

ADVENT DEVOTIONS

2024



*A shoot will come out from the stump of Jesse, and...
The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him (Isaiah 11:1-2)*

**PEACE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
900 HIGH STREET • SANTA CRUZ, CA**

www.PeaceUnited.org

Welcome to Advent

I can't think of Advent without remembering a Sunday morning, late in December, when fire broke out in my church.

Each Sunday of the season, we began our worship service at the Advent wreath, a big, beautiful ring of evergreen branches with candles representing the four Advent graces. We lighted them in order, adding one each week: first Hope, then Peace, followed by Love and Joy.

By the fourth week of Advent, the greenery had gotten a little dry. The candles lighted earlier in the season, especially the first one for Hope, had burned a little low, and about halfway through the Sunday morning service, the wreath exploded into flame.

It made a hash of the liturgy, but the fire was extinguished quickly, no one was hurt and, over the years, it has become a favorite funny story that still carries a serious truth.

Hope is the first candle lighted. It needs to be tended along the way, lest all else go up in flames. Hope is the light by which the other graces come into view. Hope is the beginning of our journey into the Peace, Love and Joy promised in the birth of Jesus Christ.

Amidst the death-dealing forces of greed, envy and hate, we dare to hope in the promise of a new day with the birth of Jesus Christ. Not the happy-clappy saccharin that "things will get better," or that we "should be optimistic" about the future, but the present promise of a new day and the invitation to live it. We hear in the story of our faith and in the moving of the Holy Spirit among us a call to pay attention to what God is doing here and now by the transforming power of Peace, Love and Joy.

Let every heart prepare the place for Jesus to be born.

Pastor Dave

First Week of Advent

Sunday, December 1

HOPE



The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David: and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it shall be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.' (Jeremiah 33:14-16, Revised Standard)

O God, in times past we have seen your majesty in heavenly eclipses, heard your voice in the howling winds, felt your power in quaking mountains. And now, by your gift in Christ Jesus, we recognize that you are among us in the warmth of our homes and in shelters for the unhoused; in our sighs of contentment and the cries of a child; in your love made manifest as we care for one another and give ourselves for the least and lost. Keep us, we pray, open to the presence of your Spirit, and give us courage in your righteousness and hope in your justice, as we have seen it in the way of Jesus Christ. Amen

Monday, December 2

The Coming Apocalypse

Reflection by Matt Broadbent

People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Luke 21:26

We live in an apocalyptic age, if one pays attention to the fearmongering in our media. By the time this meditation is read we will have had an election for our next President of the United States. One side portrays the country on the brink of disaster, crime running rampant in our cities, our borders flooded with drug dealers and criminal gangs. The other side tries to portray a more positive picture but warns against the disaster that could happen if we do not pay attention and vote. Democracy could be lost.

We use such words as “unprecedented” and “catastrophic economic collapse” and we are at an “inflection point.” Our rhetoric is as overheated as is our planet which may be on the edge of a catastrophic disaster. The Apocalypse is upon us.

Is this the final destruction of the world as we know it? That is not the original meaning of the word. *Apokalypsis* in the Greek language is a verb meaning to uncover, reveal, lay bare, or disclose. Our Advent texts use a lot of apocalyptic imagery. The times are bad. There are signs and portents of great change. Wake up! Pay attention! Something is about to be revealed.

Prayer: O Presence in all time and space, open our eyes and our hearts to see what is revealed in the birth, life and death of Jesus. Give us the courage to receive the Spirit of Christ in our hearts so that we may live in this world.

When the World Doesn't End

By Anna Citrino

You can celebrate. All those things
that could have happened, that you might have
lost or won, done or been, if you had only
been lifted out of your sandy quagmire
into the light-streamed clouds of rapture, if only
you had heard the voice of a savior,
been rescued, absorbed into a cataclysm of light.

But the anticipated hour came
and went. The world walked on, right past
the finish line marked "The End of Days"
with the crowds roaring their warnings.
Hoisting the world on its back, Atlas lifted his legs
into the next hour, and the next, and kept going.

Prayer: Faithful One Who Provides, lift us from the quagmire of thoughts
that weigh us down. Help us remember that the kingdom of God is in and
among us, will carry us through into every coming hour.

Wednesday, December 4

Humility

Reflection by Stephen Brewer

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? - Micah 6:8

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
Matthew 5:3*

What does it Mean to walk humbly with God? It implies closeness to and reverence for the One from whom all things come. This phrase also defines humility in terms of reaching beyond self into the world where so much suffering and injustice calls to us. We are not asked to take these risks alone, for in our loving kindness God walks with us.

