

Libertyville Covenant Church

Advent Devotional

2019



Maranatha Marathon



*Welcome to our
LCC Advent devotional book for 2019.
As we begin this season of waiting and
preparation, planning and decoration, it is
important that we ground ourselves daily in
both the Word of God and the community of
believers. And so, we offer this opportunity to
hear reflections about Advent from various
friends of our church community. This year we
are looking at our life together through the lens
of Discipleship. This season, we are
preparing not just for Christmas but for Christ's
future return. And so as we ponder the topics
of Hope (week 1), Peace (week 2), Joy (week
3), Love (week 4) and Jesus Himself (week 5),
we do so together. So begin each reading with
a short prayer (it is the Holy Spirit working
through this booklet that will make this anything
more than interesting reading) and end it with a
short time of reflection.*

*We hope this will be an aid to your worship
this Advent season.*

*Pastor Steve and
the Worship Ministry Team*

Sunday, December 1

Luke 1:26-38

Hope

As you look to the future, both the near future and the distant future, which lens are you looking through? For Mary, her answer to this question completely changed, and changed her future forever. Though she is the main character in this story, she only has two lines, and each shows a different lens through which she looks forward to the future.

An angel shares the future, both the immediate future and the distant future, and she first sees it through the lens of the world. This lens is skeptical, cynical, untrusting... and warped. When you look through a warped lens, everything is distorted. Promised (by an angel, no less) that she will give birth to the Messiah, she questions and she doubts. You can hear the raised eyebrow and quirked lip in her response: "How can that be?"

But the angel continues, and suddenly she switches lenses. Rather than the lens of this world, she looks ahead through the lens of hope. This lens is trusting, honest, reflective... and whole. Not only doesn't this lens warp reality, it sharpens it into focus. She sees God's power instead of her inability, and her whole response changes: "Ok, I'll do it."

What path of discipleship led her to this maturity that can consciously switch lenses in mid stride? Who were her mentors? Who taught her? Gabriel's message clarified her future, but her hope had been there all along. Only hope can help us switch lenses as we gaze into the future.

- Pastor Steve Larson

Monday, December 2

Isaiah 11:1-10

Hope

When you think of a banner what comes to mind? We used to think first about headlines that spread across a newspaper proclaiming the biggest happenings of the day. These banners helped us exult when our team won a championship (maybe a few households still have some framed in basements or man caves). Banner headlines also announced great accomplishments, joyous rescues, tragic accidents, humbling defeats, and many other events of extraordinary importance. Not all the time, but often banners brought us hope that the future would be better.

Now, we're more likely to think of banner ads that pop up on our electronic devices, blaring advertisements for some product we have little interest in. These banners are annoyances to be swiped away from our lives. Such banners seem trivial and easily forgotten. Sometimes people get fooled by a flashy blurb or photo and click on a link that leads them into a flurry of attempts to break away from electronic entrapments, hoping to avoid negative consequences from yielding to enticement. We hope to avoid such painful outcomes.

Which kind of banner do we associate with the Advent? There were no banner headlines announcing the birth of the Root of Jesse. Out of Jesse's roots came a Branch, whose arrival brought hope in a quiet way. Yet, although there was tragedy and suffering along the way, the birth of Jesus led to events more hopeful and joyous than any others in history. And, this history is unfinished, as the Branch from Jesse will bring a new era of righteousness and faithfulness. Indeed, according to Isaiah 11:10, in that day Jesus will act as a banner for all people to draw them to his place of rest. This is our glorious hope that Isaiah long foretold.

- David Oppedahl

Tuesday, December 3

Isaiah 40:1-5

Hope

Isaiah was a prophet during a long period of moral and social decline in the kingdom of Judah and the subsequent exile. Yesterday we focused on a prophecy from the first part of the Isaiah, written before the fall of Jerusalem. Today's passage marks the opening of the second part of Isaiah, sometimes called "later Isaiah" that was written to God's people stranded in Babylon.

It is easy to see why we include these verses in our meditations during the first week of Advent when we focus on the theme of hope. Of course, to the exiled Jews in Babylon, these words brought hope that their time of banishment and punishment was soon to end. Yahweh had not forgotten them, they were still His chosen people, and He was soon to return. Isaiah writes as the messenger of God, His prophet,

and proclaims to them that "the mouth of the Lord has spoken it." Later in chapter 55, he reminds them that God is true to His word and that His word never fails to accomplish His will.

