

ADVENT

with New Life Downtown



DAILY DEVOTIONALS *from* NEW LIFE DOWNTOWN

✦ *for the 2024 ADVENT SEASON* ✦

W. H. A.

Time is inherent to the human experience. To be human is to live in time. Because of its enormous influence on our lives, most religious traditions have established distinctive ways of marking time. The Church has developed a calendar that follows the life of Jesus from the prophetic expectation of his birth through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension to his return and unending reign. Keeping the Christian Calendar (aka the Liturgical Year) helps us to order our lives around the story of God, to enter his story and to see our stories inside of His.

The Christian Calendar begins four Sundays before Christmas with the season of Advent. This is our New Year! The Latin word *adventus* means “arrival” or “coming,” but it is a season of waiting. We join ancient Israel in waiting for Jesus’ first arrival, and we join the local, global, and historic Church in waiting for Jesus’ return. We hold together painful longing and joyful expectation. We name our ache, and we hope for every ache to end. This is an active waiting—a preparing if you will. In our waiting, we are prepping to celebrate Jesus’ incarnation in fragile infant flesh and ultimately to welcome his reappearing as the victorious king.

The season of Advent is followed by the season of Christmas or Christmastide. Christmas is a day and a season. For twelve days, we feast! (Yes, Christmas Day is the first day of Christmas not the twelfth.) We join with Joseph and Mary, Zechariah and Anna, the shepherds, and the angels in declaring the good news and giving glory to God. We rejoice for God has come and we trust he will come again. Christmas ends on January 5 and ushers in the Epiphany on January 6. In Epiphany, which means “manifestation” or “revealing,” we remember the story of the magi and proclaim that Jesus came not just for Israel but also for the nations.

As you can probably tell, I can get pretty nerdy about this stuff. I love the Church Calendar. I’ve been observing it in some way since my twenties. But like every Christian practice, it’s critical to remember that the goal is not to complete or perfect the practice. The point is the presence of Jesus. All Christian practices are meant to lead us into the presence of God!

This year’s devotional contains a collection of readings, reflections, poems, and prayers to help you be with Jesus during these seasons. As you read, may Jesus—Emmanuel—be with you, just as he promised!

Grace & Peace,
Jason

DEC
1

PRAYER FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Unexpected God, your advent alarms us. Wake us from drowsy worship, from the sleep that neglects love, and the sedative of misdirected frenzy. Awaken us now to your coming, and bend our angers into your peace. *Amen.*

HOPE

DEC
2

MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN MALIBU

SCRIPTURE READING

JOHN 14:3

Seven-year-old Olivia and I were standing in the sand of Dana Point Beach. While waiting for the outdoor shower to be available, we started chatting with a professional surfer who was waiting with us. She told us about competing in waves all around the world. I asked her - out of all of the exotic places she had surfed - which was her favorite. "Easily Malibu," she said. Olivia immediately blurted out, "WHAT? Malibu? Malibu is a real place?!" Olivia's Southern California world was rocked! Malibu was real, not just a fictional location for Barbie's beach house!

And then I saw myself. Sometimes I live like Olivia. I read about Jesus preparing a place for us. I know in my head He promises a new heaven and a new earth. I can talk about eternity in the heavenly city. I can even imagine spending time with those I miss from this life, not unlike Olivia creating conversations between her Barbies. But do I really live like heaven is real? Or have I adopted a Mattel vision of my future? I don't want Mattel. I want Jesus.

So, I'm trying to root out places where I've substituted plastic for perfection. I try to keep my heart's GPS set on eternity, even as I'm driving on this planet. I imagine how I will know those who have gone before, just by recognizing the very best of them in their perfected state. And then I try to see the best in people in front of me. I ask for the Holy River of Life to flow in my life as I navigate relationships. I let some things go, because they just aren't going to matter for long. But it isn't easy.

This Advent season holds a fresh reminder of what is real, eternal, and beautiful - even more beautiful than Malibu.

This Christmas, we are mourning the death of our dear friend, Casey Converse. His absence is searingly painful. But we mourn with Jesus hope, not plastic or pretend platitudes. I mourn with hope. Hope reminds me Heaven is real. Restoration is coming. Jesus is returning. There is a place, prepared for us. And Malibu is just a shadow of the glory to come.

I recently found Casey's devotion from Advent 2022. I can see him with his feet in the sand and his long legs folded up in the beach chair as he created it. "I'm writing this sitting on a beach in Maui. I don't often think about what the creation made new will be like, but if this water and sky and all these delighted people absorbing the wonder of this beautiful place is a glimpse, I look forward to meeting you there." I look forward to it, too.

GAYLEEN GARDNER

GOD'S PROMISE

SCRIPTURE READING

TITUS 2:13

DEC
3

"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." - 1 Peter 5:10

Just four days into the New Year, I experienced an unpleasant surprise while performing kitchen ballet (i.e., somersaulting over the dishwasher door), which resulted in a broken arm, a fractured and dislocated shoulder, and a damaged rotator cuff. The pain was unbearable and only increased after the surgeon screwed two long plates into the bone to hold everything together. He said it would take a full year to heal.

As the hours and days dragged on during my greatest suffering, I clung to God's Word as He refined me in the fire. At one point, I even felt like a U2 song defined my life: "You've got stuck in a moment and now you can't get out of it." Many wonderful friends and family prayed, visited, brought meals, helped with practical needs, and encouraged me through Scripture. My husband David cared for me around the clock while handling both our responsibilities.

Physical therapy (PT) was agonizing. I called it "The Pit of Despair." Then I began losing my voice and endured a week of stomach flu. My voice further deteriorated, which isolated me even more. A lump had formed on my right vocal chord - probably from intubation during shoulder surgery. When I learned I'd need another surgery to remove the lump, a wave of hopelessness washed over me. It was all pretty much, well...awful. But I knew God was working in me.

In this life, there is no guarantee that things will turn out how we want, but God promises He will never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5), and Jesus assures us of His peace in the midst of trouble that will certainly come (John 16:33). Through disappointment, grief, and suffering, "we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

As I continue striving toward full mobility and healing, I occasionally reflect on the painful trial my Lord has led me through and rejoice that, for now, the days are brighter. I'm always amazed when He produces positive changes in my life through suffering. I am more compassionate and focused, and PT has increased my overall strength. I still hope for a total recovery, but more than anything, I wait for the blessed hope of seeing Jesus. Do you find it difficult to hope? Take comfort in knowing you can trust in God's promises for this life and the next.

DEBBIE DECKER

DEC
4

HOPE IN GOD

SCRIPTURE READING

PSALM 42:5

“You only care about being a mom so far as it benefits you.... You’re one of the most selfish and narcissistic people I’ve ever met.... You weren’t a good mom.... I have no interest in ever having you be a part of my life.”