“*Poor in spirit*” is an Aramaic idiom meaning “*humble*.” So, the first beatitude is not about blessing the materially poor, or those whose spiritual lives might be lacking; It is a call to take our own interests and needs out of the center of our lives. Jesus shows us in his teachings and in his life, that putting self above others is not the Way.

In this Advent Season, as we prepare to receive the newly-born Christ, may we be challenged by the humility of Jesus to learn better how to let go of “Me” being first priority so that we may make room for God’s Spirit and compassion and kindness.

Prayer: Lord and Christ, you came to us in the humblest of ways: born in scandal to poor parents who could find no place for your birth other than a drafty stable, among beasts. In your life you walked among the lowly and rejected, offering healing, hope and life. May we join you in this walk of Peace and Love. Amen.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers

By Emily Dickinson

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

Source: The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited by
R. W. Franklin (Harvard University Press, 1999)



Labor to Bring Forth Life

Reflection by Barbara Broadbent

“...when she who is in labor has brought forth [life]...he shall be the one of peace.

Micah 5:2-5 (selected)

Our daughter, our second child, was late in being ready to present herself into this world. At one point, my obstetrician shrugged and said, “I think the baby has decided not to come out.” I became so used to contractions that would start and then just stop, that by the time I actually did go into labor, we almost didn’t make it to the hospital. I remember a nurse saying to me, “Honey, you are going to have a baby very soon!”

I was hastily prepped and on the delivery table in minutes. The delivering nurse, knowing I knew how to control the contractions, told me when to push and when to stop, which I did successfully.

Our labor is the ongoing spiritual work. It is hard, often painful, but it is necessary for life to continue. As a congregation, our ongoing work is to call forth the best in everyone we meet, to be good and faithful friends, and to be a helpful presence wherever we may go.

Prayer: In this way, I pray that we shall continue to “bring forth life” in the most positive ways. Amen.

Saturday, December 7

*O come, O come **Emmanuel**
and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here,
until the Child of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to you,
O Israel!*



Second Week of Advent

Sunday, December 8

PEACE



For a child has been born for us; a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6, Revised Standard)

Eternal God, we thank you that through all the years you have offered the gift of peace, and led your people in a vision of peace for all the world. We pray that what we do in the light of Christ may show your presence to the sick, to the hungry, to the lonely and imprisoned, to all who need, so that all the world may be as one, and at peace. Amen

Monday, December 9

PEACEMAKING, part 1

Reflection by Susan Thistlethwaite

Luke 3:5 – “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths of the Lord straight.’”

“Jesus will forgive you, but Santa Claus never will.” During the children’s sermon one Advent when I was a local pastor, I had asked the children in my congregation, “What is the difference between Jesus and Santa Claus?” and that is the answer a little boy gave.

He was exactly right. Santa Claus makes a list and checks it twice in order to tally up the wrongs children have done in the previous year. “You better watch out!” Jesus will forgive and not keep a list as John the Baptist foreshadows. Over the years, I have come to see how important it is to recognize that forgiveness is a crucial practice of peacemaking and that tallying up wrongs leads to anger, resentment and sometimes even to violence.

There are ten Just Peace practices (things you need to do for there to be more peace and less violence) and #4 is “Acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness.” Without letting go of resentment and anger at previous wrongs, whether wrongs you have done or have been done to you, peacemaking is nearly impossible.

Prayer: O God of Peace, free me from the bondage of tallying wrongs so that I may live as if peace is possible. Amen.

Tuesday, December 10

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.
Where there is discord, let me bring union.
Where there is error, let me bring truth.
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.

-anonymous prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi



PEACEMAKING, part 2

Reflection by Susan Thistlethwaite

Luke 3:3 – *“John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,…”*

Forgiveness as a practice that leads to just peacemaking was the most controversial of all the themes we as the group who drafted the first Just Peace document considered. I was one of those in the group who first opposed the inclusion of forgiveness as “forgive and forget” is preached at abused women all the time. They are told to be “Christ-like” and forgive their abusers, but without the call to repentance. John’s practice specifically calls for a “baptism of repentance” that leads to forgiveness. And that was emphasized in our just peacemaking work. I ultimately agreed to include it.