Looking back from this side of the cross, we know that this prophecy foretells the arrival of John the Baptist, and of Jesus as the one to travel the paths that have been made straight, the "glory of the Lord" that has now been revealed to the whole world. He is the Christ, the one who is our ultimate hope. In fact, all four gospel authors look back to this passage as proof that Jesus is the Messiah sent from the Father to redeem those who will believe in Him.

I can't read this very famous passage without hearing the first few movements of G.F. Handel's oratorio, Messiah running through my head, and no other music says Advent as well as it does. That music, and this passage still speaks comfort and gives hope to us today. God has paid far more than double for our sins; He has sacrificed His own beloved Son for us. Jesus will return again, and now is the time to prepare for His coming. Leveling ground, filling in ditches, and straightening out the paths is hard redemptive work. Putting things back the way God intended them to be in this broken world is practice for the work He has for us in the new creation to come. And we can be sure of it all, because God's own word, not ours, will make it happen. Thanks be to Him during this Advent, and every day beyond.

- Art Nikkel

Hope

I recently heard a Bible scholar on a podcast (The Bible Project: Episode 162) discuss the distinction between optimism and hope. The gist of it was that optimism is the idea that “circumstances will work out,” where hope is placed in a particular person or object. Hope is believing, “So-and-so will work things out.”

In this passage, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and explains that indeed, God will work things out; Joseph is given hope. Consider the circumstances Joseph was facing. Perhaps he was filled with optimism as he and Mary became engaged. I think most engaged couples are optimistic that circumstances will work out, that their future life as one will turn out well. But then things get a bit messy for Joseph when Mary becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Verse 19 says, “Joseph, her fiancé, being a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace her publicly.” Yes, a just man; he’s a good egg. I think he was remaining optimistic, believing that things would work out. He wasn’t looking to blow things up or further sully Mary’s reputation.

After the angel explains to him that all of these circumstances are happening to fulfill God’s plan and message from the prophet, Joseph did what the angel commanded. Joseph moves from optimism to full-on hope, because he could rest in the knowledge that God was working things out.

- Julie Dahlberg

Thursday, December 5

Micah 3:1-4

Hope

Like Isaiah, Micah was also a prophet during the time of the decline and downfall of the kingdom of Judah. The message he brought from God was aimed squarely at the corrupt, unethical leaders of the day and the false prophets who gave them a veneer of legitimacy. They took advantage of the people they governed and failed to promote justice. So why do we include this rather harsh passage during a week of Advent when we focus on hope?

While Isaiah brings G.F. Handel's Messiah to mind, this passage from Micah reminds me of a very different piece of music. The country music icon, Johnny Cash, recorded a cover of the gospel song "God's Gonna Cut You Down" in 2003, the year in which he died. Cash had always been known as a man who sympathized with the poor. Many of his songs contained somber reflections on the lives of the down and out, and the hope of redemption. The clear message of this particular song is that those who are evil will not escape God's judgment, a message that resonated with many of his fans. Give a listen to this powerful recording.

How often have we watched the television news where a reporter interviews someone who has been swindled, suffered violence, or lost a loved one to a drive-by shooting? The sobbing victim turn to the camera and tell us that all they want is justice. They put their hope in the legal system to put things right knowing that the system may well fail them. To people like that, it is comforting to know that God is the ultimate arbiter of justice.

It is easy to shy away from passages like Micah 3. We'd much rather focus on the love of God than to contemplate a God that brings judgment on sin. After all, we are all sinners and deserve to be "cut down. The hope we have is not for justice. While we are called to do justice, ultimate justice is in God's hands. But we put our hope in Christ Jesus, who has taken the judgement we deserve upon Himself. Because of His sacrifice and intercession, the Father will not turn His face away from us because of the wrongs we have done. When we confess our sins, Jesus is faithful to His promise to forgive us and make us righteous before God. Our hope is in Christ Jesus! All praise be to Him!

- Art Nikkel

Friday, December 6

John 1:1-8

THE WORD

Words are so important to us. From earliest years when our eager parents spoke sounds for us to mimic until later years when the sounds turned into meanings. A miracle occurred. We spoke and we understood. This then is the sure and basic means of our interactions and relationships with the people around us.

