin'?" "Honestly, I like more onions on my fish taco" said the young woman clarifying my order, "so, later, when I talk to friends, they'll know my day was a spicy one!" Each order they call out is accompanied by "Love the color of your hair," or "I hope this makes your day a little better," or "I look forward to seeing you next time." Suddenly, any stress I brought in with me that day had dissipated by the time I left with my tacos!

Back in line — still moving slowly — we pass one another a third and fourth time, awkwardly trying to avoid looking too directly at each other, though I am starting to feel oddly connected to these people and tempted to start up a conversation. "Hey, didn't I just see you a minute ago? We should be friends!"

It's all seriousness in the TSA line, though, with an implicit fear or anxiety that accompanies the process. And I get it. We want to be safe. And we don't want to miss our flight. But what we may be missing in such a moment, like all our moments, is joy. In all our lines and routines and even challenging, frustrating moments, I wonder, "If joy is possible, how does one prepare the way for it in such a place, or a time, as this?"

John the Baptist felt something, so he dressed up crazy and started shouting, "Make way for joy. Make a path for love! Cause it's already here!" And maybe that's the ticket — we don't wait for it. We jump into the lifeline and take it on faith — the little moments of joy at the heart of the matter that hold the whole thing together, even when things seem to be falling apart. Life can be anxious or mundane, or failing to meet my expectations? Waiting for it doesn't help. "Repent" says John. "Turn around, take notice! It's here!" The 14th century poet, Rumi, wrote, "Your task is not to seek out love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it." Joy — the heart of God in the heart of life — are always present.

It just needs a path.

Prayer

Holy One, in this very moment, and the next, and the next, I will clear a path in my anxiousness or my anger or my cynicism, with a deep breath and curious heart, and mine the path for joy.

DECEMBER 9
Larry Ammerman

Music is what ties Christmas together

Joy to the World! The Lord has come! Let every heart prepare him room and let heaven and nature sing! What wonderful news! Let us all make room in our hearts and minds for teachings and example of our Savior.

Growing up as a preacher's kid, my fondest memories of Advent were 11:00 pm Christmas Eve services when I was young, and it was very special to stay up until midnight. The bells in the sanctuary would toll at the end of the service signifying Christmas Day, as we exited the sanctuary into the chilled night air. The music and singing carols in those Christmas Eve services were the highlights and have always been a fitting climax to the Advent season. But music throughout Advent is always the common thread that reminds me of the Christmas story and the gift a Savior. My parents always had Christmas music playing while the tree was being decorated, a tradition that I continue today. While I have heard the Christmas stories innumerable times throughout my life, it is the music that brings me back to that childlike emotion of the **wonder** of the Christmas Gift, our Savior and our example of the love of God. The music and the story reminds me that God came into the world as an infant, growing an living life like each of us, understanding what it means to be fully human and an example of how we are to live and love to all of people who are God's children.

DECEMBER 10
Linda Abel

Repeat the sounding Joy — Loving Joy

“Comfort my people...speak compassionately...every valley will be raised up and every mountain and hill will be flattened...uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain.” Isaiah’s words describe the experience of each of us. At different times, we hope for compassionate words of comfort, for the valley to be raised up, the mountain to be flattened, the rough places plain.

What is your valley of despair, or hopelessness? What is your mountain that seems insurmountable? What rough place are you going through? Who will bring comfort and speak words of compassion to you?

In our dementia ministry, we know there are many in despair, hopelessness, facing an insurmountable mountain, going through the roughest times of their lives. How can we bring comfort and speak words of compassion to them?

Hear these words based on Matthew 25:

“I was hungry and had forgotten how to eat and you fed me.

I was thirsty and I couldn’t tell you when I needed a drink and you gave me a drink without my asking. I was lost and lonely, losing a sense of myself and those I love, a stranger in a world I could no longer understand, and you treated me like a good friend.

I was naked, not remembering how, nor having the skill to dress myself and you dressed me and helped me to look nice.

I was sick with a disease I did not choose and did not understand, and you did not shy away from me. I was in prison, locked in a prison inside myself, unable to communicate and you visited and reassured me.”

And the king will reply to them “I assure that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.”

You can be the reason that these will find hopeful joy in this season.