These excerpts are a few drops in the tidal wave of painful judgment that flooded my life when my oldest daughter cut off relationship with me over seven years ago. Suddenly, I was involuntarily enrolled in the Cancelled Parents Club and oriented to its agonizing reality. The loss felt like a death, but without a funeral, so the grief was largely invisible. My daughter’s scathing indictments of my character and parenting performance shattered my identity as a mother and left me with wounds of shame, humiliation, rejection, and betrayal.

After two years of shock and numbness, while praying for healing in a supportive small group, I was able to release heartfelt forgiveness to my daughter. Forgiveness was the catalyst for a heart change that brought inner healing, deeper intimacy with God, and the true comfort of the Holy Spirit. I continued to pray and hope for reconciliation with my daughter. Instead, four years ago, I experienced another inconceivable loss when she influenced her younger sister to sever contact with me as well.

When something is wrongly ripped from your life, the consequential waves of suffering and grief require space and time to acknowledge, express, and process in healthy ways such as therapy, support groups, prayer, creative expression, body movement, and self-care. Yet deep sorrow, like a torrential downpour, can threaten to erode hope and foster unbelief in God’s goodness. The danger of intense sadness is an inward turning of the soul that refuses the grace of God. For me, this refusal arose in subtle ways as I allowed my circumstances to crowd out the truth of God’s goodness. I avoided pain with busyness. As I watched my close friends plan weddings, baby showers, and holiday gatherings, I resented the absence of these joys in my own life.

The Holy Spirit gently revealed these broken areas of my heart and invited me to submit them to His healing care. He welcomed my honest lament, for He is “close to the brokenhearted” (Ps 34:18). His grace enabled me to hope in Him, trusting that He is good, that He is working all things for my good, and that He is redeeming what the enemy intended for evil (Rom 8:28, Gen 50:20). He promises that He will wipe away every tear and “there will be no more death, suffering, crying, or pain” (Rev 21:4). Whatever you may be grieving this season, I pray that God’s hope comes to you in the midst, and that you experience the deep comfort of his Holy Spirit. Let us yet praise him, our Savior and our God!

ANNE WILBUR

DAWN LIGHT

SCRIPTURE READING

LUKE 1: 78-79, LAMENTATIONS 3:21

DEC
5

“Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.” - Luke 1: 78-79

I could see the autumn dawn hitting Cheyenne Mountain from my front patio chair as I sat with my coffee and Bible, but my soul needed to be in the light. I grabbed my second cup of coffee and moved to the back where the view wasn’t as good, but where I could feel the new day hitting my face and soothing my heart after a rough night coughing and trying not to wake up my husband. I was spent. For many reasons. Also blessed, for many reasons. But you know that feeling when you just can’t pull yourself up by your own strength? I’d been feeling that way for a few months. For very good reasons. Sending two sons off to college. Job hunting. Family medical concerns. Financial shenanigans. Loneliness. Brain Fog. Hurricane fears. Harvesting plums. You know, life.

But I felt the most struggle processing the end of my five-year breast cancer battle—which also included a side of thyroid cancer. My surgeon and oncologist both had recently released me from follow-up care. Time to rejoice. So why did I find myself holding in tears as I left both appointments? No more pushing that dreaded fourth floor cancer center elevator button. No more blood draws and other myriad follow-up details that had taken the brain power of a part time job since my mastectomy. After walking in the shadow of death and battling its minions again and again, I was weary. My family was weary. Now the battle was over. But the enemy had fooled my medical team before. Could I truly hope now?

Early that October morning, the light drew me outside and the Holy Spirit nudged my soul to meditate on the truth of these Scripture verses in Luke 1 (and Lamentations 3:21). Jesus—the dawn from on high, the light that broke and breaks upon us who sit in darkness—He is the fullness of God’s tender mercy. He is a firm path to peace. I have seen the way His presence lights up the dark at every step in my journey. I can trust Him, come what may. The true light and anchor for our souls is to live in hope.

What has you weary this season? How have you seen the faithfulness of God?

JESSIE RAGAIN

DEC
6

EXPECTANT HEARTS

SCRIPTURE READING

LUKE 1, GENESIS 22, 1 TIMOTHY 2:15 & JOHN 3:16

My wife and I tied the knot in 2010. We had clear expectations for how the first years of marriage would play out. We'd focus on our relationship for a couple years, and then we'd settle down and start a family. That was the plan. God had a different plan.

Queue the music. Imagine Grover Washington Jr.'s "Just the Two of Us" playing with vibrant joy until slowly fading into somber undertones echoing in an empty space. We wrestled with emotions as younger siblings got married and their families grew. My wife pampered new mothers at baby showers and returned home despondent. I didn't know how best to comfort her longing heart. The hope of having children was pushing me away from God. I wrestled with my faith. Was God not answering my prayers? Or was His answer "No," and I didn't want to hear it?

There are two women at the beginning of the Christmas story. One, a young single woman. The other, an older married woman. Neither one planning to have children soon. For one, that reality was crushing her soul. Within six months of each other, however, both women were on a miraculous, unexpected journey of motherhood and faith. But I want to flip back several hundred pages in the Bible to Abraham and Sarah. Because they too were hoping to have children and couldn't. They too were wrestling with what felt like a contradiction of God's promise and their personal experience. After Isaac was finally born and the promise seemed kept, God asked the impossible: "Go up on the mountain and sacrifice your only son to me."

Like Abraham, I misunderstood God's promise and misplaced my hope in having children. Like Abram, I had to climb a dreadful mountain. I built an altar, placed my hope on it, pulled out my blade, and prepared to strike.

My wife went to a preliminary checkup to diagnose why we couldn't have children. That very night, she looked bewildered at me from the top of the stairs with a pregnancy test in-hand. "I'm pregnant."

We named our daughter Madison. Her name means, "Gift of God." Her name is a constant reminder of two things. First, we didn't do anything to deserve her. And before she was born, we didn't do anything not to deserve her. All children are a precious gift from God. Secondly, my greatest hope of all rests in a child, but not my own. God so loved the world that He gave us His only begotten Son, and He was born miraculously after thousands and thousands of years waiting.

What are you hoping and waiting expectantly for this Advent season? Is your hope pushing you away from God, and if so, why?

MATT STICKEL

UNEXPECTED HOPE

SCRIPTURE READING

MATTHEW 12:21

DEC
7

This powerful verse is translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message* as, "the mere sound of His name will signal hope, even among far-off unbelievers."

It was the Christmas season in the early 1980s and, along with my responsibilities as a very young associate pastor of a large "Jesus Movement" church in the Los Angeles area, I was also a police chaplain. On that Sunday afternoon, I was called out to a home where the father had tragically taken his life.