As we read the beginning verses of the Gospel of John about the WORD, our imaginations stir, our hearts warm. The greatest creator God communicates with us through words! His love story unfolds in the WORD. This WORD is unique. It brings life. In Old Testament times there were prophets proclaiming truth how God sends the WORD, his own beloved Son, our Lord Jesus, who lives that truth through His ultimate sacrifice of death. That WORD also give slight through the resurrection. Life and light—God’s ways and His gifts — are further proclaimed in the written Word: the Scriptures.

It is here we meet John the Baptist who gives testimony to this WORD. He carefully shows that his task is to prepare the way for the WORD.

Down through the ages until this very day, we are the privileged hearers of this message. Just as we rush to the mailbox or our advanced technologies of communication for some word, so we turn to the Scriptures. For some this is a brand new message, an announcement, an invitation to embrace this WORD. For others it is a joy-filled reminder of this dazzling truth given to us.

- Janis Carlson

HOPE

In our household, there is a lot of college going on. A lot of “what do you hope to be?” And a lot of “how can you make that happen?” And as a result, a lot of striving and managing and hard work! A lot of ups and downs and “are we there yet?”

This familiar passage calls people everywhere to a larger hope: the hope to be counted among the children of God. The hope for a life tethered to something greater than the day-to-day. The hope for a home that will last forever. This passage also contains the great good news that no one has to suffer failure or rejection in order to get there. No one has to strive to make it happen. The work has already been done by Jesus. Jesus is the hope. And that hope extends to all people. No one need be left out! Our part is to believe it. To receive him.

This Advent season, can you see the light dawning? It is full of grace and truth. The name of the light – the hope – is Jesus. Relax, receive the Lord, and draw near to God. His arms are open wide to welcome his children.

- Karin Hinz

Sunday, December 8

Luke 1:46-55

PEACE

In Advent, we often imagine Mary pregnant, with a blue headscarf and a Mona Lisa smile. The very picture of peace. And here she is singing. How lovely! Mary was carrying the Prince of Peace in her womb. Her words are prophetic. Her son would ultimately bring peace.

But let's really listen to Mary's prayer. This song of Mary is not meek and lowly. We might picture her serenely praying this, but she is calling for a complete overthrow! A world turned upside down. This is a prayer for liberty. A prayer for justice. A prayer for things to change. And a great prayer of faith – faith in God whose intentions are bent toward the lowly.

Mary prayed as though all of this had been accomplished. As though the rich and powerful no longer lorded it over the poor. But they still do, right? Jesus' work of creating peace is ongoing. So this Advent, can we be brave like Mary to call for what is right, knowing that only on the other side lies a lasting Peace? Are we even willing to be overthrown if we stand in the way of peace? Can we be faith-filled like Mary, putting our trust in the living and active Prince of Peace? Do we pray like this? Do we dare?

- Karen Hinz

Monday, December 9

Isaiah 9:6-7

Peace & God's Presence

It is amazing to think that the Prophet Isaiah lived 700+ years before the birth of Jesus, and yet, as a prophet of God, foretold of Jesus' birth, saying that he would reign and rule a kingdom with Justice and Righteousness "from that time on". If you think about it, Isaiah was really telling the people that the hope for a savior was coming, but only sometime in the future (maybe even 700 years later!), in the form of a baby who would be called "Mighty God". Perhaps he never said it would take 700 years, but imagine how hard this news might be to believe. Imagine the hunger of the people - as broken as they were - for a savior, an everlasting father, **a prince of peace**. Do you ever stop to realize how incredibly blessed we are to be able to be able experience the **peace** that Jesus offers? We don't need to wait 700 years for a baby to reign. Rather - as broken as we are - we have access to God's holy scripture in full, the witness of 2,000 years within our broader Church family, and the unimaginable gift of God's Holy Spirit and presence, within us each day! God's presence among the people in the Old Testament was only in certain places - within the temple, or perhaps in a pillar of fire. Not everyone could come close. Jesus birth, life, death and resurrection delivered to us the very presence of God, within us, every-day. His invitation is for all, to "come". **An enduring peace and presence of God that passes all understanding.** *He will be called Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* Rest in his peace and presence today, as we reflect and prepare for his coming!