My colleague Dr. Dow Edgerton and I taught a class at Chicago Theological Seminary on forgiveness and students who took it harbored so much anger at the wrongs that had been done to them and the failure of the wrongdoers to repent. “How can I find my way to forgiveness when they don’t even acknowledge the wrong that was done to me?” was a constant refrain. The students resented that failure so much.

I think the still burning coals of resentment can easily ignite the flames of anger and even lead to violence unless one can let go of them. Confession, repentance and change is important, no doubt, but letting go of resentment, even when the wrongdoer does not repent, can be done. Such a process is never easy, but it is necessary for people to find peace with themselves, with their communities and it is also necessary among nations.

Prayer: O God, let me repent of my resentments and find the path to forgiveness. Amen.

Thursday, December 12

O Lord, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in forgiving that one is forgiven,
it is in dying that one awakens to eternal life.

-anonymous prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi



Friday, December 13

SHARE IN GRACE

Reflection by Bonnie Lange

"God's grace is shared with me and through me." (from Philippians 1:3-11)

During the hectic, hustle of holiday frenzy, I take a moment and reflect on the grace of God that surrounds me.

Like the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, may I sense the gratitude from a deep recognition of God's grace in the lives of people in my community. Paul is thankful not just for their support but for the way they share in God's grace with him. This grace is not passive; it calls us into partnership in the Gospel. It invites us into a love that grows in wisdom and understanding.

In this moment of stillness, consider the relationships in your life that reflect this shared grace. How are you called to nurture love and peace within your community? Contemplate how God's grace works through you, filling you with peace and guiding your steps.

As we share in God's grace, may our hearts be filled with love, discernment, and the peace that only Christ can bring.

"So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well." (Philippians 1:9)

Saturday, December 14

*O come, O **Wisdom** from on high,
And order all things far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And help us in that way to go.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to you,
O Israel!*



Third Week of Advent

Sunday, December 15

JOY



As God has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept God's commandments and abide in God's love. These things I have spoken to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.
(John 15:9-11, Revised Standard)

Eternal God – Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer – of every goodness, whose love would heal all brokenness, teach us with heaven and nature to sing the renewal of this earth, to repeat the sounding joy of life in the wonders of Christ's love. Help us to know the joy of his coming to our flesh, and prepare us to receive him anew into our lives, that love may rule the world with truth and grace, the glories of his righteousness. Amen

Monday, December 16

What if joy is not entangled with pain,
or suffering, or sorrow,
but is also what emerges
from how we care for each other
through those things?

-Ross Gay



Tuesday December 17

JOY... REJOICE, AND BE GLAD

Reflection on Philippians 4:4-8 by Grant Erickson

Scholars tell us that the Bible uses forms of the word “JOY” over two hundred times, and that the two well-springs of Christian joy are the love of God and the will of God. Only in an atmosphere of God loving us and us loving God can we find real joy.

Though sorrow and grief played a significant role in the life of our Lord, scriptures reveal that Jesus longed for us to be glad, saying one day to his disciples, “These things I have spoken unto you that you may have joy to the full.”

Saint Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, gives some practical instructions for a full, happy life: may you always be joyful in your life in the Lord; show a gentle attitude toward all; ask God for what you need, always asking with a grateful heart; fill your minds with those things that are good and deserve praise, things that are noble, pure, lovely, and honorable.

Child psychologists tell us that the greatest gifts parents can give their children is a solid foundation of love, and treasured lessons of the heart – faith, courage, acts of kindness, living the Golden Rule, expressing gratitude for life’s abundant blessings.

Prayer: Let this hymn verse by Edward Plumptre (1865) be our closing prayer:

*Yes, on through life’s long path, still chanting as you go,
From youth to age, by night and day, In gladness and in woe:
Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice, give thanks and sing!*

TO LIVE WITH JOY

Grant Erickson

“Relish the moment” is a praiseworthy motto, especially when coupled with Psalm 118:24, “This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” But history reveals turmoil in every age. It isn’t the burdens of today that drives us mad, but the regrets over yesterday and the fears of tomorrow.

Kalidasa, a most inspiring and versatile poet, put it this way:

*Look to this day:
For it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course
Lie all the verities and realities of your existence.
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,
The splendour of achievement
Are but experiences of time.

For yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision;
And today well-lived, makes
Yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this day;
Such is the salutation to the ever-new dawn!*

Prayer: This is the day you have given us, O God. May our hearts be filled with deep love and satisfaction for this day, which is the source of our joy. Amen.

