

The background is a dark navy blue. A large, thin gold geometric shape, resembling a stylized star or a complex polygon, is centered on the page. Inside this shape, there are four solid-colored circles: three dark blue and one pink, each with a small gold dot in the center. The text "Advent GUIDE" is written in a gold serif font, with "Advent" in a larger size than "GUIDE". Below the text, there is a gold-colored wreath made of various green leaves, pine needles, and white berries. The wreath is positioned at the bottom of the page, partially overlapping the gold geometric shape. The overall design is elegant and festive.

Advent GUIDE

Light in the midst
of darkness

CELTIC PRAYER

*Christ, as a light
illumine and guide us.*

*Christ, as a shield
overshadow us.*

Christ under us;

Christ over us;

Christ beside us

on my left and my right.

*This day be within and without us,
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.*

*Be in the heart of each to whom we speak;
in the mouth of each who speaks unto us.*

*This day be within and without us,
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.*

Christ as a light;

Christ as a shield;

Christ beside us

on our left and our right.

DECLARATION OF FAITH

To whom shall we go?

*You have the words of eternal life,
and we have believed and have come to know
that You are the Holy One of God.*

*Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ,
King of endless glory.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

How to Use this Guide	4
Introduction	5
Advent Wreath	7
How the Church Keeps Time	8
Week One: <i>PEACE</i>	9
<i>Weekly Overview and Practice</i>	10
<i>Peace Reflection (Jeff Cook)</i>	11
<i>Waiting on God (Henri J.M. Nouwen)</i>	12
Week Two: <i>HOPE</i>	13
<i>Weekly Overview and Practice</i>	14
<i>Hope Reflection (Esau McCaulley)</i>	15
<i>Hope Reflection (MLK Jr.)</i>	16
Week Three: <i>JOY</i>	17
<i>Weekly Overview and Practice</i>	18
<i>Joy Reflection (Andrew Root)</i>	19
<i>Reflecting Radical Joy (N.T. Wright)</i>	20
Week Four: <i>LOVE</i>	21
<i>Weekly Overview and Practice</i>	22
<i>Love Reflection (David G. Benner)</i>	23
<i>Love Reflection (Sheryl Fleisher)</i>	24
Christmas Day	26
Appendix	27
<i>Daily Practice Guide</i>	28
<i>Communal Practice Guide</i>	29
<i>St. Nicholas Day Dec. 6th</i>	30
<i>Spiritual Practices</i>	31
<i>The Jesus Prayers</i>	34
<i>Praying the Psalms</i>	35
<i>The Nicene Creed</i>	36
<i>The “Second Coming”?</i>	37
Resources	39

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Let's start with good news.

The fact that you have opened this guide is evidence of God's invitation in your life! We need this reminding because Advent is not about doing more, it's about our intent, and giving our consent to God's slow growth in our lives. Advent reveals the mighty acts of God to heal/save the world. As Jesus first followers asked, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" To which Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:48-49). This guide is a means of believing—trusting, relying, with faith—the living Word who is the "Light of the World" (John 8:12).

This means that Advent is a gift to us. "An invitation to move slowly and methodically, looking inward with honesty about our relationship with God incarnate," as Tsh Oxenreider writes. This guide, then, is meant to practice "the true season of Advent as separate from Christmastide without complicated cultural pressure or excess activity. As we prepare our homes for the great Feast of the Nativity on December 25, we also prepare our hearts, minds, and souls in this season of expectancy, preparation, and longing."

Though there are various devotional patterns to Advent, this guide borrows from Tsh Oxenreider and the Christian Anglican tradition, emphasizing the fruits and their focus of: hope and expectation, faith and preparation, joy and anticipation, and peace and gratitude.

However you use this guide: as a means to learn more about Advent, as an inspiration for devotion, for weekly reflection, for daily Scripture reading, as a communal practice, and/or personal devotion, the key is YOU CANNOT MESS THIS UP! There is complete freedom. Consider this as a canvas, and no matter what you create with it, God will hang on the heavenly fridge, and smile looking at it every single time. Remember, the fact that you've opened up this guide is evidence of God's invitation in your life!

Choose Your Own Adventure

DAILY AND/OR WEEKLY PRACTICE

This guide is meant to be versatile and freeing. Much like the popular, and totally awesome Choose Your Own Adventure book series, the categories below provide an at-a-glance look so you can map out your Advent adventure.

Daily Practice: This page offers a scaffolding for practicing a daily devotional (personal or communal) using the daily Psalm reading and prayer liturgy. The book of Psalms is a great place to build momentum as we join the Church. Feel free to mix and match practices, or even to bypass them altogether and try one of the recommended Daily Apps.