- Paul Hawkinson

Tuesday, December 10

Isaiah 52:7-10

PEACE

Having served in the U.S. Army during the Cold War, I'm thankful that armed conflicts didn't break out during my time overseas. I was stationed in the Republic of Korea and West Germany, both of which were nations split by democracy and communism. My unit participated in monitoring Soviet communications near the Czech border, in order to be ready for attacks that never came. While in Korea, I was aware of military incidents along the DMZ (the Demilitarized Zone that separates the North and South). Thankfully the Koreans have maintained a long-term cease fire, even though a negotiated peace has never been arranged.

Peace is hard for humans to establish and maintain. World War II soon followed the "War to End All Wars." Earlier this year I was reminded on a trip to Germany of how East Germans were forced to live behind the Iron Curtain. Thirty years ago the Berlin Wall came down, and we rejoiced at the reunification of Germany. One can still see parts of the barrier erected in 1961 to imprison the population of East Germany. Furthermore, the U.S. has had a series of wars over my lifetime. No matter our thoughts on the justification of warfare, we can all agree that death and destruction aren't what God had in mind for His Creation.

Thankfully our security and well-being don't depend on the prevention of earthly hostilities. We can sing along with Isaiah, "Your God reigns!" The Lord comforts us with the assurance of our redemption. During Advent we celebrate a vital phase in God's plan for salvation--the birth of Jesus. We should proclaim the good news and shout with joy as we serve as God's watchmen. Ultimately, the Lord's power will be revealed to every nation, in order that all may see God's salvation. Only then will there be true peace on earth.

- David Oppedahl

Wednesday, December 11

Isaiah 55:6-13

PEACE

As we celebrate this season of advent, we are reminded that as Christians, the advent of our Lord's return is our 2nd advent: 1st His coming, 2nd His return.

This prophecy from Isaiah speaks directly to both! The Invitation to seek the Lord and to repent; to be prepared before his arrival. The offering of mercy, pardon, and blessing and the assurance that God is in control. It is God's control and his purpose that brings PEACE when we recognize that in Christ's 1st coming, like the rain that God sent, vs 11, he sent Jesus (the Word) vs 12, to return the harvest to Him. And this is guaranteed vs 13b. We find PEACE in the assurance of God's authority and dominion, and in the accomplishment of his purpose in Jesus 1st coming.

As we celebrate the coming of Christ's birth this advent season, be vigilant to his next coming. Amen

- Vern Johnson

Thursday, December 12

Micah 5:2-5a

PEACE

There is an Advent prayer in the Book of Common Worship that begins, *Stir up thy power O Lord, and with great might come among us...*” If that might be our prayer in this Advent season, and if God indeed hears and answers that prayer – then what? What if the Lord decides to stir things up today—what then? What might that mean? How would we respond? Would we allow ourselves to be moved by God’s might and power? Would we be willing to be changed? That is a serious challenge. It probably easier to stay in our own comfort zone and the ways we are used to doing things and having things.

But it used to be that the Advent season was a time of penitence. A time to reflect and prepare one’s heart for the coming Christ. These days Advent is a time of shopping and joy to the world and festivities and celebration. The Christmas season has become a busy, festive, often hectic season and for the most part we like that. But penitence is far from people’s minds

Let us pray that God would stir us to consider a holy and righteous God coming to dwell with us, Immanuel. Really, that thought alone should cause us to be penitent and to seek his presence humbly.

-Bruce Thorson

PEACE

I often find passages in Isaiah confusing. Who is he talking to? Are his messages for the people of Israel, the folks living in the time of Jesus, or us today? What is he talking about? Is he talking about the time period he's living in, or some years later, or 400 years later, or 4000 years later? And I suppose the answer to most of the questions is, "Yes." Therefore, confusing.

These verses are definitely written about a time after some sad days. It probably was written for the people of Israel after their exile. And, it probably is for the people awaiting their Messiah, and it is applicable for you and me. He is explaining that the good part of the story is coming; Your God is coming! Don't be afraid to shout it out so all can know. He is powerful, and strong. At the same time, He is gentle. He feeds and carries and gently leads all the sheep of the flock, even the babies and their mothers. He is everything we need.

The Old Testament word for peace has a wide range of meanings. It can mean completeness, fulfillment, wholeness, harmony, security, and well-being. How fitting that who our God is covers all the bases, meeting our needs completely. If we could fully understand His nature, how could we stop ourselves from shouting it out?