The crime response team was there and waiting for the coroner's office to arrive, and the family had all gathered and were completely despondent—thus the dispatcher's call to me (this was prior to cell phones of course!). Sitting with them in the crowded living room, with all the seasonal decorations up, I felt way out of my depth. I was only in my twenties and trying to help these dear people make sense of the senseless.

I did my best—listening, praying for them, and referring to the season, how Jesus came as a baby in one of the darkest times in history. I doubted they would respond, but I offered my services to the family, and they asked if I would officiate their father's funeral service (Christmas funerals are the worst, by the way!).

I did the funeral and spoke on the Christmas message of hope. Lacing my talk with probably more Scripture than was needed, I hoped to help push them toward Jesus.

Three months later, I was offered a position at a large church in Denver, which is how we moved from California to Colorado back in 1982. The day before my flight to Denver for my final interview, the flight was changed. Instead of a direct flight from Los Angeles, I had several flights to get to Denver. On my second flight, as I was walking back to my seat, a hand reached out and grabbed me. A young man, seated alongside his wife, looked at me and said, "You were that chaplain who was there that day when my dad died!"

Right there, while I was standing in the narrow aisle of the plane, he told me how after that event, he had listened to what I said about hope and had ended up at a neighborhood church, given his life to Jesus, and become baptized. Eventually, when I sat back down in my seat, I wept and thought of that verse: "the mere sound of His name will signal hope, even among far off unbelievers!" I pray this verse would be true for all of us this advent season.

STEVEN TODD

DEC
8

PRAYER FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Laboring God, with axe and winnowing fork you clear a holy space where hurt and destruction have no place, and a little child holds sway. Clear our lives of hatred and despair, sow seeds of joy and peace, that shoots of hope may spring forth and we may live in harmony with one another.

Amen.

PEACE

PEACE IN THE LOSS

SCRIPTURE READING

ISAIAH 26:3

DEC
9

“You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.” - Isaiah 26:3

It was five years ago, the week before Christmas, that I got the call from my mom. “Your dad and I filed for divorce.”

To say I was shocked is an understatement. I didn’t know their bickering and backbiting had gotten that bad. They were on the verge of retirement, so why now?

In the weeks and months that followed, I struggled to rationalize why my heart was so broken. Why I couldn’t seem to have a normal conversation without breaking down in tears. I felt ridiculous and child-like. I was a thirty-five-year-old adult, and I kept telling myself that my everyday life would not be affected by this decision. That my relationship with them would not have to change. What I came to realize as time went on (and as I processed with close friends and a great therapist) was that I had experienced a significant loss I was not expecting. A loss of future moments I desired. A fracture of what I knew as family. A change of family holidays and Christmases to come.

And then two years later, the week after Christmas, my husband’s parents asked to Facetime us privately without the kids around. They told us they also were getting a divorce. We thought they were joking...but quickly learned they were not.

Family can be complicated to say the least, and Christmastime often has a way of surfacing pain. Showing us our loss. Spotlighting the empty chair. Throwing in our faces what’s missing, what’s broken, what’s void. Sometimes the easiest thing to do is to run, to hide under the covers, to lean out of the holiday season, and to just try to get through it with our heads down. After Christmas comes the new year, and who doesn’t just want a fresh start sometimes?

But Advent invites us to do the exact opposite. Advent invites us to lean in. Not to avoid or sweep it all under the rug, but to recognize the pain, recognize the void, and invite Christ to fill it. This is exactly the purpose of Advent. The twinkle in the dark night sky. The angel’s proclamation to the unsuspecting shepherds. The infant’s cry in the early morning silence. Advent is our invitation to invite Christ into the hard, into the loneliness, into the brokenness...because this is who He is. He is our peace in the storm. He is our mender, our healer, our satisfier, our counselor, and friend. The only One who can fill the ultimate void in us is Jesus. He came to bring us peace.

STEPHANIE BARKER

DEC
10

COUNTING DAYS

SCRIPTURE READING

HEBREWS 12:11

Sixty-one. The countdown began. One of my children was very excited for an upcoming party. So we started counting down the days together. Yes, from sixty-one.

Sixty-one. Sixty. Fifty-nine...forty-three...twenty three...ten...T-minus one. And it all was over. Not finished, but canceled. Yes, canceled. On the morning of the party, I told my son that we were calling it off and it wasn't going to happen. Things had to change first. It was one of the hardest parenting decisions that I've had to make to date.

Flashback in time. While we were counting down, this child was simultaneously having a hard season. He was becoming increasingly aggressive. We had calm down sessions. We had deep breathing. We had talks. Many. Many. Times. But things weren't improving. Uncontrolled anger was ravaging his self-control and our whole house. Fast forward to party week. The behavior continued. Scratching. Biting. Hitting. His siblings, his parents, the dog. No one was safe. Then, the night before the much-anticipated party, it escalated.

With a weight in my chest making me double over, I pulled the ripcord on the only thing that I thought might be able to get through to him: the party. Not without much wrestling and prayer. I struggled. I asked God, my husband, a counselor.

The next morning, I knelt down on the kitchen floor. Looking into his eyes, I broke the news to him. The party was canceled. Slow, quiet tears fell from his eyes. It was heart wrenching. He did not fight. Just quiet acceptance and pure sadness.

I wrapped my heart around his sorrow. I was still unsure this consequence was going to help him. I wondered if it would even backfire. "I didn't do anything. My mom just hates me!" was what I feared the most. I hung my heavy sorrow, my doubts and my fear, on the Lord's Word, as if it were a brass hook on the back of a door: "Endure hardships as discipline, for the Lord is treating you as children. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of peace and righteousness for those who have been trained by it." - Hebrews 12.

"Lord," I whispered, "I'm heartbroken. Please take our pain and use it to bring a harvest of peace and righteousness in his life."

As I'm trusting in the Lord to bring peace, I wonder where we are all experiencing peace that was because we endured hardship as discipline from the Lord. Life is hard, and I pray for all of us that we find his peace.

ELLEN BECKHAM

DEC
11

I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY

BY HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

TODAY, WE INVITE YOU INTO CHRISTMAS
CELEBRATION WITH THE ORIGINAL WORDS
OF LONGFELLOW'S POEM.

WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO READ AND THEN PLAY
A RECORDING OF IT . . . AND SING ALONG!

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

DEC
12

GOD'S HEALING & PEACE IN ADVENT

SCRIPTURE READING

GENESIS 37-50

Take a deep inward breath. As you breathe in, say, "Come, Lord Jesus." As you let it out, say, "Come." Challenge yourself to spend two minutes here. Be still, listen, feel Yahweh's embrace, and rest in His peace.

Hi, I'm Sarah, a grateful believer in Jesus Christ who has overcome pornography and negativity and is working on patience. Hi, my name is Brian, and I am also a grateful believer who has overcome pornography and rage and is working on trusting that God is in control of my life. This is how we introduce ourselves in Celebrate Recovery!