DECEMBER 11
Dr. Len Delony

“We are fragile creatures, and it is from this weakness, not despite it, that we discover the possibility of true joy.” — Desmond Tutu

Every year around November 13th, I remember a particular evening when I was in 7th grade. Looking in the bathroom mirror at home soon after football practice, I noticed a knot in my neck. Within six days I had a biopsy, was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, and moved to Memphis for treatment at St. Jude Children’s Hospital. At the end of a two-week blur, I found myself in the familiar traditions of Thanksgiving Day. But I was too sick to enjoy the day’s feast. Instead of hunger, I felt only a haunting emptiness that seemed to say I was in a strange land.

After 6 months of struggling through overwhelming chemo, radiation, and surgery, when I was finally able to return to my familiar home, I realized that I, too, had become strange and unfamiliar. I noticed that many of my friends were afraid to visit me and did not know what to do or say. In just 6 months I had gone from playing football at 115 lbs. down to 75 lbs. and was too weak to attend school.

But it was in that time of fragility, isolation and pain, that I discovered something deeply healing that probably helped save my life. Lying silently in the back yard in the warmth of springtime, I noticed a mockingbird singing with great zeal. And something inside me awakened to the gift of “Presence” in that moment. I began to notice that I was surrounded by a symphony of nature’s sounds, sights, and smells. In the midst of my weakness, I discovered a deep joy and delight.

Now I know that my heart was being prepared and helping to make room for the very real and personal experience of the Presence of Christ. And the experience of that Presence has changed the way I see everything. I discovered at my core, a gift I was receiving from cancer — a deep sense of celebration within, that filled me with gratitude.

Looking from the outside, I had not moved. But on the inside, where I once had felt isolated with deep sadness, I was now experiencing a sense of wonder and wholeness. As in the familiar hymn, I was experiencing “heaven and nature” singing with joy to the world, and of a peace that passes understanding. I suddenly knew deep within that I was part of something much bigger. I began to realize that I had “new ears to hear and new eyes to see.” How awesomely amazing is this grace!

After almost 50 years, though in times of busy distraction I may forget, the sanctuary of nature (especially when I hear a mockingbird singing) reminds me to prepare my heart, and to follow the songs of “Presence” toward renewed purpose and the power of compassion. I now experience it as listening with “ears of the heart” in ever deepening, Contemplative Prayer. (St. Paul wrote: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17.)

Today, take time (perhaps in nature) to let God quiet your soul, to breathe deeply in the Spirit, and prayerfully let go of your own words so you might silently prepare your heart to receive God’s Word. Gently remember a difficult time in your life when you felt especially vulnerable. And listen with “the ears of your heart” for the songs of deep joy and the new life being born within you.

DECEMBER 12

Gaye Fuller

Joy to the World

It might have been a cold day that December in the middle of The Great Depression, when a baby girl was born into a rather insecure family. Even with these conditions, the birth was considered a joyous event. The parents, as well as a sister and two brothers welcomed the baby to love and care for. After her parent's untimely death, she and her three siblings went to live with their grandmother. "Wooie," also lived there in order to take care of the children while Gran put her upcoming teacher retirement on hold. The children never knew that money was tight — they only knew the joy of being loved.

There was a large back yard full of interesting animals and places to play. Living close to a school yard, the boys spent much of their time there, playing ball. Sometimes the little girl would be found playing ball over there too. In those days you could play most anywhere in the neighborhood.

Often friends that had grown up with her mother came to visit. They were important visitors because they brought stories of their childhood together — and sometimes they even brought gifts. The stories were especially appreciated.

As a young woman, after college and teaching for a few years, she married a man who was solidly true and devoted to her. Their marriage of 50 years brought forth three children who have honored their parents with lives of responsibility and truth.

The seven "perfect" grandchildren have been the icing on the cake — however, they could lose their place by the newest addition — a Great Grandson!

All through her life, this woman has observed God's Gift of Joy! — in times of happiness and even in times of sorrow. Joy was there to greet her birth; and especially for her when her grandmother altered her own life to benefit the children. Her wedding was a Joyful affair; Joy accompanied the birth of every child and grandchild. And, in her deepest grief, God was there to direct her; showing her how to use His Joy for the benefit of others.

The baby girl is now an older woman (some might even call her an "old woman"). She welcomes each day in anticipation of hearing one more Sounding Joy of God's Love!