- Julie Dahlberg

Saturday, December 14

Isaiah 53:1-5

A reject. A loser. A nobody. Avoided, neglected, suffering. The first part of this passage describes someone already familiar to us. This is the guy we see out of the corners of our eyes, pushing around an old shopping cart containing his belongings. He's dressed in ill-fitting old clothes that look, well, disgusting. He smells bad. Occasionally he shouts something in anger or pain. He's obviously hurt or ill because of the way he moves. He's given up begging because nobody gives him anything. We hustle our kids away from him, afraid that he'll become violent or communicate some disease. He pretends to not notice us because he knows that nobody wants him to. He talks to himself about nonsense, rehashing old conversations, making remarks about things around him, trying to focus his mind on something, anything. His days are filled with small, desperate acts of survival: finding a bit of food, finding a safe place to sleep, getting warm, avoiding predators; his nights are a shivering torment. He's so inconsequential to our lives that we've forgotten about him a few seconds after he passes from sight.

But as calloused and hardened as we are to him, the next two verses tear our hearts wide open. In spite of our indifference and repulsion, in spite of the horror and pain of his own life, he's willing to sacrifice for us - he's willing to take the punishment we deserve. We've long ago forgotten that we're guilty, that we're criminals, that at least part of the comfortable, safe lives that we lead has been built on cheats, thefts, threats, lies. So a reckoning is due. And it won't be pretty. Once all that ugly stuff we've suppressed is revealed, we're going to feel exposed and ashamed. And when the verdict comes down, there'll be no point in arguing or pleading. The proof of our crimes will be so obvious, so flagrant, so embarrassing, that there'll be nothing to do but hang our heads and agree. What kind of penalty would be just? What punishment would make up for that awful mess? How did we ever run up such an astounding debt?

Thank God we have a savior. Contrary to our expectations, he's not a wealthy friend, or a handsome celebrity, or a politician. He's a guy who was dismissed and avoided. He's one who would never get invited home or maybe even to church. He has absolutely nothing to offer except himself, which he does, for us. For our peace. For our healing. Go figure.

-Paul Nauman

“It’s in the Details”

There weren’t any newspapers in the first century A.D., certainly not as we know (or knew) them. But if there had been, Luke the physician would have been hired instantly: Throughout his gospel, he lends credibility to his storytelling with an abundance of detail that clearly was based on extensive reporting. The result? We have no reason to doubt what he tells us, and we can enter fully into the emotions of the participants in his stories.

Take this tale of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents-to-be of John the Baptist. Luke gives us, ahem, chapter and verse on exactly who they were – Zechariah’s job, both of their families, their blameless behavior, their defining disappointment. We know exactly what Zechariah was doing, and why he was doing it, at the moment the angel Gabriel showed up next to the altar of incense with a message of joy:

Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you . . . He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

What more could a priest ask? Well, it turns out in the next few verses, he could ask how he could be sure of this miracle, which was not the reaction that Gabriel was looking for. But Luke makes we sure know that part of the story, too, confident that – along with Zechariah and Elizabeth (and, as we will see tomorrow, Elizabeth’s cousin Mary) – we have all the information we need to rejoice in the Advent miracles of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and understand that they are both miraculous and true.

- Owen Youngman

Monday, December 16

Luke 1:39-45

“Jumping for Joy”

The angel Gabriel has kept busy in the months after yesterday's action, following up his visit to Zechariah at the temple in Jerusalem with one to Mary in the town of Nazareth. Part of his message to Mary was that her older cousin Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy, the kind of information that soon had Mary on the way to make a visit (a three-month visit, Luke carefully tells us).

There was no time to waste, and we can picture her fairly bursting into Zechariah and Elizabeth's home to greet her cousin. Luke of course has the details:

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”

That joy is soon expressed in Mary's Magnificat (“My soul magnifies the Lord,” vv. 46-55). This is one of the most famous songs of praise in the Bible, but did you remember that it was delivered in a priest's home in Jerusalem, not in a public place – meaning that the original audience might have been as small as one or two or three or four (depending on whether Zechariah was home, and whether we should count the babies in the womb)?

Obviously there should be no waiting around when there's joy to share. Maybe today would be a good day to share your own joy at the coming of the King.