Brian, our son Dax, and I sat across the couch from Brian's mother. It was the first time I'd ever met her, and the only picture I had of her was stories of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. Brian experienced a great deal of anger throughout his teenage years and early twenties. Through his adult life, his mom would come in and out during different seasons, always quick and never reliable. Slowly, God was working on his heart to release some of the anger.

When we got married in 2022, we decided not to invite her to our wedding. There was no longer the same anger, but we didn't feel peace about letting her into this celebration. During the next couple of years, we felt like God was telling us to slowly let her in. It felt right. God's peace was overcoming the anger as we extended the olive branch.

She reached out to Brian when Dax was born and asked to meet him. Through God's love and peace, we decided to let her meet our son. God asked us to extend wild forgiveness (with boundaries) to her and say yes to meeting her grandson. As we sat on our couch, I held Dax, and everything in me did not want to hand him over to Brian's mom. Brian peacefully looked at his mom and said, "You can hold him if you want." Come, Lord Jesus, come!

In Genesis 37-50, we see Joseph not denying his past but instead trusting in God's goodness and peace as he said to his brothers in Genesis 45:4, "Come close to me." We still have years left of stepping into God's invitation of healing and deep peace with Brian's mother. One thing we know for sure is one day we can teach our son the furious longing of God's restoration with us, regardless of our hurts, habits, or hang-ups. We can rest in the peace that He eventually gives us, no matter the severity of the pain.

During this season of Advent, what past hurts do you need the power of God's peace to invade? Can God's peace help in fostering healing in any relationships?

SARAH AND BRIAN WATKINS

PEACE ON THE LONG, SLOW ROAD

DEC
13

SCRIPTURE READING

PSALM 34:18

I turned twenty-eight this August. I think in most people's lives, twenty-eight would be a wildly insignificant birthday. Turning twenty-seven marks the start of your late twenties, and twenty-nine is one last hurrah before thirty. But twenty-eight? Who cares about their twenty-eighth birthday? Well, I did. And I cared about it because of a significant realization it brought over me. My twenty-eighth birthday marked a perfect fifty-fifty split of living with chronic pain, since it was on my fourteenth birthday that I contracted the auto-immune disorder I still deal with today.

It was sobering as I realized every day forward would mark a larger percentage of my life spent in chronic pain than not. Three EH courses ago, I would have pushed these thoughts away and chosen to smile, to tell everyone that it was not a big deal and that I was fine. But I don't feel the need to hide the hard things in my life right now. I imagine that you, like me, have something in your life that you have carried for a long time. Something you have spent countless hours praying about. Something that you can't seem to solve no matter how hard you try. Maybe it's something physical like it is for me. But it could also be a relationship, a spiritual need, a mental battle, a grief, or something else.

During the late days of August, I found myself reflecting on the words of Psalm 34:18: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

When I think about Advent, I think about all the people who had waited for countless years for the promised Messiah—the generations who never got to see the One they had waited for. I think about how they would have read and prayed these words. Did they come to this prayer with skepticism, defeat, hope, or faith?

These days, when I think about peace, it seems to resemble the close companionship of Jesus on the long, slow road of the Christian life. I find myself discouraged and defeated by my consistent struggle with chronic pain, but I rejoice because I know in those moments, the Lord is close to me, like a dear friend. I celebrate the incarnation today, because I know that in Jesus, peace has come and is now so close—close enough that, as I walk the long, slow road, I know I am not alone, and neither are you.

How are you experiencing peace in this season of Advent? In what ways are you longing to experience peace this season? Peace be with you!

STEPHEN STEININGER

DEC
14

COME, THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS

TODAY, WE INVITE YOU INTO
ADVENT DEVOTION TO THE LORD
THROUGH POEM AND SONG
“COME, THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS.”

WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO THREE MOVEMENTS:
FIRST READ IT, THEN PRAY IT, THEN SING IT

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.
Israel's strength and
consolation, hope of all the
earth thou art; dear desire
of every nation, joy of every
longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver, born
a child and yet a King, born
to reign in us forever, now thy
gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit rule
in all our hearts alone; by thine
all sufficient merit, raise us to
thy glorious throne.

DEC
15

PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

O Lord Jesus Christ, you sent your
messengers the prophets to preach
repentance and prepare the way for our
salvation: Grant that the ministers and
stewards of your mysteries may likewise
make ready your way, by turning the
hearts of the disobedient toward the
wisdom of the just, that at your second
coming to judge the world, we may be
found a people acceptable in your sight;
for with the Father and the Holy Spirit
you live and reign, one God, now and
for ever. *Amen.*

REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

O God of Isaiah and John the Baptist,
through all such faithful ones you
proclaim the unfolding of future joy and
renewed life. Strengthen our hearts to
believe your advent promise that one day
we will walk in the holy way of Christ,
where sorrow and sighing will be no
more and the journey of God's people
will be joy. *Amen.*

BOOK

DEC
16

JOY WHILE SUFFERING

SCRIPTURE READING

1 PETER 5:10-11

What follows may sound strange, but for me it is truth: Joy comes even while I experience deep suffering. Joy is not something I conjure up. Joy is given by the Spirit.

I have experienced unbearable physical pain, fear of unimaginable loss, and the agony of betrayal. Jesus understands. His eyes are always on me. Jesus invites me, in my darkest hours, to keep my eyes on Him. Jesus walks with me, brings joy, and restores my heart.

1 Peter 5:10-11 declares, “The God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you.” Circumstantial change is not promised. Happiness is not promised. The promise is that Jesus will restore. The promise is that Jesus is with me. To me, that is joy.

I have experienced excruciating physical pain due to intestinal necrosis. Emergency surgery offered but a slim chance of survival. The Lord held me during my three-week coma and tenderly whispered Proverbs 3:5-8 when I woke in ICU. Many major surgeries followed over the years. The Lord still surrounds me as I live with chronic ischemia, a partial digestive system, a shunt in my liver, iron deficiency anemia, and physical limitations. The numerous scars I bear remind me how far Jesus has carried me. I accept this broken body as God’s creative way of keeping me alive. My organs will not come back. I will live with chronic illness for the rest of my days. Through acceptance, joy found a way in. Joy won.

Jesus surrounded me as suicidal attempts by one of my daughters caused my mama-heart to cave. In those moments of screaming, “No! No! No!” and the fear of unimaginable loss, Jesus held me in my darkness and whispered, “I’m here. I’m holding her. Trust Me.” His presence allowed me to surrender my grip before the outcomes were known. I am beyond grateful my daughter is alive to love and to hug! Through surrender, joy found a way in. Joy won.

Jesus walked me through the agony of betrayal and abuse by one who once promised, “‘til death do us part.” I was able to forgive him because Jesus forgave me. Forgiveness wasn’t immediate; it took time. The marriage did not survive, but over time, my heart was restored. Through forgiveness, joy found a way in. Joy won.