Prayer

Gracious Lord, the Angels sang of the Joy given to us the night you were born in Bethlehem. Help us to remember you were sent in love, and your love is to be shared with all people. We are all children of God, who loves us and asks us to love others as ourselves. It is up to us to spread that Joy to the World. We pray that we fulfill that command and spread the Joy of Christmas all our days. Amen.

Journaling

"A Lifetime of Joy"

DECEMBER 13

Robert Stovall

This past Sunday, Choral Union presented to our congregation, *JUBILATE DEO* by composer and arranger, Dan Forrest. As the choir prepared this incredible work, it came to me that within each movement, and there are seven of them, God is telling us to **do something**. We must do seven things according to this adaptation of *Psalm 100!*

First, we must ALL SHOUT TO THE LORD WITH GLADNESS! Even if we can't sing, we can still shout the praises to our Lord.

Second, we must DO SOMETHING FOR THE LORD. Why? We do this because God makes us happy. He fills us with joy!"

Third, we must come to where the Lord is. We can sing to him, we can talk to him, but, first, we must come to him. God will always hear all that we say and sing, by using prayer as an avenue to converse with him.

Fourth, we must know who God is. God will be faithful to his servants and his servants will be faithful to God.

Fifth, we must go to where God's people are and worship with them, as well as tell God how much you love him.

Sixth, Say thank-you to the God for everything. We must thank him always, because he is always loving and kind to us.

Seventh, we must **Bless His Name**. This means that God likes us to say good things about him. Seven things we must do. Do all this because the LORD is good. He is always loving and kind. He will always do what he has promised to us. **THE LORD IS A GREAT GOD!**

DECEMBER 14
Matt Britt

“Sing to the Lord a new song because he has done wonderful things! Sing your praises to the Lord with the lyre — with the lyre and the sound of music. With trumpets and a horn blast, shout triumphantly before the Lord, the king! Let the sea and everything in it roar; the world and all its inhabitants too. Let all the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains rejoice out loud altogether before the Lord.” —Selections from Psalm 98

Humankind is always seeking out music, and our brains are capable of hearing just about anything as music. We naturally pick out patterns of sounds that repeat or are melodic in the world around us and will attempt to place them together inside our head to form music — because music helps us better understand and connect with the world around us.

But music is not uniquely human. Birds use similar pitch relationships and combination of notes as human composers and are capable of transposing pitches across keys and creating music in harmony. Monkeys use rhythm to communicate with one another about danger or food and can match tempo at varying speeds. Humpback whales use musical phrases similar to ours and combine and repeat those phrases to compose songs as long as a movement in a symphony.

Even beyond the animal world, ambient sound is a central component of the world around us and the music of nature. The ambient sound of an environment mimics that of an orchestra — each creature has its own frequency and amplitude and works in concert with the other voices around it, all underscored by the sound of the wind moving the leaves or the water running through the creek bed.

And all these things were created by a God that calls them good and beautifully and wonderfully made — including us. So we add our voices to the music of the world around us, singing out to praise the God that is always reaching out to us, never gives up on us and has called us beloved and good.

DECEMBER 15
Mark Burrows

Make the Blessings Flow

Notice that the line from the carol is NOT — *He comes to make his blessings where there were no blessings before.*

It's — *He comes to make his blessings FLOW.*

The blessings are already there! How might you help make God's blessings flow?

You could:

- Offer to do a new chore around the house. Helping is a blessing.
- Call a relative just to say, “I love you.” Connection is a blessing.
- Donate canned food to the Mission. Giving is a blessing.
- Pray for someone in need. Prayer is a blessing.
- Go sit with someone who's all alone. Reaching out is a blessing.

And hey — blessings work in many directions. While you're actively blessing others, make sure to recognize ways others are blessing *you*.

- A funny joke is a blessing.
- A snuggly dog is a blessing.
- A warm blanket on a cold night is a blessing.
- Clean water is a blessing.
- Food to eat is a blessing.
- A friend is a blessing.
- Family is a blessing.

You are worthy to receive blessings. You are worthy to *be* a blessing.

God bless you.