Communal Practice: This page offers a scaffolding for a group or household. *You can also mix and match anything from this guide—get creative!*

Weekly Overviews: There are five Weekly Overview pages, one for each Sunday of Advent, and one for Christmas. The Psalms are highlighted for those that want to begin by joining the Church in praying the Psalter. Some participants will only want to utilize these overviews as they provide the thematic emphasis for each week, including a list of all the Scripture readings. If this describes you, look for the purple bookmark on each of these five pages.

APPENDIX

Explanation Pages: There are several pages for those who want more understanding of the Advent season, the Church liturgical calendar, and the symbols themselves. For those that don't, feel free to skip this section.

Spiritual Practices: This section highlights a few practices from FloodChurch.org/Practices that can be integrated into both daily and weekly time with God. For example, Breath Prayer, Lectio Divina, Prayer of Examen, etc.

Historic Practices: The Lord's Prayer, The Jesus Creed, Communion, and the Nicene Creed has special significance in our liturgical practice. The first three are how Jesus taught us to pray and confess him until he returns, and the fourth is one of the essential creeds of our historic shared faith, which highlights the final consummation of all things at Christ's second coming.

Reflection and Resource Pages: This guide is the amalgamation of many Christian writers and exemplars. Included are excerpts, as well as, a full bibliography for those that want to continue learning.



INTRODUCTION



dvent
(Latin, *Adventus*)
means “coming/arrival”.

It is a four-week season before the twelve days of Christmas season that summons us to recognize the Coming One, who said, “I am the Light of the world” (John 8:12). Advent, more than any other season of the church year, is more closely connected to the concrete difficulties and dark days of our lives. That is to say, we live in Advent—the time between the first coming of Christ and the second coming, between darkness and light. It is a season of waiting and watching in hope for the *light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it* (John 1:5). In Advent, we faithfully remember the past, while watching and waiting in the present, for our future hope. In many ways, John’s capturing of praise embodies Advent:

***“Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come”
(Revelation 4:8).***

And though we live in “the time being,” Advent has traditionally emphasized the second arrival of Christ, inaugurating the “last things” of the final judgment. As Paul instructs his disciple Timothy, “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom (2 Timothy 4:1).” In other words, “This is why Advent differs from the other seasons in that it looks beyond history altogether and awaits Jesus Christ’s coming again, as we recite in the Nicene Creed: He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. In the cycle of seasons and that takes the church through the life of Christ, it is Advent that gives us the final consummation; it is the season of the last things” (Rutledge).

Let’s pause here for a moment. How do those phrases make you feel: last things; final consummation, judge the living and the dead? Exactly.

This partly explains why treat the Advent season more like the Christmastide season (see Church Calendar page)—to avoid the discomfort of reflecting on our lives, the pain of loss, and the humility that comes with turning back to God alone as our only hope.

We don’t feel like waiting in the darkness, so we stretch out the holly jolly as long as we can (starting in October), before abruptly ending in a consumeristic comatose at 5pm on December 25th—which ironically is meant to be the day that inaugurates the joy of feasting—for twelve days! If you want to see children’s faces light up, ask them what they think about opening presents for twelve straight days.

Though it’s understandable that we seek what is lighter, we need to ask ourselves if we have exchanged the “Light of the world,” for artificial lights. Are we missing something? Are we balking at ancient wisdom?

In his article, “Cracks in the Secular,” Christian scholar James K. A. Smith describes a painting that hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, El Greco’s *The Vision of St. John* (1614). Evoking the opening of the Fifth Seal in Revelation 6:9-11, the martyrs who bore faithful witness are given white robes while John (it seems) looks heavenward toward the epiphany of Jesus, the Lamb of God. But, as he notes, “The painting as we view it today is a fragment. The canvas that hangs in the Met doesn’t tell the whole story. In the course of a ‘restoration’ around 1880, the unfinished canvas was trimmed by nearly six feet. In the name of ‘improvement,’ the scene is truncated by almost half. And so, in what seems a fitting parable of modernity, the exultant arms of John the Revelator reach upward to—nothing: to the top of the frame, to the edge of the canvas. The martyrs seem to receive gifts from nowhere, and John seems to praise the nonexistent. All of them seem to look for something no longer there. What if our tentativeness towards the second coming has unwisely severed us of what makes our faith flourish? What’s up there? Our calling in this season might be less about succumbing to the trappings of Madison Avenue and more about bearing witness to what is missing, especially to those who are feeling the claustrophobia of that frame. We might be surprised at the response.”