It is strange that joy and suffering can hold the same space. Jesus is my only explanation. Jesus walked with me in the dark places. Thankfully, He did not keep me there. Through acceptance, surrender, and a forgiving heart, Jesus restored me. Bells of joy continue to ring: “Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come!”

VALERIE COX

UNDERCURRENT OF JOY

SCRIPTURE READING

PSALM 16:11

DEC
17

“You make known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” - Psalm 16:11

I grew up thinking joy was synonymous with happiness. When life was going well, it was easy to say I was full of joy. When life was difficult, it was harder to say—and even harder to grasp. It was like a tide, coming and going with my swells of emotions.

Then, my world was upturned with the degeneration of a pre-existing medical condition. Many things I had found joy in (or, really, just plain old happiness in) were suddenly unavailable to me. I couldn’t exercise, hang out with friends, hike, or even work anymore. My emotions were like the tide, gone out to sea.

Amid that season of grief, God did start to teach me true joy. It was an undercurrent, knowing Christ was with me. It was in His presence that I started to learn joy despite my circumstances, not because of them. I didn’t realize how much I’d been chasing something else as my joy until the other things were taken away. Now in the years that have followed, I can feel my joy in the Lord growing, even as more griefs and pains have come. I’m always stunned by how they can all coexist.

As I’m writing this, I’m just back from an overseas trip. There were many things I wanted to see, do, and experience...that I couldn’t. One day, I’d planned to ride a famous train line that ran in a circle around the city. Each station in this loop has a unique stamp to search for and collect. It was supposed to be an easy, disability-friendly way to see the city. But as I stood up that morning, overwhelmed by dizziness and muscle weakness, I realized I wasn’t going anywhere.

The circumstances felt difficult, but there it was—that undercurrent. Underneath the momentary sadness, joy. I ended up getting to spend the day in prayer and solitude with the Lord. It didn’t erase my disappointment, but it did help me put that feeling in its proper place. Grief and joy, together, because one does not cancel out the other.

The more I look for real joy, the more I find it in the presence of Christ, not my circumstances. So whatever your circumstances this season, I hope there is an undercurrent of joy for you, too.

LAUREL BURLEW

DEC
18

JOY AND GRIEF

SCRIPTURE READING

ISAIAH 61:2-3

“...to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” - Isaiah 61:2-3

I love old Pixar movies. The storylines make my heart soar. Inside Out is no exception. My favorite moment from the movie is when Joy recognizes that she and Sadness can share memories with each other. Joyful yellow moments tinged with a hint of blue Sadness. Not mutually exclusive, but co-existing together.

I'm thankful for this language that has helped me navigate holidays, especially Christmas, over the past nine years. In May of 2015, my husband's sister, Ellie, died tragically at the age of fifteen from amoebic encephalitis. I had known Ellie since she was a toddler. She was like another little sister to me. And then she was gone. Numerous decades before she should have left this earth. Holidays have never been 100% joyful ever since.

At the age of four, I lost my Mimi, my paternal grandmother, to breast cancer on Christmas Eve. All of my earliest memories are graced with her presence. And I never even got to know her as an adult. I just know my Daddy often tells me I remind him of her. My grief at Christmas started at age four.

Christmas with heartache is not quite like Narnia, where it's always Winter and never Christmas. It just feels like the White Witch has her hold on some remote areas of Narnia. Places that should be green and blooming with flowers are frostbitten and dead or fighting for survival.

But I have found joy at Christmas in remembering that I don't have to isolate my emotions from each other, and that I can and should talk about how I'm missing my Mimi and Ellie, in the midst of the festivities. Ever since I was a little girl, every year at Christmas my family has driven to Pueblo to put a wreath on my Mimi's grave. The reminder of death is always there. But so is the hope and joy in resurrection, because my Mimi knew Jesus, and so did Ellie. We decorate our Christmas tree with ornaments that belonged to my Mimi. And there are two ornaments with Ellie's picture that adorn our tree as well. Then there are the butterflies. The last thing Ellie was studying before she died were butterflies. Life from death. Joy and grief, joy and sadness. In the same hand, at the same time. Emmanuel, God with Us. Come, Lord Jesus.

How can you hold both joy and sadness/grief in your heart during this Christmas season?

CHELSEA ADELMANN

DEC
19

JOY AND SORROW

SCRIPTURE READING

JOHN 16:22

Two years ago, on early Christmas Eve morning, my mother-in-law unexpectedly passed away. I can still vividly remember the surrealness of that morning, as we told our three kids their beloved grandma had passed away we also wondered how to even approach the coming Christmas festivities.

Our daughter was scheduled to sing in the Christmas Eve choir and, after a heartfelt conversation, she decided to still participate. She wanted to honor her grandma who absolutely delighted in watching her sing and worship God. As she sang, Ian and I stood there in church with tears streaming down our faces. We both experienced an acute sense of sorrow and joy in that moment as we watched her. Since then, we have experienced many moments when joy and sorrow seem to walk hand in hand.

In John 16:22, Jesus told his disciples, “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (NIV). Advent creates space for heartache amid joy because we remember and look for our Savior who came and will come again. I have found that the hopeful expectation of Advent has deepened my understanding of both, reminding me that one does not negate the other, but instead through faith we find that sorrow is not hopeless, and joy is not dependent on circumstances. We can rejoice and experience genuine joy in the season, because our hope is fixed on our Savior who will one day make our joy complete. Advent is for those who know everything is not now as it should be but who wait in expectant longing for when all will be made right.

Maybe for you, like my family, Advent is needed more than ever this year. Where do you need Christ to meet you this Advent season?

BREANNA SPEIR

DEC
20

JOY ON THE JOURNEY

SCRIPTURE READING

LUKE 2:1

My childhood best friend had a six-year struggle with cancer. After graduating, we both served in a global missions organization dedicated to spreading the love of God. Years later, as her disease progressed, we had many conversations about heaven, Jesus, faith, grace, and forgiveness. She was not afraid to die. I was afraid to let her go for selfish reasons—I was afraid of losing my oldest friend and confidante who kept me grounded. But I realized I had to come to terms with what I truly believed about death and the afterlife. When face-to-face with death, did I really believe in Jesus and love and eternal life? I searched long and hard and deep. And I found that I did believe it!

Even though I grieved when she passed on, even though years later I still miss her, and even though I occasionally cry that I can't have coffee with her or share a silly Instagram reel, now I find that underlying the grief is a form of joy. She won the race (2 Tim 4:7)! She got to see Jesus first! Because of Him, death does not have the final say. My friend is with a loving God, experiencing the life of His presence that is wildly beyond my imagination. I found joy through my grief.