DECEMBER 16
Rev. Linda McDermott

“Joy can wrap its arms around the *full* spectrum of the *human experience*.” — Rob Bell

In his time spent with two world leaders meeting together, Douglas Abrams, author of the book, *The Book of Joy*, commented on a conversation between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu regarding suffering and compassion. Both had either witnessed or been subjected to horrific suffering — one in exile and constant threat of death for over 60 years, the other leading the path to reconciliation in the aftermath of Apartheid. (ex. Desmond Tutu witnessed the meeting of a man who had slaughtered with a machete the entire family of another man — and there was forgiveness, a new beginning, a growing friendship, and peace.) Yet, these two men expressed genuine joy in life. How? “Begin with compassion.” Compassion, they both agreed, knits people together. “When we recognize that we are all connected, one family — the human family — we are then able to feel and show compassion. And “compassion,” they said, ‘is the birth of true joy’.”

“Joy is not the absence of suffering or tragedy but the ability to lessen one’s self-absorption.” — Bishop Tutu

“Discovering more joy does not, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreaks without being broken.” — Bishop Tutu

In our scripture reading about Mary, her joy is the result of her compassion for her people who suffered. She understood that her own personal suffering was a part of the suffering of all, even if different in kind. But, to turn away from an act of compassion was, for her as a woman of great faith and enduring hope, her true humanity. And so, her compassion made way to joy — not happiness, a fleeting experience, but true and abiding joy. A joy that would be for ALL people, most especially those who suffered.

During this Advent season, recognize the connectedness of all people and all creation and let that spur you on to compassion — not just a feeling, but a willingness to be connected — and that compassion will open you to the path of true and abiding joy.

DECEMBER 17
Elaine Johnson

Unabashed Joy, Joyful Joy

Hearing a baby laugh or watching puppies play comes to mind when I think of unabashed joy. However, in Nan C. Merrill’s translation of Psalm 98 she writes “Let the voices of all people blend in harmony, in unison let the people magnify the Beloved!” this brings a totally different mindset to unabashed joy. I have traveled with the youth choir from FUMCFW now for 10 summers when they go on tour. They sing at nursing homes, retirement facilities, and children’s homes. The last thing we do as a group is sing “What A Wonderful World” *with* the residents. Everyone is touching someone else, holding their hand, laying a hand on a shoulder, or simply touching an arm. We are all connected as one. The joy on the faces of the people in the room always brings tears to my eyes. They aren’t sad tears but tears of joy as I watch the youth and the elderly become one voice in song. We sang one year at the memorial for Martin Luther King Junior. We were in a large circle and many others, not part of our group, that were visiting at the same time joined with us as we sang. It was a powerful moment in my life.

There must have been many moments in Mary’s life when she felt joy hearing her son’s magical baby laugh or watching a newborn donkey or calf play. There must have been times that she sang to Jesus and others may have joined with her, filling her eyes with tears of joy. Mary knew what the birth of her son meant to the world and she rejoiced. What are things in your life big or small that you can rejoice in this season?

Prayer

God, help us to find unabashed joy as we move closer to celebrating the birth of Jesus. Help us listen for the laughter and watch for playfulness. Hear us sing praises of Joy to the World, the Lord is come! Amen.

DECEMBER 18

Kat Bair

The “Christmas story” is one in which most all the characters are teenagers. Mary, Joseph, probably at least some of the shepherds, were teenagers. And I may be biased, as someone who works with teenagers, but I believe that is fundamentally necessary to the story itself.

Dr. Cari Parcels, a First Church member, and friend of the youth ministries, when asked what the biggest opportunity teenagers have, answered that it is that they “believe they really can do anything.” Teenagers and young people have historically been on the front edge of political and social movements, innovation, and discovery, because they are naïve enough to think that the world really can change, and tend to change it in the process.

In the Old Testament, when Sarah is told she will have a child in her old age through God, she laughs, because she believes there is no way this can be. She, like so many adults, has come to believe the disappointments of our world are truer than the promises of God. When Mary is told she will bear a child through the Holy Spirit, she doesn’t laugh — she praises God, and she runs to a trusted older family member, Elizabeth. Elizabeth doesn’t tell her “that’s ridiculous,” or “you’re being unrealistic” — she cries out “God has blessed you above all women.” She says it because the work that God has done in her, in giving her a child in her old age, recognizes the work God has done in Mary.