***The purpose of
this guide is to help
us reframe Advent—
to illuminate what
could be dimmed.***

INTRODUCTION *continued*

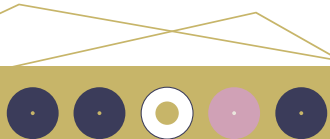
When historical theologian Justo González was recently asked, “What is the most significant theological work in the past fifty years for the Church,” Gonzalez replied, “The renewal of eschatology [study of the Last Things in the Bible] from a Theology of Fear, to a Theology of Hope.” In other words, Gonzalez as a Church Historian knows that we are missing something. Namely, the second coming of Christ is good news! It was good news to the apostles, the first Jesus’ followers, and it is good news to us! The Last Things, along with Advent, has been hijacked by fear. But as the apostle John later writes, “There is no fear in love. Perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). Advent is about perfect love—the love that incarnated God into Jesus of Nazareth, and the love that doesn’t shriek back from evil, but instead eradicates it as the only One who can right every wrong and rectify all things. And that is the meaning of the Last and Final Judgment—hope and healing. What can be better news than what John records towards the end of his life describing the day when all things will be new:

“Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth’... Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away... The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there” (Revelation 21:1a, 3-4, 23-25).

The Advent of Christ is good news because God has done, is doing, and will do what human beings cannot do—we cannot save ourselves—this is the glorious and loving work of God alone. What we can do, however, is participate in God’s “kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” today (Matthew 6:10). At that will mean watching, waiting, hoping, faithing, enjoying, and peacemaking. And by doing so, we join those who have gone before us, the “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), as well as, millions of Christians from around the world as one Church.

For from the beginning, Christians were singing hymns, psalms, saying prayers, celebrating communion, sharing their resources, and becoming a people marked by a desire for God’s coming kingdom—a desire that shaped them as a vigilant people in the present. Advent, then, is not something we do, it does something to us.

This guide invites you to join them, moving slowly and methodically with the season and with fellow Christians from around the world. It can be used once as an inspiration, or once-a-week for scaffolding, or for daily practice. In any case, as Tsh Oxenreider writes, “Honoring the season doesn’t need to be complicated. It simply requires that we take the first step and respond to the invitation.”



In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

JOHN 1:1-5

ADVENT WREATH

When the Advent Wreath is placed in a central place in the home, it serves as a constant reminder of the truth of God's presence with us—even in the darkness. The wreath can be as simple or elaborate as you want. The point is not to try and impress God, but to embody the season. "Wreaths can be made from anything, but there's something decidedly poignant about them when they're crafted from nature. As Paul says in Romans 8, there's a symbolic resonance to recognizing Advent with nature as a reminder that all creation waits in anticipation along with us (Oxenreider)."

Lighting the Candles: Each of the four weeks of Advent has its own candle that can be lit at any time during the week to illuminate time with meaning (prayer, meals, etc.). Beginning in the second Sunday of Advent, the current and past week(s) candles are lit. "As our nights grow longer and our days grow short, we look on these earthly signs--light and green branches-- and remember God's promise to our world: Christ, our Light and our Hope, will come (Oxenreider)."

Symbolism - Candles: The three **purple** candles represent both royalty of the King and our turning (repenting) from our petty little kingdoms towards trusting in God's kingdom. The one **rose** (pink) candle, representing the harmony of joy to the melody of the more somber preparation motif. The first four candles represent the four hundred years of waiting before Malachi's prophecy and the arriving of the Messiah King Jesus. The **white** candle is the Christ candle, reminding us that Jesus is in the center of all good things— the source of our **hope**, our faith, our joy, and our peace. The **Wreath** is designed to remind us of God himself—his mercy and love has no beginning or end. The green of the wreath points to the hope we have in God – the hope of renewal, or eternal life (Pray-as-you-go).

History: The Advent wreath originated in the middle of the nineteenth century. Its purpose is to highlight the final arriving (advent) of Christ, and give meaning to the time in between the first arrival and the final one, where God promised to right all wrongs as the prophets foretold (Rutledge).

1
Peace

4
Love

Christ

CHRISTMASTIDE

*"The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness
has not overcome it."*

JOHN 1:5

2
Hope

3
Joy



HOW THE CHURCH KEEPS TIME

A Return to the Unforced Rhythms of Grace

Social theorist Hartmut Rosa surmizes that “Modernity is acceleration, the continual speeding up of every aspect of life.” As theologian Andrew Root expounds, “The Church used to be the Time-Keepers as rhythms, seasons, festivals and feasts, directed our hearts and minds to what was most important, and was then able to direct our inner being towards biblical picture of the good life—to live out the fruits of the Spirit in and through the power of God. However, in the 18th century, Modernity staged a Coup d’état and killed the old Time Keeper so-to-speak, and the State became new Time Keeper. In the absence of a transcendent God, modernity takes over with a picture of the good life that is exclusively human created—we can save ourselves! Then again, in the late 20th century, another takeover happened as Silicon Valley became the new Time Keeper with the belief that technology will save us! Thus, our identity has morphed into the consumer products we use (or use us). But, the Silicon Valley has no patience for slowing down, and therefore no real value for wisdom. This begs the question, ‘Does church move at the speed of wisdom?’” (New Time Religion). Advent, then, offers us an invitation to slow down and join the wisdom of the Church and join Jesus’ unforced rhythms of grace (Matthew 11:28-30, MSG).