Real joy is based in the love of a God who cares for me, who sent Jesus to show us what God is like. God is merciful and compassionate (Ps 86:15, Ps 145:8-9), our refuge and strength (Ps 46:1). God's love is unfailing (Ps 36:5). And so much more.

Through Advent, we wait in the pain and the grief of life right here and now. There is sickness and death and stuff we don't like. But we can rely on Emmanuel, the God who is with us, because it's what the angel promised the shepherds. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people" (Luke 2:1).

Jesus came to bring us joy, in the future and right now. How do you need to cling to that promise?

AMY ROEMER

DEC
21

MARKED BY JOY

SCRIPTURE READING

JAMES 1:2-4

With tears streaming down my face, my fifteen-year-old self cried out to my youth leader, "Robyn, I feel lost. I don't feel like I'm growing in the Lord. This is the unhappiest I've ever been, but I have this joy I can't explain." The years leading up to my parents' divorce (and those after) were the most devastating years I've ever experienced. Days were hard and the weight unbearable. The very foundation of my life was crumbling around me, yet I had a joy I couldn't explain. My youth leader assured me that though I didn't feel like I was growing, the fact that I could maintain joy in the midst of deep heartache told her I was growing leaps and bounds, even beyond some adults she knew.

It's no coincidence that at this same time our youth group was memorizing the book of James. Since then, my favorite verses have been James 1:2-4: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, when you face trials of many kinds, for you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

Considering trials as a source of joy doesn't come naturally. It's one of the many ways that God's Kingdom is a bit topsy-turvy, but once you grasp it—oh, what a gift!

I've come through the most difficult times of my life stronger and more mature, because I have looked to the Lord to sustain me. Because it was His joy in me, joy remained.

Joy is something people always tell me I've been marked with. I know it is a gift from the Lord that has been made fuller over the years, and I am grateful.

As I age and raise my own children, I pray that the joy Jesus offers will be our inheritance. I want the complete and overflowing joy that Jesus promises in John 15:11.

When we understand who the Lord really is—that He is the GOD OF THE UNIVERSE and the very Author of joy, and that His love and joy are in us—we can confidently face whatever comes our way.

What about you? What are the times in your life that have felt the bleakest? Have you been able to maintain joy? If not, I gently encourage you to ponder where the source of your joy is coming from. If it's not Jesus, ask Him for help, knowing He gives generously whatever we are lacking.

RANDI LYNN JOHNSON

DEC
22

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Shepherd of Israel, may Jesus, Emmanuel and son of Mary, be more than just a dream in our hearts. With the apostles, prophets, and saints, save us, restore us, and lead us in the way of grace and peace, that we may bear your promise into the world. *Amen.*

LOVE

LOVE IN THE BATTLEFIELD

SCRIPTURE READING

1 JOHN 4:19

DEC
23

Today's world is quite lonely, overstimulated, and despite the constant pleasures that can be found...it's a battlefield. It's not always warm and inviting; nor is the way I started this devotional. So, grab a warm beverage, and I dare you to stay with me for a few minutes.

In our typical current lifestyle there are countless elements of attack, coming from all fronts. We are at war. With ourselves. Each other. Our phones. Our hearts. Even our minds, which are so powerful. I'm finding myself, and many others, seeking something deeper.

I've been a runner my whole life, and I've definitely had my fast race times and enjoyable moments of success. I've also endured some challenges in my life that forced me to dig deeper. Often, it felt like I was sitting in a dark room alone with racing thoughts from different angles. Broken relationships. Feelings of failure. Shame. Guilt. Suicidal ideations. Oftentimes leading to me experiencing a lack of purpose or no reason to go on. Graciously, God gave something very special to me at a young age, that I would hold tightly during the darkest and brightest of days. God gave me grit.

Grit is a trait that often gets overlooked. It is demonstrated through passion and perseverance toward a goal, despite being confronted with constant obstacles and distractions. He gave it to you, too. You may just have to learn how to grow into it. I've found that grit has allowed me to find strength when there didn't seem to be any. Days where looking toward the cross didn't seem to help. Ironically, as we often find in these times, those traits come from Him. No matter what, God is there. The wonderful part of this little story is that all the while, God was running after me. This is love, not that we loved Him, but that He loved us and gave us the grit of His steadfast love and faithfulness, the grit of His relentless pursuit of us.

I continue to try and love and live my life that way- showing up despite the struggle. To do that, I must continue to look to the cross as much as I can. As a community, we must come together and love each other. To live into the truth that we're not actually alone. Together, we can face anything in this life.

In that truth we can circle the long winding trails of life both outside our doors as well as inwardly in our souls, to find love from the one person who knew what it meant to show up no matter what was asked of Him, Jesus. We just need to keep showing up too. Loving ourselves and others. Put on your armor, grow in your grit, show up and let's do this.

JEFF WILSON

DEC
24

CHRISTMAS EVE READING

SCRIPTURE READING

LUKE 2:1-20 CEB

- 1-3 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.
- 4-5 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.
- 6-7 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.
- 8-9 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.
- 10-12 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."
- 13-14 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."
- 15 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."
- 16-20 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.

CHRISTMAS DAY READING

SCRIPTURE READING

JOHN 1:1-18 CEB

- 1-2 In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning.
- 3-5 Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.
- 6-8 A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.
- 9-14 The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world. The light was in the world, and the world came into being through the light, but the world didn't recognize the light.
- The light came to his own people, and his own people didn't welcome him. But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God's children, born not from blood nor from human desire or passion, but born from God.
- 14 The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.
- 15 John testified about him, crying out, "This is the one of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is greater than me because he existed before me.'"
- 16-18 From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace; as the Law was given through Moses, so grace and truth came into being through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made God known.

DEC
25

MESSY, FAITHFUL HANDS

MISSIONARY TESTIMONY

CHRISTMASTIDE TESTIMONIES

FROM OUR NLD MISSIONARIES

Having waited the weeks of Advent for the long-expected Messiah, we now find ourselves in the 12-day feast season of Christmas.

This year we asked our global and stateside NLD missionaries to share with us testimonies of how God has been working in and through them and the various organizations they work with.

Whether you read one a day or all at once, we hope these Christmastide testimonies encourage you that Emmanuel, God with us, is good news through all the world!

Merry Christmas!

Sitting down to write a testimony of what God has done and is doing in our context in Spain is both an immense privilege and, for a people pleasing perfectionist like me, a heavy burden. I long to convey encouraging stories of God's work, but ministry in Spain is slow, and long, and can sometimes feel like a perpetual season of sowing without harvest. But if I've learned anything this last year, it is that God is not rushed, and he invites us to live and work at his pace, and not ours.