Those of us who have felt called, inspired, motivated, transformed by the Holy Spirit, when we are confronted by the young people around us, who are claiming great ambitions, ideas, calls themselves, ought to follow the example of Elizabeth. We ought not to speak from the war-weariness of the world, which may tempt us to tell them they are being ridiculous, or even laugh, but speak from the indisputable truth of the transformative work that God has done in us. We ought to respond to the calls that teenagers articulate to us as Elizabeth does — being filled with the Holy Spirit, and blurting out that they are blessed, and “happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.” We know that God has worked in us, called us, transformed us, so, yes, of course, God is at work in you!

Because it’s only then, only when Elizabeth tells her that yes, she is called, yes, she is blessed, yes, she is to be the mother of the Son of God, that Mary sings the Magnificat. This teenage girl knows the truth in her heart from the beginning, but it is only when an adult sees, recognizes, validates, and celebrates the sacred work she has begun that Mary truly sings.

The Christmas story needs teenagers, who believe they really can change the world, who when confronted by an angel telling them that they will be the mother to the Son of God, don’t laugh, but say “Let it be with me just as you have said.” And it needs adults, its needs Elizabeth’s who shelter teenage girls and see and affirm their gifts and callings, and give them the courage they need to shine, to lead, and even, to sing.

DECEMBER 19

Rev. Larry Grubb

Mary’s song of joy (Luke 1:46-55) begins with these words, “With all my heart I glorify the Lord.” This is an illustration of unabashed joy!

I have a wonderful friend, in his eclectic search for truth says, “Christianity is love, Joy and peace”. He lives a life of unabashed joy, any time I am around him. He is continually reaching out for truth that enriches his life.

I live in a place where my main living space has an east double glass door. I get to experience a wonderful sunrise, almost daily. This new light of day is God saying to the world and to me, “I love you. This light will never fail you. This light gives life to every living thing.” This is unabashed joy!

We live in a world where negative forces invite us to a life that is dark and foreboding. However, there are far more people worldwide, who practice love and compassion. This is unabashed joy when we choose to see it.

So, we can tune into Mary’s song of joy and sing from our heart, with deep feeling and meaning, “Joy to The World”! This is unabashed joy, which lifts our world. We can see it in many ways, when we choose to focus our attention on this joy.

Prayer

God, thank you for the limitless ways joy can fill our life. May I learn to see more and more of this joy each new day.

Reflection

Today I will count all the ways joy comes flowing into my life and I will celebrate this reality with gratitude!

DECEMBER 20
Dr. Bill Longworth

It was after Christmas, in the afternoon of one of those wonderful Texas winter days, sunny and in the 70s. We were in the backyard of our home; my beloved Susan had recently returned home following an extended stay in a rehab facility after a very serious illness. She was standing on the steps by the backdoor.

Our daughter Sarah was there with her two boys, Rhett and Evan. They had just ridden their new bikes. Our son David and his family were there. Andi, our daughter-in-law, was holding their five-month-old baby boy, William. David was swinging Andrew, their one-and-a-half-year-old son, by his arms so he could kick the soccer ball as he played with Rhett and Evan.

I stopped and stood for a moment, taking into myself, how fortunate I was to be present at such a moment with our small extended family. I took a deep breath and thought, “it doesn’t get any better than this.”

Prayer

Help us, O God, to stop, pause, and see the wonder that is around us. May we allow it to continually, enrich our lives.

DECEMBER 21
Peggy Graff

While growing up, my family attended First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Hastings, Nebraska. My dad was an elder and taught the adult Sunday school class every week. My mom regularly arranged meals for funerals and took food to shut-ins. I recall the feeling of joy and delight when she and I took food to a particular lady who was blind and temporarily bed-ridden. She was the sweetest person and had a dog who was attentive and watched over her. I cannot recall our conversations with her and other shut-ins we visited over time, but I vividly remember the feeling of joy that I got out of just being with them. Being raised by parents whose lives were centered in Christ was a blessing for me; and I learned that serving is a way of life that brings joy. At the age of 12, the church allowed me to take pipe organ lessons and practice in the sanctuary. By the age of 14, I became the church organist; and the joy of serving continued. As an adult, I have continued to glorify God and serve others through music as a choral music teacher in the schools and as organist of this magnificent church. It is a blessing to “serve the Lord with gladness” every day I am alive — what a joyful opportunity!

DECEMBER 22
Dr. Mike Marshall

“Let the sea laugh... Let the waters clap their hands; let the hills ring out with joy before the Beloved...”