Living the Magnificat

Reflection by Bev Brook

My soul magnifies the Lord, ... [who] has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. Luke 1:47, 52

In her poem 'Our Lady' Mary Elizabeth Coleridge presents Mary as a revolutionary figure whose power is not to be tamed by sentimental pieties. Writing long before Liberation Theology but very much in its spirit, she was insisting on a long-neglected truth of the Gospel. Most of what we hear about Mary comes from Luke who is very clear that she represents the *anawim*, the humble people of Israel: the underclass, the marginalized and the oppressed. Above all Mary's Magnificat, framed around the song of Hannah from 1 Samuel 2, consists entirely of quotations from the Hebrew Bible's passages about the poor. Mary's song is *their* song; she is the voice of the voiceless whom God at last has heard and is going to vindicate, because God is going to turn the old order upside down.

Mary also symbolizes the Church in its perfection. But the dangers of ignoring Mary and her identification with the Church are obvious. The Church forgets at its peril that Mary, the peasant girl who suffered with her son and followed in his way, is revered because of her poverty, because she followed God's call, because she represents and furthers the hopes of the *anawim*. When the Church rests too readily in its own power and glory, when it sets its own institutional life and survival above its solidarity with the poor and marginalized, then the identification with Mary is lost. And if the Church is no longer the Church of Mary and the Magnificat, it is no longer the Church of Christ.

Mary's uncompromising song forces us to ask the questions: Who exactly are the rich and powerful now and who are the *anawim*? And which ones are we, corporately and individually, and whose side are we really on?

Prayer: O God, may we walk as companion with Mary, in courage and love.
Amen

Blessed Are We by Carol Keeney

*Blessed is she who believed that the promise,
made her by her God, would be fulfilled.*

—Collen Fulmer

In a time of great violence, Mary
believed in us, her fellow humans
upon this Earth. She believed so deeply,
she praised love and justice realized,
reminding us it is ours to live, right now,
right here, given to us by our God.

Are we not all Mary, carrying within us
the Light of the World? Do we not,
each one of us, through our labor,
through how we live each moment,
bring forth some realization of that promise
of love and justice on Earth?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, Creator of All that Is, like Mary, help me believe in
all your people and help my actions, each day, affirm love and justice.
Amen.

Saturday, December 21

*O come, O Day-spring, come and cheer
our spirits by your advent here;
Love stir within the womb of night,
and death's own shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to you,
O Israel!*



Fourth Week of Advent

Sunday, December 22

LOVE



*My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God... This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world that we might live through him... God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us... The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both. (1 John 4:7-21 select, *The Message*)*

O God, we thank you that Jesus showed your love for every person – babies and children, old people and young, the sick and those who were strong, the rich and those who were poor. Come to us anew, we pray, and lead us in love for all your people, by the grace of one who first came to us as your own child, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen

Listening to Perotin's-Beata Viscera

Poem by Anna Citrino

A voice echoes from walls of centuries past,
a melody wandering a pathway of silvered dust
fluttering down from an opened window looking out
to a trembling twilight sea.

Birds ascend to the mountains—submerge
into canyons' hidden depths. Sirens call
from across a cold and hollow valley
to pilgrims wandering a long path
leading away from home.

The mind sinks into sound's green well—
rising, falling with the curls and turns
of exhaled breath. This is a birth song,
the heart's cry declaring the pain of becoming.

Soft as incense, music swaddles you
in unresolved beauty. Moon washes
your forehead, kisses your feet.
Before you, the future burns like fire.

Shoeless, you step onto a road of flame and ice,
and begin your journey.

Prayer: Dear Ancient of Days, be our peace and strength as we set forth on
the difficult journeys in the days before us.

Tuesday, December 24
Christmas Eve

*O come, **Desire of Nations**, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind.
Make envy, strife, and quarrels cease;
fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to you,
O Israel!*



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Grant Erickson – Reflection

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Carol Keeney – Poem

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ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS SERVICES

December 1, First Sunday of Advent

Communion with Jazz on High

Rev David Pattee, preaching

December 8, Second Sunday of Advent

Birthday Sunday with Chancel Choir

Rev David Pattee, preaching

December 15, Third Sunday of Advent

Jazz on High

Rev David Pattee, preaching

December 22, Fourth Sunday of Advent

Chancel Choir, Christmas Cantata

Rev David Pattee, preaching

December 24, Christmas Eve

5 p.m. Jazz on High

8 p.m. Chancel Choir

December 29, 1st Sunday after Christmas

Rev Matt Broadbent, preaching