Oftentimes the stories of God's faithfulness come together years later, with many messy and imperfect hands involved in the work. Last Christmas Matt and I were some of those messy and imperfect hands. On Christmas Day, we invited over some teammates and a few exchange students in our church that were away from their families for the holidays. We were excited to open our home to them and share the gift of hospitality towards them.

However, a half hour before everyone was due to arrive, we were asked if an unexpected guest could join us. In our heart of hearts we did not want this person to come over. Instead of feeling excited to share our home with someone else who had nowhere to go, and was also an unbeliever, we fretted and stressed and were generally grumpy about this turn of events. One aspect of this being that the meal we had planned for dinner was completely inedible for her as it was full of prohibited food for her culture!

BUT GOD.... But God worked in spite of us. As she came to our house, we rummaged around in our fridge to feed her with something that she could eat as we stressfully tried to finish cooking the main meal. I'm sure you all can picture the scene as you think of times you've hosted others for a meal and nothing was close to ready on time. When we finally sat down to eat, this young woman asked question after question about our faith, and shared how drawn she was to Jesus. Was it our fantastic hospitality and openness of spirit that brought this conversation about? Absolutely not.

Thanks be to God that He works in spite of us to plant seeds! Fast forward to last month, and this young woman came to our church service with another teammate who has been intentionally pouring into this relationship. Many hands, messy though they are, being faithful to sow seeds. Pray with us that they would bear fruit in this woman's life and in the lives of countless others that our community is reaching out to, and that we'd have the patience to wait on God's timing for the harvest.

JANELLE H

ELEVATING THE LEAST

MISSIONARY TESTIMONY

“And the king will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ “ - Matthew 25:40

On a warm morning in Uganda, I am sitting under a flame tree, preparing to take photos at the Gem Foundation. A nanny carrying a boy of about 12 comes along and hops on a swing. Within moments the boy is grinning ear to ear and his nanny is laughing.

The Gem Village is a peaceful green campus of low slung homes surrounded by farm land and rolling hills. It sits in stark contrast to the former 3-story building where the staff of the Gem Foundation was caring for children with special needs in the heart of Kampala. There they were choked by dust and diesel fumes, bombarded by noise from a nightclub next door. Out in the countryside we awake each morning to the call of black ibis on their morning flight and the lowing of cattle.

I was visiting to produce a video about the inclusive playground EMI had recently finished building for the Gems, as the children are called, but all of Gem Village is designed for beauty. Trees were left in place and hundreds of flowers planted. The founders and staff of The Gem Foundation know that most of the Gems will have very short lives, due to the severity of their disabilities. Their goal is to make that life as beautiful as possible.

Besides living with special needs, the 61 Gems nearly all have one thing in common: they were abandoned by their parents. While many parents did so out of desperation and inability to care for their child, some of them were simply deemed unworthy. Moving through the homes and the playground, I see nannies and nurses singing, playing, and cuddling with children and constantly smiling. Everything in the Gems' world here says, “You ARE worthy!”

When we honor the least of these with such beauty, such quality care, and by giving our best, we elevate their status, and not just in their own eyes. We tell the rest of world, “The least of these matter. They are just as important to God as the rest of us.”

It is that picture of the boy swinging with his nanny that I take with me when I return to Kampala. It's in my mind as I board the plane, and still as I process the trip after returning home. It reminds me that to value the least of these doesn't just lift them up, it shows God's heart clearly to a world desperately needing to see it.

JENNI KEITER

HALLELUJAH ON HI-RES

MISSIONARY TESTIMONY

Recall a time when you experienced deep goodness and beauty and shared the glory of that moment with others. Perhaps it was:

- An autumn drive in the mountains, saturated in aspen glow at golden hour.
- A quiet December morning: Christmas tree twinkling, a cozy blanket, hot coffee.
- A holiday meal with special flavors and traditions for just that special day.

These are examples of sacred times and spaces where heaven draws near and God's glory blazes around us. Like the heavenly choir filling the Christmas night sky with praise, our glory-filled moments can remind us of the joyful news that God is with us, that unto us a Savior has been born. Like the shepherds, our awestruck hearts can prompt us to run and see if the promises of God are true. And when we've tasted and seen this goodness for ourselves, we want others to share in the joy too.

This is the heart of the ministry of Young Life - sharing the Good News by sharing life with adolescents and inviting them to come and see about this God who loves us. Young Life staff and volunteer leaders are an embodied answer, present to adolescents who ask, “Where is God? Does He see me? Does He even care?” Our incarnational presence shouts, “YES! He is here! He loves you! He gave everything so He could be in relationship with you!” Young Life is a hallelujah chorus on hi-res, pointed directly at the hearts of kids!

Today, Young Life leaders around the world know over 2.5 million kids by name. About 2,800 of these kids live here in Colorado Springs. Over 120 currently attend Palmer High School. New Life Downtown has been an integral partner in Young Life's ministry at Palmer - generously offering the use of The Commons, funding for food, and volunteers to help make and serve free grilled cheese lunch for students on Thursdays. This is another example of a sacred space and time where heaven draws near and God's glory is ablaze. Here, Palmer students experience a tangible expression of God's love and hospitality as they are welcomed, served, and YL leaders spend time getting to know them. They are fed far more than just lunch!

This Christmas, may we receive afresh the Good News that has been announced over us! May we sense God's glory and beauty around us. May we be enlivened to taste and see for ourselves that God's promises are good and true, and find ourselves sharing this source of our joy with those around us. Joy to the world, ad infinitum.

KATIE GUTHRIE

FINDING THE BEST IN HUMANITY

MISSIONARY TESTIMONY

As a seven-year-old with three older brothers, I desperately wanted another girl in the family. I hoped Mom and Dad would bring home a baby sister. I didn't understand why a little blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and extremely scared two-year-old girl arrived instead. She was not the sister I envisioned.

She was in foster care. Foster care? She can't live with her mom anymore and needs to live with us. Why? Knowledge too heavy for a child. Why did she run from my Dad and brothers when they spoke to her? Why did strangers take her for weekend visits with her mom? Why did she hide behind chairs or cling to my Mom's legs in terror? I wasn't old enough to understand.

My parents adopted her two years later and I officially had a sister, one with a completely different story than mine. Broken promises, fear, an unknown father, manipulation, abuse and neglect that occurred when she was too young to remember or understand. God set the lonely in family, but her trauma reverberates decades later. (Psalm 68:5-6)

Two years later, social services begged my parents to take in a three-year-old boy (whom they adopted) whose foster home had their license immediately revoked. My new siblings constantly perplexed me. Emotional carnage welled up as huge emotions- they longed for the very moms that abandoned them, had unknown fathers, had siblings that weren't given up for adoption or never experienced foster care, high school dropouts, teen pregnancy, repeated incarceration . . . WHY? We grew up in the same home raised by the same parents! I saw only part of the picture. (1 Cor 13:11-12)

God's WHY arrived when I started directing Royal Family KIDS- understanding foster care, child development, trauma, Satan's scheme to disrupt core human connection, generational sin, and - ultimately - God's beautiful design for family. God had given me first-hand understanding of what brokenness does when it cracks and severs the very relationships meant to keep you safe and how to help heal traumas through consistent healthy relationships. Now, I get to help equip volunteers to face the worst of humanity in this spiritual battle - to stand firm against evil - and show up to bring Kingdom to El Paso County foster kids in (Ephesians 6:11-13). Healing and unflinching compassion through God's word at Camp & Mentoring Club. Hope for the hopeless. The best of humanity. It's the hallmark of each and every Royal Family KIDS volunteer.