I absolutely love this translation of a portion of Psalm 98, by Nan C. Merrill. For me, it is a reinforcement of two important realities. One is that God is present with us in all ways and in all circumstances, including the wonder of our created world. The second reminder for me is that God is most profoundly experienced in moments of laughter, applause, and joyful gratitude for this world and to this world. As our honored hymn begins, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King...”

There is certainly a peace that comes from the kind of joy and happiness that begins with our focus on others, instead of only thinking of ourselves. Rabbi Harold Kushner has described this in such a tender and meaningful way. Here are his words: “The happiest people I know are people who don’t even think about being happy. They just think about being good neighbors, good friends, and good people. And then happiness sort of sneaks in the back window while they are busy doing good.”

My prayer for all of us on this Sunday before Christmas is that happiness will truly sneak in our back windows while we are busy doing good — while we are laughing and applauding and singing of our gratitude — and may it surround us with the peaceful joy that God longs for each one of us to embody and enjoy!

DECEMBER 23
Rev. Chuck Graff

When we were children, my older sister Claudia, my younger brother John, and I always looked forward with great anticipation and excitement to Advent and Christmas. Our father would always bring home a live evergreen tree and we would decorate it early in the season with bright lights, traditional family decorations, and top it with a bright star that we kept for many years. Our mother loved to bake, and so we always had all kinds of homemade Christmas cookies, chocolate fudge, the best divinity ever and lots of hot chocolate and popcorn. Our grandfather pastor, William A. Albright, had the hobby of making outdoor Christmas decorations in his shop, and so we had bright electric candles on stands on the front porch and other colorful decorations. Christmas Eve services were always special when we would sing in the children and youth choirs, dress up in homemade costumes for Christmas pageants, and sing the beloved Christmas hymns and carols by candlelight that we had memorized from birth.

Christmas is all about love and joy that keep coming to us as a gift by God’s grace, and the coming of Jesus Christ among us on that original Christmas day and beyond is truly experienced best in a personal, incarnational and transformative heart-felt way through community with our families, friends and church. The Psalmist writes, “O sing to the Beloved a new song, for Love has done marvelous things. Yes, your steadfast Love and faithfulness are ever-present gifts in our lives.” Psalm 98 As we all create new and special traditions, memories and unique Advent and Christmas experiences again this year in our homes, with friends and within our congregation, may the love and joy of Christ come to us all anew that we might sing a new song of praise and thank God for the marvelous things God is still doing among us with one another.

DECEMBER 24

Dr. Zhenya Gurina-Rodriguez

I clearly remember the night when my son was born. It was 11:11 pm when I saw him for the first time. I held him in my hands, I looked at his face. I wanted to soak in all the joy and love that I felt toward my child. In that moment I wondered how this little human being could turn my entire world upside down and change who I am — mommy. My joy was overwhelming!

Baby Jesus brought everlasting joy to our world, the joy that never seizes. We share this joy with Mary, Joseph and all the other witnesses who stood by the manger that night. He is the source of joy of God's presence in our lives:

Let heaven celebrate! Let the earth rejoice!

Let the sea and everything in it roar!

Let the countryside and everything in it celebrate!

Then all the trees of the forest too

will shout out joyfully

before the Lord because he is coming!

He is coming to establish justice on the earth!

He will establish justice in the world rightly.

He will establish justice among all people fairly.

— Psalm 96:11-13

DECEMBER 25

On Christmas Day there is no better devotional reflection than we find in Luke 2:1-20. Today let's read this familiar passage together, in the ancient prayer practice of *Lectio Divina* to see how these words and phrases create new reverberations of Joy within you in light of our 2019 Advent focus on Joy to the World.

Lectio Divina (literally *divine reading*) is a way of becoming immersed in the Scriptures very personally. By reflecting prayerfully on the words of scripture, read four times in very specific ways, we experience these words in a more deeply personal way. In Trappist Monk Fr. Thomas Keating's "Open Mind, Open Heart," Fr. Keating describes the four stages of *Lectio Divina* as compass points around a circle, with the Holy Spirit moving seamlessly between them.

Here are the basics of this ancient prayer practice:

Set aside 20 – 30 minutes to read, reflect, and respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings. Sit quietly for a few moments to settle your mind. Some people like to light a candle — nothing magical about that, but the flame and the fragrance can definitely set the mood for a quiet, sacred devotional time. After a brief prayer of invitation, maybe something like, "God, please help me to connect with these words and through them, more deeply with you."