The Liturgical Church Calendar

“The liturgical year is the year that sets out to attune the life of the Christian to the life of Jesus. It proposes, year after year, to immerse us over and over again into the sense and substance of the Christian life until, eventually, we become what we say we are—followers of Jesus all the way to the heart of God” (Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year*).

In her book, *Shadow and Light: A Journey into Advent*, author Tsh Oxenreider writes, “Liturgy is an invitation for the people of God to participate in the work of God. The liturgical year, therefore, is a recognition and celebration of feasts and seasons, transforming our ordinary 12-month calendar into sacred time. We inherited the idea from our Jewish ancestors in the Old Testament, who commemorated both holy days, such as Yom Kippur, and holy ordinary practices, such as recognizing a sabbath day every one day out of seven. People have marked time and seasons since the beginning of written history, and followers of Christ have continued this ancient Jewish tradition since the early days of the Church.

The purpose of such a calendar was to trace the mystery of salvation and the course of salvation history. We see the beginnings of the calendar in the early Church...The rhythmic seasons in the Church calendar also reflect the natural world’s cycles of sowing and reaping. These organic cycles speak to the mystery of birth, growth, death, and resurrection that we recognize in the earthly and divine life of Christ.”

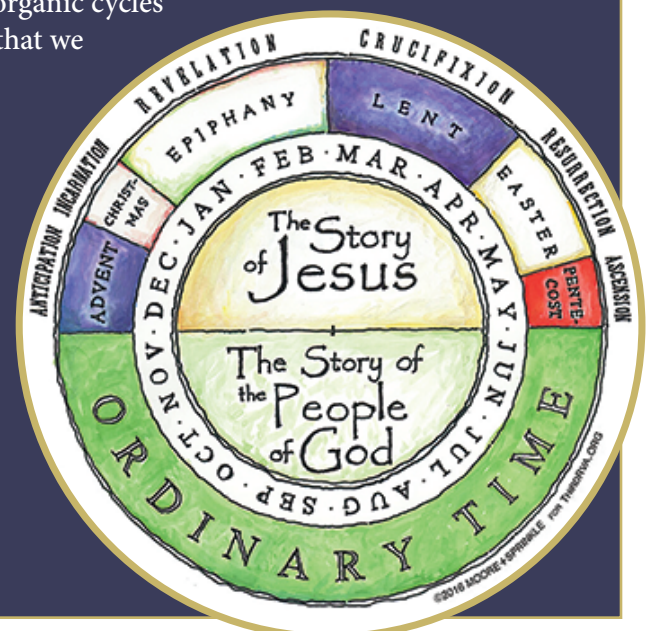
Here are the seasons and their emphases
(Scot McKnight, *Praying with the Church*):

THE STORY OF JESUS

- **Advent** - Longing for the Messiah
- **Christmastide** - Celebration of the Messiah
- **Epiphany (and after)** - Commitment to the Messiah
- **Lent** - Repentance and Renewal
- **Holy Week** - Fasting, prayer, and commitment
- **Eastertide (to Pentecost)** - Die to sin, rise to new life

THE STORY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

- **Ordinary Time** - Living out the gospel in the Spirit





PEACE

focus
Preparation
fruit
Peace

FIRST WEEK

WEEK ONE OVERVIEW



Fruit and Focus

“God with us” is the source of all **peace**. Here we read Nathan’s response to David, and look at Mary and her response to Gabriel’s announcement. God calls us to participate. That participation isn’t always easy, but God will never ask us to participate without his involvement, and as Jesus said (Mt. 19:26) nothing is impossible with him (Shallenberger). We cannot attain God’s presence because God is already and always will be with us. What is absent is awareness. **Gratitude**, opens us to God’s presence. The One who was “reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, Prince of Peace, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. As we turn to you, may recognize your Presence resting upon us. Help us to be vigilant in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing, and may we show gratitude through our living. We continue to anticipate your arrival. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus (Rev. 22:20).

Scripture*

1st Sunday, November 27: Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

Monday, November 28: Psalm 124; Genesis 8:1-19; Romans 6:1-11

Tuesday, November 29: Psalm 124; Genesis 9:1-17; Hebrews 11:32-40

Wednesday, November 30: Psalm 124; Isaiah 54:1-10; Matthew 24:23-35

Thursday, December 1: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 4:2-6; Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

Friday, December 2: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 30:19-26; Acts 13:16-25

Saturday, December 3: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 40:1-11; John 1:19-28

**The Sunday readings are the week’s emphasis, and the Psalms are encouraged for on ramping to daily practices.*

Reflecting the Light

FloodChurch.org/GivingTree: Join the Church by reflecting God’s Kingdom come through generosity.

Practice Options

Breath Prayer: “Let your face shine [inhale]; that I/we may be healed [exhale].”

Daily Practice: See Daily Practice Guide Page.

Communal Practice (Household, Group, Family, etc.): See Communal Page.