PS. I encourage you to read "The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog" by Dr. Bruce D. Perry. It has equipped many volunteers, foster families, and adoptive parents in their journey of foster care.

MELISSA TAFOYA

YOU'RE CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

MISSIONARY TESTIMONY

As a young couple serving in YWAM, Isabel and I moved to a South Asian nation in 1990. This country had a reputation for being resistant to the Gospel. With our team, we were to pioneer a new indigenous work in a large Muslim city. After five years, the government revoked our visas, and we were forced to close down our efforts. For ten years, we continued to mobilize mission interest for this nation. Feeling defeated and discouraged, we shelved our efforts towards South Asia and moved into a new project in Central Asia.

Unbeknownst to many in our organization, a handful of indigenous workers from this restricted access nation completed YWAM training in 2013 and began running discipleship training schools. To date, this small team has seen over 400 graduates! They are now planning further mission training and next steps to engage the 786 unreached people groups in their nation.

I was privileged to return to this nation in April 2024 to teach in their discipleship school of forty students and staff. I had the honor of baptizing several students - many tears of joy shown. One young female student from an unreached, uneducated people group lived as an indentured worker in a brick kiln village. On a previous YWAM outreach to her village, her family received Christ and heard about the YWAM discipleship training school. Her family allowed her to come to the school. She told me, "I never dreamed there would be life outside of bricks and poverty... now, I have a plan to reach my village with the gospel of Jesus!" To see this team's passion and vision for their country was a dream come true for Isabel and I. We contended in prayer for years to see this fruit (Jn. 15:16). After years of sowing seeds, we are now seeing an answer to many prayers.

God's timeline of breakthrough, provision, and healing always comes at just the right time. However, for each of us awaiting the breakthrough to our prayers, we can feel impatient, disillusioned, and/or even filled with doubts that God is unable to meet our urgent needs. Singer, Danny Gokey wrote, "Have you been praying and still have no answers? Have you been pouring out your heart for so many years? Have you cried all the faith through so many tears?... Cause it's only in His love that you'll find a breakthrough, oh it's like the brightest sunrise, waiting on the other side of the darkest night. Don't ever lose hope, hold on, and believe. Maybe you just haven't seen it yet, your closer than you think you are" (Lam. 3:22-25). Jesus came to us at just the right time!

VON AND ISABEL HECKMAN

HEARING AND RESPONDING

MISSIONARY TESTIMONY

There I was, swimming in my local swimming pool, when a new person arrived and started to swim. It is my custom to pray as I swim, and as I was praying, I clearly heard the Lord Jesus tell me to invite this new person to our Officers Christian Fellowship Bible study. “Lord,” I said, “we don’t invite people to Bible study at the swimming pool.” “Be courageous and ask her anyway,” the Lord said. When the person stopped swimming, I introduced myself and asked if she was interested in joining our Bible study. “Funny you should ask me,” she replied. “We are new to the area and just this week I was asking God to lead us to a Bible study!” She and her husband are now regulars at our Bible study.

Mary was quick to respond to the Lord’s leading. She went out of her comfort zone to do what the Lord asked. Just as Mary quickly responded, so I need to respond quickly when God Almighty leads me, even if it is outside my comfort zone.

2 Corinthians 5:6-9 tells me, “We are always full of courage. Even while we are at home in the body, we are homesick to be with the Master—for we live by faith, not by what we see with our eyes. We live with a joyful confidence, yet at the same time we take delight in the thought of leaving our bodies behind to be at home with the Lord. So, whether we live or die we make it our life’s passion to live our lives pleasing to Him.”

This Christmas season is the perfect time to invite others to come to Christmas parties, Christmas church services, etc. Many who do not know the Savior are only waiting for someone to invite them.

Whom could you invite? How could you carry God’s presence and invitation to people God puts in front of you?

RICK JACKSON

SLOW GROWTH

MISSIONARY TESTIMONY

When Jesus came to live among us and save us, the Father, Son, and Spirit decided to start with a pregnancy. To invest the plans of heaven into just one little womb, one little family was an interesting start to the salvation of the world. More often than not, God works through slow growth.

In our work in Guatemala, we’ve had the honor of assisting with a student leadership team at the orphanage. Six years ago, it wasn’t uncommon for one of the young people to be asked a deep question and take ten minutes, crying, just to work up the courage to speak out loud. We waited. Slowly, over the years, they’ve opened their hearts and mouths in trusting God, trusting each other, and trusting themselves to share. We’ve watched this group grow to over 40 kids who have matured like trees, slow but strong, and still growing in their ability to be led and to lead here in their large family.

I recently taught this group about the process of attention, to intention, and creation in our lives. The following week they shared testimonies. Each one is an absolute miracle. One teenager had read Romans 12 every day, honing in on the details. Another read Ecclesiastes and pondered the meaning of life and how to balance fun with purposeful activities. Another shared how happy she felt all week, simply learning to pay attention to what she was paying attention to and spending time with the Lord. Another talked about his growing awareness of balancing technology with his studies. Another repented of not studying much over the week because he was engrossed in a novel. Another illuminated the Scriptures that have turned her life around from an abusive childhood to now, at age 21, finishing high school. (She’s rehabilitating after a few years ago, a parent tried to burn her hand off in a fire and destroy her tongue with boiling water.)

The power within those parentheses—that’s the miracle. Their pain is now in parenthesis. The main thing is that she preached to us for ten minutes out of Isaiah. We used to have to wait ten minutes for someone to start speaking. The growth is slow but very real.

Sometimes, there are big miracles, like the angels singing, which gathered shepherds around the birth of Jesus. But living with these kids who were once abused and abandoned is a lot like watching a forest grow. Like the growth of the infant Jesus into the Savior we now know and love. Pay attention to what you’re paying attention to and see how you might notice the forest of slow-growth miracles in your own life.

NIKKI PARKS



SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to give special thanks and recognition to the fellow NLD congregants who empowered the creation of this year's devotional by sharing their time, stories, and gifts with us.

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Editor *Leslie Calhoun* for lending your keen eye and care of the English language.

On behalf of the entire NL Downtown team and family, thank you, we love you all, and Merry Christmas!