1. Lectio (Read) — Our first reading of the scripture offers an opportunity to get to know the passage itself — and to open our awareness as we read to any words or phrases that seem to jump out. By waiting patiently — never forcing — we open ourselves to God's gentle guidance.

2. Meditatio (Reflect) — In the second reading of this same passage, we focus more specifically on those things that got our attention during the first reading. It's OK to just read a few verses at a time to examine more closely where God is nudging us. Then we spend a few moments reflecting on what God is saying to us through these nudges. Sometimes it helps to ask God to help us by making this focus more clear.

3. Oratio (Respond) — Read the entire passage once again, and this time, we get to respond. Some people like to journal their wonderings and whatever comes to them; others like to respond in prayer, talking to God about what we're hearing and feeling through this reading on this day.

4. Contemplatio (Rest) — This is the final reading, after which we simply sit in silence for about 10 minutes. This is nothing fancy — prayer or meditation — but rather a time of stillness in which we allow God to work within us. If we catch our mind wandering back to the business of our day, we gently return it to stillness.

Luke 2:1-20 Common English Bible (CEB)

Jesus' birth

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Announcement to shepherds

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

DECEMBER 26
Rev. Bob Weathers

And Now The News

Christmas is the news of great joy. What a great Christmas this can be for some who have waited for that word and despaired about its coming. "AND NOW THE NEWS." Christmas always comes, every year, and hope and joy are restored.

How common is the scene of Christmas; a manger, a barn, a few cattle and sheep, shepherds, and man named Joseph and Mary. Common folk in a common setting. Suddenly there was with them the Glory of God. That can happen over and over again in the lives of people today.

How long has it been since we really prayed? Wouldn't it be something of a wonder if, at this Christmas time, our prayer could be made real: touched by the Glory of God.

What does it mean to us to find a place of worship like this on Sunday morning? Wouldn't it be a wonder if this Christmas Sunday is endowed with a sense of the Glory of God? There is the service we have given, which may have become routine. Suppose that God touched that service with a new freshness and meaning. God's grace could help us see that it is no longer a chore or a duty but a divine enterprise as we minister to God's children.

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come." Christmas comes to remind us that we are not forgotten; God is in the midst of our lives; we are loved by this great God.

Sing the glorious Christmas hymn: "Joy to the world." Carry the joy, hope and love into our busy and challenging world. We are not alone, God is with us. Let God be praised.

"AND NOW THE NEWS!" Will you hear it?

DECEMBER 27
Lane Davis

"He rules the world with truth and grace..."

Consider, for a moment, the nature of authority. History teaches us that, for most of human existence, the just wielding of authority has been a rare and notable event. While we remember the names and stories of good kings, presidents, and rulers, the fact is that there are many more examples from history of bad leadership than good. In the bible, the names of Hezekiah and Josiah are lauded, but the book of Kings documents many more failed rulers than successful ones.

This week, our New Testament scripture tells the story of a brutal ruler who, out of jealousy and spite, slaughtered innocent children in order to consolidate and protect his power. This is just one more example of bad authority used for evil purposes. And yet, even in the midst of the worst use of authority, God's love is not thwarted. In fact, the Bible uses this event to situate the story of Jesus within the framework of a previous example from Israelite history of nefarious rule and God's redemption: the Hebrew exodus from Egypt. Just as Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt, we, the readers, are meant to ponder this previous example of God's deliverance of his people from a brutal and terrible ruler. The point could not be clearer: we will be subject to the misuse and abuse of authority here on earth, but God's rule will ultimately deliver our salvation.

Truly, God *does* rule with truth and grace.

Prayer

Gracious God, rule in the lives of your people. Deliver us from evil, and create in us new hearts of love, justice, and mercy. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Thought

When have you experienced deliverance into truth and grace? Where might you be the one to deliver someone else into God's truth this day?

DECEMBER 28
Melinda Smoot

In her 2018 book, *Dare to Lead*, Dr. Brené Brown calls upon new research conducted with thought leaders, change makers, and culture shifters to inspire us to take fundamental human ideals — connection, courage, and empathy, for example — and turn them into tools for becoming more conscientious leaders.