Advent Wreath / Advent Candles: See Advent Wreath Page.

The Word as Light to Our Path: Print out the verses below (from the first Sunday of Advent) and have each member of your household recreate on a piece of paper. Add them to a special box and place next to your Advent wreath/candles. Before meals, have someone choose a passage to read. And/or, write these down, create pieces of art, or memorize them to light your path of waiting in hope and expectation.

PSALM 122:9

For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

ROMANS 13:11

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;

MATTHEW 24:42

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

PEACE REFLECTION



Book Excerpt: *Everything New*, by Jeff Cook

During these days of exile, much of the Old Testament was assembled, edited and written. As such, two themes routinely emerge in the Jewish scriptures. The texts often explore pain, struggle and failure on one hand, yet they are balance by passages of great optimism. Many of the OT writers anticipated a new day when the Hebrew God would return and set things right through the promised Messiah.

Though we tend to think of the Christmas story as a placid scene with a chubby baby and furry animals, the real story begins with a king and an act of power—Caesar displacing thousands of people in order to check the value of his empire and remind everyone who rules the earth. Of course, the Christmas story pictures something that would have been obvious to any Jew at the turn of the first century. Rome controlled people so specifically that it could force poor, pregnant teenagers to travel dozens of miles in the dead of winter in order to assess how much they would contribute to Rome in taxes...

A biographer named Matthew tells a complementary story to Luke of Persian rulers coming into Israel carrying royal gifts to Bethlehem, of signs in the heavens that complemented the coming of a new sovereign, and of Herod the Great unleashing his army to find and slaughter every male born in the area for fear his throne might be in jeopardy.

The Christmas story begins with a king and an act of power—Caesar displacing thousands of people in order to check the value of his empire and remind everyone who rules the earth. Luke intentionally begins the story comparing the image of Caesar and the pronouncement of a different kind of king.

The Christmas story is bigger than one trees, fling reindeer, and ugly sweater competitions. It's a political story about restoration, about the hopes of an oppressed people. Christmas is about a new kind of king. Jesus' mother celebrated the occasion with a song pointing toward the overthrow—not merely of Rome but oppression, slavery, and evil itself.

In 63 BC, Rome violently swept into Israel, dominating its wealth and people. Rome would control Israel for the next 400 years. Early on the Romans elected a man they called "The King of the Jews" to rule the country, who history knows as Herod the Great. Herod sold out to Rome so severely that he placed a large golden eagle—the symbol of Rome—over the gates leading into the Jewish Temple. Many were deeply offended. In 4 BC, after years of disgrace, a large group of students cut the graven image down during midday prayers. Herod was not amused. Forty of those responsible were burned alive a few days later.

During the Roman occupation, such protests followed by violent reprisal were common—in a time called, "Roman Peacetime." This is the setting that a baby to be named Jesus (the Lord delivers) started an uprising by speaking about *good news* and a new kind of peace in a new kind of world.

"Good News" was a powerful term in the first century. In the Jewish mind, the phrase was short hand for the elimination of evil. In the Roman world it was the announcement that a new ruler had taken control of the world. Because of Israel's continued oppression by foreign powers, many concluded that God had not returned to his home on top of Mt. Zion. It's clear from writings of the day that the Jewish people believed that these empires would not have succeeded if God was in his temple, and by this first century AD insurrectionists like John the Baptist were inviting the faithful out of Jerusalem—away from the Temple Mount—to plead for God's return.

Jesus was not just a moral teacher, a prophet, or all around good guy. He was so purposed for something massive, and expects all of his followers to be completely devoted to him, and therefor his project—to help him announce the good news, and fashion a whole new creation right in the middle of this one—by bringing healing and peace; by going to people in dead places and raising them to life. Jesus saw the kingdom of God as so valuable, so awe-inspiring, that it was wroth setting aside very other dream, pursuit we could have. Jesus embraced this and showed in the most revolutionary way possible what it looks like when God becomes king.

And, because of Jesus, God with us, the cross is no longer an icon of hostility and death, but a symbol of peace, and everlasting life.

WAITING ON GOD



Book Excerpt: *Waiting for God*, by Henri J. M. Nouwen

Waiting is not a very popular attitude. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time... for many people waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go. And people do not like such a place. They want to get out of it by doing something.

In our particular historical situation, waiting is even more difficult because we are so fearful. One of the most pervasive emotions in our atmosphere around us is fear. People are afraid—afraid of inner feelings, afraid of other people, and also afraid of the future. Fearful people have a hard time waiting, because when we are afraid we want to get away from where we are. But if we cannot flee, we may fight instead. Many of our destructful acts come from the fear that something harmful will be done to us... People who live in a world of fear are more likely to make aggressive, hostile, destructive responses than people who are not so frightened. The more afraid we are, the harder waiting becomes.