- Owen Youngman

Tuesday, December 17

Luke 1:67-79

Joy

Zachariah reminds us during this time of advent and celebration the path that we can chose to be on and how to walk it. He reminds us that God keeps his promises and came to save us. This passage reminds of us of how God showed us his tender mercy in the forgiveness of our sins. We are children of God. What better way to celebrate and honor our Lord than by telling others about this path of salvation and remind them of how great our God is. We can walk this path without fear and lead the way for Him.

- Angela Kocinski

Wednesday, December 18

Psalm 146:5-10

JOY

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God...the Lord who remains faithful forever. Following the promises of all those He helps in this Psalm, the conclusion is...The Lord reigns forever!

We all love to feel JOY during this special advent season; in fact, we are almost *expected to feel joy*. *Secular songs like "The most wonderful time of the year" and familiar carols like to "Joy to the World" convey that we should be joyful.*

But, what about those who are oppressed, hungry, prisoners of something, those who are bowed down or burdened in some way. Many of us may not be experiencing the extremes listed in Psalm 146, but some of us are...Who in your circle is struggling during this special time? Is it a single mom, trying to earn a living and provide for children? Is it someone who needs a job? Someone who recently experienced the loss of a special person? Someone who is simply overwhelmed by life?

The promises in Psalm 146 include a God who helps, provides hope, remains faithful, watches over, sustains and reigns forever. He is the true source of our JOY.

The great hymn writer Charles Wesley wrote these words many years ago:

*Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.*

May we find JOY during this advent season.

- Merileen Thorson

**“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus”**

The prophet Isaiah uses powerful words to help us understand and remember God’s role in our life. Isaiah’s choice of the word “wilderness” at the beginning of Isaiah sets the stage for the passage. It reminds us that throughout time, God’s flawed people have faced the wilderness and that God’s love saves us from the difficulties and pain that is there. In His time – not in ours. There is hope and joy in that knowledge.

God does not abandon us to the desert or leave us broken. He makes us whole. ***“For waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water”***

We are all incomplete and starving for something. God’s presence fills us with joy and hope. God has not promised we will not have to walk through the wilderness or struggle with tragedy – He simply reminds us that we do not do it alone.

Through the promise he fulfilled with the birth, life, death and resurrection of His son Jesus Christ, God gives us so much more than we could ever earn or deserve. Christmas is a time to rejoice and be filled with joy.

- Judy Tanzer

Those who wish to sing, find a song.

Swedish proverb

So how are you feeling right about now? It is five days until Christmas. Is stress your middle name right now. Are you reading this passage because you feel you have to for the day or are you reading it to celebrate the joy of life in Christ? The psalmist has found his song to sing. He is taking time to celebrate the Lord, he has found his song

John Ortberg in his book "The Life you always wanted" talks about learning spiritual disciplines. He says, "Joy is at the heart of God's plan for human beings.....In fact he says it is the heart of God Himself." . (P. 61) It is so easy this time to get caught up in all the have to do's this time of year, we forget to really experience and celebrate what this season is for. Anticipating Christ's birth. My favorite thing to do this time of the year and gives me great joy, is not in doing things, but just sitting. Sitting in my Living room with the fireplace going, my Christmas tree lights on and Christmas music playing. Just being. And reveling in God and his unbelievable love for me .My time to find my song to sing and singing it.

And so I encourage you, with five days left of the this hustle and bustle, look for your song to sing. Take time to enJOY this time. This season is a gift, life is a gift, a gift that is filled with Joy and singing . It is a time to celebrate Christ's birth, and the joy that life In him gives us. Find your song and sing it loudly.

-Lisa Kindstrom

Saturday, December 21

Isaiah 12:2-6

JOY

Ann Voskamp in her book *One thousand Gifts*, emphasizes taking time each day to write down those things that we are grateful for, even when it seems everything in our life is going against us.. When I read this passage in Isaiah, it seems like he is doing just that. And the more he rewrites the more the joy and gratitude emerge.

If we start at verse one his disappointment in himself is evident, because he knows God is angry at him. However, then he remembers that ultimately that anger turns to comfort and the sense of gratitude swells from there. He thanks God for his comfort, his goodness, the strength and salvation he has received, and the glorious works of the Lord. His words of remorse turns to great joy as he writes down on his list things he is grateful for.