Does this wisdom apply only to leaders of companies, organizations and “mighty nations?” Can we as individuals in our own circles of influence achieve the “Peaceful Joy” that will inspire others to, figuratively speaking, “beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools?” What does that even *mean* in today’s world?

Can we really find techniques for inspiring healthy connections and well-being instead of weaponizing ideas and practices that seek to divide and conquer? How can we, in times of fear, anger, and turmoil, find the way to put down our swords and spears and “walk in God’s paths . . .” and “by the Lord’s light?”

The secret, Brown maintains, is finding the courage to embrace our vulnerability — in the face of “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” to plant ourselves firmly in this birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy and creativity.

Finding ways to hold, build, and maintain this new kind of tool bucket of “iron plows and pruning tools” seems like a tall order to me. It’s one thing to know and understand these ideals as the way of realizing God’s kingdom — and quite another to make our way every day up this sometimes steep and rocky climb. What keeps us climbing? What helps steady our feet as we attempt to stay on God’s paths and walk “by the Lord’s light?”

I think it’s the joy. That deep, steady, sustaining awareness of God’s presence all around us and within us. From God’s undeniable fingerprints on the beauty of nature to the certainty of this light we find in others — and in community with our fellow climbers.

What’s in your bucket? How might it be transformed into something more healing, connective, or joyful by the active intent to beckon a deeper sense of joy? What kind of risk or courage would that beckoning entail? How can we recognize God’s light in those who climb with us?

DECEMBER 29
Rev. Lance Marshall

It has passed. The steady awareness of the coming Christmas grew for a season, culminated on a hallowed morning, and now prepares for the beginning of a new year.

So how was it?

Was there anything worth celebrating? Was there anything good? Amidst the thousand opportunities to feel stressed or overwhelmed, did you sense any joy? Did you recognize Emmanuel, God-with-us, in the midst of all the chaos? Did you see the Christ in Christmas?

For our final devotion, let’s pause to follow the words of the Psalmist, who exhorts us to recount God’s faithful acts and to sing praises for who God is and what God has done. God is always present and active in our lives, and Christmas is the perfect time to recognize where we’ve recognized God in our midst. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Emmanuel, God-with-us,

Thank you for your presence in my life.

For all the ways, seen and unseen, you shower me with grace.

Your mercy is unending, your love is enduring.

I praise you, God, for all that you have done and are doing.

May I go forward with eyes to see and ears to hear
the coming of your Kingdom?

In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICES

Tuesday, December 24, 2019
Holy Communion served at all services

NOON CANDLELIGHT SERVICE

Noon – 1:00 pm | Sanctuary | Rev. Lance Marshall

Offering the same special First Church Christmas Eve worship experience as our 7:00, 9:00, and 11:00 pm evening services, including communion, candlelight, and special music, this midday service provides an earlier alternative to our evening services.

FAMILY CANDLELIGHT SERVICES

3:30 & 5:00 pm | Sanctuary | Dr. Tim Bruster & Mister Mark Burrows

Come join us for a family-friendly evening filled with all our cherished Christmas Eve experiences — candlelight, Christmas carols, Communion, and the wondrous story of Jesus' birth — PLUS our special kid-favorite Christmas Eve puppet show!

TRADITIONAL CANDLELIGHT SERVICES

7:00, 9:00 & 11:00 pm | Sanctuary | Dr. Tim Bruster

“The Lord is Come: Incarnate Joy” | Luke 2: 1-20; Psalm 96

The cherished experiences of Christmas and the beauty of this night will be enhanced by uplifting music and proclamation of the Word, celebrating Holy Communion, singing carols, and lighting candles. Sanctuary doors will open 20 minutes prior to each service, and special music will be performed by First Church Brass and our own Peggy Graff, Organist and Associate Director of Music and Worship Arts, prior to the service.

ACCESSIBLE VALET PARKING

3:00 – 10:30 pm | 5th Street

Complimentary and Accessible Valet Parking will be available from 3:00 – 10:30 pm on Christmas Eve for anyone with mobility challenges. To reach the valet station, please enter the church parking lot's 7th Street entrance, and then come straight through to 5th Street where you will find the Parking Stand. After dropping off your car there, use the Garden courtyard ramp entrance right into the Sanctuary for our 3:30, 5:00, 7:00, and 9:00 pm services. Sanctuary doors will open 20 minutes prior to each service.