All the people who appear on the first pages of Luke's Gospel are waiting—the whole opening scene of the good news is filled with waiting people. And right at the beginning all those people in some way or another hear the words, "Do not be afraid. I have something good to say to you." Now Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna—representatives of waiting Israel—are waiting for something new and good to happen to them. "My soul is waiting for the Lord" (Psalm 130:5-7) is the song that reverberates all through the Hebrew scriptures.

But what is the NATURE and PRACTICE of waiting? How were they waiting, and how are we called to wait with them?

Waiting is the **WAITING WITH A SENSE OF PROMISE**, as we see it in the people on the first pages of the Gospel. People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow. This is very important. We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more.

Second, **WAITING IS ACTIVE**. Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. But there is none of this passivity in scripture. Those who are waiting are waiting very actively. They know that what they are waiting for is growing from the ground on which they are standing. The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it.

A WAITING PERSON IS A PATIENT PERSON. The word patience means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Waiting means nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her.

WAITING IS OPEN-ENDED. Open-ended waiting is hard for us because we tend to wait for what we wish for. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes. We are full of wishes and our waiting gets entangled in those wishes. For this reason a lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and when that doesn't happen, we can become very disappointed and even slip into despair. Here we can see how wishes tend to be connected with fears. I have found it very important in my own life to let go of wishes and start hoping. It was only when I was willing to let go of my wishes that something really new, something beyond my own expectations could happen to me. To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God molds us according to God's love and not according to our fear.

How do we wait?

Elizabeth and Mary came together and enabled each other to wait. So, these two women **CREATED SPACE FOR EACH OTHER TO WAIT**. They affirmed for each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for. This is a model of Christian community. It is a community of support, celebration, and affirmation in which we can lift up what has already begun in us. Christian community is the place where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness and darkness. This is how we dare claim that God is a God of life even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. Thus, our waiting is always shaped by alertness to the word. Jesus says, "Keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back (Mark 13:35). It is waiting in the knowledge that someone wants to address us. The question is, are we home?"



HOPE

focus
Expectation
fruit
Hope

SECOND WEEK

WEEK TWO OVERVIEW



Fruit and Focus

Our **HOPE** is found in the truth that though “all passes away, mercy endures.” We are reminded to base our hope not on things of this world, but on Jesus. He tells us in Mark 13 that we will see the Son of Man descending. Don’t lose hope; Jesus will return (Rick Shallenberger). We live as expectant people.

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, our God, we praise You for Your Son, Jesus Christ, for He is Emmanuel, the hope of all people. He is the Wisdom that teaches and guides us. He is the Savior of us all. Give us the grace to be completely open to your illuminating Word. O Lord, let your blessing come upon us as we light the first and candle of Advent.

Scripture*

2nd Sunday, December 4: Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

Monday, December 5: Psalm 21; Isaiah 24:1-16a; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Tuesday, December 6: Psalm 21; Isaiah 41:14-20; Romans 15:14-21

Wednesday, December 7: Psalm 21; Genesis 15:1-18; Matthew 12:33-37

Thursday, December 8: Psalm 146:5-10; Ruth 1:6-18; 2 Peter 3:1-10

Friday, December 9: Psalm 146:5-10; Ruth 4:13-17; 2 Peter 3:11-18

Saturday, December 10: Psalm 146:5-10; 1 Samuel 2:1-8; Luke 3:1-18

**The Sunday readings are the week’s emphasis, and the Psalms are encouraged for on ramping to daily practices.*

Reflecting the Light

If you haven’t already, visit FloodChurch.org/GivingTree, and read about our partnerships. Each organization has a logo linked to their website and a wishlist which allows you to purchase gifts online and have them sent directly to the recipient. As you read through our Giving Tree partnerships, **ask God to prepare your heart and reveal a partner to hold in prayer this week.** Is there any other way God’s faithfulness could be revealed in and through you to this partnership?

Practice Options

For More: See the Daily Practice Page, Communal Page, and the Practices Appendix

Breath Prayer: “Faithful Shepherd [inhale]; lead me in the way everlasting [exhale].”

Life Practices Audit: Spend some time reflecting on the Life Practices Audit in this section as a way to turn to God.

Practice Confession: Share with God and one another. For, “The action of God’s grace precedes our consciousness of sin, meaning we could not even know of our offenses unless we are already claimed by the divine light of the gospel. The light of Christ reveals sin by the brightness of the redemption already accomplished” (Rutledge).

The Word as Light to Our Path: Write, create, and/or memorize the passages below. Add them to your Advent box.

ISAIAH 11:6

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

ROMANS 15:5-6; 13

⁵⁻⁶ May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

HOPE REFLECTION



Book Excerpt: Reading While Black, by Esau McCaulley *African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*

The struggle I speak of is the struggle between Black nihilism and Black hope. I am speaking of the ways in which the Christian tradition fights for and makes room for hope in a world that tempts us toward despair. I contend that a key element in this fight for hope in our community has been the practice of Bible reading and interpretation coming out of the Black church, what I am calling Black ecclesial interpretation.