I have started writing my list. It seemed a bit daunting at first, but there is joy in numbers. With each gift listed a bit more joy emerges. I have received so much from Christ. Through his daily grace, I receive gift after gift in not only big things but in the minute things as well. This is the time of the year that we are so laden down with giving gifts, I encourage you to give yourself this gift —give yourself a few moments to really realize all that we have been given in this life we live. The hope and joy will receive through this gift to yourself will astound you. May you find a sense of peace and joy in the midst of this hectic season, Christ was born for us...the greatest gift of all.

“Shout aloud and sing for joy, for great is the Holy one of Israel’s among you”

-Lisa Kindstrom

Sunday, December 22

Luke 2:1-7

LOVE

Today we reflect on Love. To Love is to be kind, generous, and welcoming someone into our space and life. Christian Love is rooted in God, and it is significantly different from any other kind of Love. It is in obedience to God that the Jews will customarily have guest room for strangers in their houses. They are to offer unearned kindness to strangers because they are His people (or His disciples). In this sense, they live into their identity and mission, and God's command to them.

Therefore, when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem after traveling for about 90 miles (on foot or donkey), they expected to have accommodation among God's people. Unfortunately, there was "no room" for them. I wondered if the people (or the owner of the house) would have acted differently if they knew baby Jesus is destined for greatness.

Loving on other people as God commanded is increasingly becoming challenging because our culture instills fear of the other in us. But in making room for the other, Christian generosity and kindness reflect divine kindness and generosity. Making room to others allows both the host and guest to encounter something new, edging to the unfamiliar, and crossing it. So, resolve to intentionally have a meal, invite someone in, talk with someone in need. We are commanded to meet the needs of the people God brings our way. As disciples let's start small, do it regularly, and add gradually.

-Zachs Gaiya

Monday, December 23

Luke 2:8-20

LOVE

After the shepherds received the message of the good news of the birth of the Savior of the world, they shared it with other people. This is one way that Christians love on other people. Remember, God uses ordinary people to accomplish His divine plan. Our culture intimidates us with labels: irrelevant, intolerant, extremist, exclusivist, and proselytizers. Nevertheless, when we realize the cost at which the good news came to us and its inherent power to change people and places, we should be compelled to bring it to people.

Did you know that 43 % of adults in the US question the existence of God, the role of faith, and the value of the church? Did you also know that one out of every four adults considered themselves as “spiritual but not religious”? Lastly, did you know in lake county, 13.1% are “evangelicals” and 46% none-religious.

For over a century, as covenanters or “Mission Friends,” we continue to bring the good news to all people for “God’s glory and neighbor’s good.” May we continue to make the message of the good news available and accessible to all people in words and deeds. The good news brings hope, joy, and change. Look around; someone needs you to bring the good news to them. The good news of Jesus is a trust given to us as his disciples, might we love people enough as God did to bring the good news of Jesus to them?

-Zachs Gaiya

Tuesday, December 24

John 3:16

My Silent Night

John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"

Christmas Eve is one of my favorite days of the year. Often we are traveling to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and the van is packed with presents, luggage and winter apparel. As we travel, the hectic pace of the city transitions into the farms fields of Wisconsin and then to the snow filled forests of the U.P. I find that the road itself causes me to slow down and forces me to travel at a reduced pace which allows time to look out the window at God's beautiful creation. We then attend the Christmas Eve service and after singing "Silent Night" by candle light we come home and I get to experience one of the most cherished parts of the season, my silent night. As the kids run into the house and get ready for bed, I take a moment to look up and let the silence envelop me as I think about all my blessings, the first Christmas and the amazing gift the world received. John 3:16 reminds us of the sacrificial love God has for us and it should not be dismissed because it is a familiar verse. To me, this is what Christmas is all about. Perhaps today we need to reread it and understand that this verse is addressed to the "world" but also directed at us personally. This year, take a moment to slow down, quiet your mind and spend some time with this verse and really comprehend who this Gift is for. Try to understand it like this "God loved YOU so much that he gave His Son to be born in a stable and die on cross for you, so that if you accept Him as your savior, you will not die, but have life forever with Him!" Of all the gifts you have under the tree, no other is worth more and given in more sacrificial love than this one. Thank you God for this Silent Night.

- Trevor James