Do we not have a case in which the proper Christian response to mistreatment is not revolution, but obedience under suffering in the hopes of an eschatological righting of wrongs? Christian eschatology is a much-maligned area of reflection. The hope of new creation is often portrayed as an opiate lulling us into complacency. Eschatology, however, need not be dismissed as some small thing. The coming kingdom remains a central pillar of theology that not only gives us hope for the future, but also negates the power of those who can kill the body but do no more (Mt 10:28)...

One response to the problem of evil has been to posit the cross and resurrection as God's answer to the question. We do not worship a God who sits apart, but who enters human pain and redeems it from within. The Christian is not given a series of deductive proofs that solve the problem of evil to our satisfaction. We are given an act of love that woos us. And we know that this wooing isn't a false promise because the resurrection proves that God is sovereign over life and death. Our focus on eschatology in any case is not unique. The nihilist is just as driven by their eschatology. It's just that his or hers is devoid of hope: let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die...

Anyone familiar with the Jewish Scriptures knew that when God did act, he would not leave the rulers of this world unthreatened. This is what frightened Herod—the possibility that the advent of God's reign through Jesus might upset his own.¹² Whether Herod believed that God was at work in Jesus is beside the point. Herod displays no fear of God. Power was Herod's god. What he feared was the hope that Jesus might give to the disinherited...

The second Beatitude at the center of our reflections moves beyond the suspicion raised in our mourning. It articulates our hope: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled." Hungering and thirsting for justice is nothing less than the continued longing for God to come and set things right. It is a vision of the just society established by God that does not waver in the face of evidence to the contrary. Mourning is not enough. We must have a vision for something different. Justice is that difference. Jesus, then, calls for a reconfiguration of the imagination in which we realize that the options presented to us by the world are not all that there is. There remains a better way and that better way is the kingdom of God. He wants us to see that his kingdom is something that is possible, at least as a foretaste, even while we wait for its full consummation. To hunger for justice is to hope that the things that cause us to mourn will not get the last word.

The Black Christian, then, who hopes and works for a better world finds an ally in the God of Israel. He or she finds someone who does more than sympathize with our wants and needs. This God steps into history and reorders the universe in favor of those who trust in him. He calls us to enter into this work of actualizing the transformation he has already begun by the death and resurrection of his Son. This includes the work of discipleship, evangelism, and the pursuit of personal holiness. It also includes bearing witness to a different and better way of ordering our societies in a world whose default instinct is oppression. To do less would be to deny the kingdom.

Nonetheless, Zechariah and Elizabeth were "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly" (Lk 1:5, my translation). They had walked from one end of their life to the other and maintained their faith in God despite the fact that many of their friends and neighbors may have long since given up any hope that God might act. They continued in this faith even though they had been unable to conceive and give birth to a child. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived with national (Israel under the rule of Rome) and personal (no children) tragedy. In Luke's Gospel, they represent all Israelites whose personal stories carry the brokenness of the larger corporate narrative within them.

HOPE REFLECTION



Excerpt: Draft of Chapter XIII, “Our God is Able”

by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Source: KingInstitute.Stanford.edu

We may feel at times that we don't need God, but then one day the storms of disappointment will begin to rage, the winds of disaster will begin to blow, and the tidal waves of grief will beat up against our lives, and if we don't have a deep and patient faith our emotional lives will be ripped to shreds. Now, this is why there is so much frustration in the world. We are relying on gods rather than God. For years we have genuflected before the god of science, only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate. We have worshipped the god of pleasure only to find that thrills play out and sensations are short-lived. We have bowed before the god of money only to find that there are things that money can't buy—love and friendship—and that in a world of possible depressions, stock market crashes, and bad business investments, money is a rather uncertain deity. No, these transitory gods are not able to save us or bring happiness to the human heart. Only God is able. It is faith in Him that we must re-discover in this modern world. With this faith we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sun-lit paths of joy, and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism. Is someone here this morning moving toward the evening of life and afraid of that something called death? Why? God is able. Is someone here this morning all but on the brink of despair because of some grave disappointment?—The death of a loved one, the breaking of a marriage, the waywardness of a child. Why? God is able to give you the power to endure that which cannot be changed. Is someone here afraid of a bad health? Why? If it comes, God is able.

As I come to the conclusion of my message I would like for you to indulge me as I mention a personal experience. The first twenty-four years of my life were years packed with fulfillment. I had no basic problems or burdens. Because of concerned and loving parents who provided for my every need, I sailed through high school, college, theological school and graduate school without a single interruption. It was not until I came to this community and became a part of the leadership of the bus protest that I really confronted the trials of life. Almost immediately after the protest started we began to receive threatening telephone calls and letters in our home. Sporadic in the beginning, they increased as time went on. When these incidents started, I took them in stride, feeling that they were the work of a few hotheads who would soon be discouraged when they discovered that we would not fight back. But as the weeks passed, I began to see that many of the threats were in earnest. Soon I felt myself faltering and growing in fear.

One night toward the end of January I settled into bed late, after a strenuous day. My wife had already fallen asleep and just as I was about to doze off the telephone rang. An angry voice said, “Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you; before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.” I hung up, but I couldn't sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. “I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.”

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.” Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me the inner calm to face it.

Three nights later, on January 30, as you know, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the work of the bombing calmly. My experience with God a few nights before had given me the strength to face it.

Yes, God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life. Go out this morning and let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and

***He is able to make a way out of no way,
and trans-form dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.***

This is our hope for becoming better men. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world.



JOY

focus
Anticipation
fruit
Joy

THIRD WEEK

WEEK THREE OVERVIEW



Fruit and Focus

Jesus brings restoration and joy to all. While the Christmas season brings great joy to some, to others it is a reminder how little they have. The readings remind us that the gospel of Jesus is good news for all—including the poor, the broken, and those mired in despair. Christ is our new beginning (Shallenberger). Therefore, we receive the joy of our salvation, and so **anticipate** our final restoration.

Prayer of Illumination

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. May this restore to us the joy of our salvation. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful lives; through our Lord Jesus Christ, who was and is, and is to come. Amen.

Scripture*

3rd Sunday, December 11: Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:5-10, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11

Monday, December 12: Psalm 42; Isaiah 29:17-24; Acts 5:12-16

Tuesday, December 13: Psalm 42; Ezekiel 47:1-12; Jude 1:17-25

Wednesday, December 14: Psalm 42; Zechariah 8:1-17; Matthew 8:14-17, 28-3

Thursday, December 15: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Galatians 3:23-29

Friday, December 16: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:18-22; Galatians 4:1-7

Saturday, December 17: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:23-29; John 3:31-36

**The Sunday readings are the week's emphasis, and the Psalms are encouraged for on ramping to daily practices.*

Reflecting the Light

"For I, the Lord, love justice" (Isaiah 61:8).

- Set aside a time each day to pray for others. Include three minutes of intentional silence, asking God to speak to you.
- Identify a blessing you have that you could give away. Share this blessing with someone in your community.
- Keep a lookout for anyone who might seem lonely, stressed, or sad. Offer this simple invitation: "May I pray for you?" Then offer prayers – silently or aloud – on the person's behalf as you move through your day.

Practice Options

For More: See the Daily Practice Page, Communal Page, and the Practices Appendix

Breath Prayer: "Fill me/us with your joy Lord [inhale]; set me/us free from _____ (fill in) [exhale]."

Remembering Saving Grace: Psalm 126:3 sings, "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy." Spend some time together reflecting and sharing God's saving acts in your lives. Include areas of healing you are still longing for. Also, take turns naming a way the person on your right or left has blessed you (even over zoom).

The Word as Light to Our Path: Write, create, and/or memorize the passages below. Add them to your Advent box.

PSALM 146:5-10

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

LUKE 1:46b-50

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

JOY REFLECTION



Book Excerpt: *The End of Youth Ministry?*, by Andrew Root

The trinitarian life of God, even before creation (John 1), is constituted in the joy of union. That is, Joy is the experience of the inner being of the triune God. The same triune God who made his dwelling among us.

Matthew Croasmun and Ryan McAnnally-Linz point to this perspective of indwelling: “Human beings are created to be indwelt by God—that is, for God to be in them and to work through them—and in a different sense by one another. To be human is to be created for this indwelling.”

Miroslav Volf adds this idea: “Joy, then, is best experienced in community. Joy seeks company (‘come and rejoice with me’) and the company of those who rejoice feeds the joy of each. Feasts and celebrations both express and nourish joy...”

Gratitude and joy are often interconnected because they are interlaced with communion. Happiness is not contingent on gratitude. You can be happy with objects, even happy with the accomplishment of your evil schemes, without ever getting to the level of relationship. But to feel the joy of gratitude necessitates a community of communication. We are grateful when we find ourselves with another who gifts us with their presence. We say thank you and feel gratitude. In the gratitude of the overflowing love of the Trinity, God chooses to create. Human beings are gifted with life from the gratitude of God’s own triune communion. Therefore, to be human is to be a communicating creature who says thank you to God and one another. A flourishing life is not a happy one but a joyful one, filled with words and acts of thanks. Therefore, saying thank you as a practice wraps us in gratitude that starts in the death experience of the need for others, giving us the Good of communion.

Joy is the experience of being in communion through acts of love, mercy, friendship, gratitude, and compassion. Happiness cannot produce eccentric experiences of joy, because joy is born from within the gift of receiving something new from beyond you, sharing in a union that includes you but is more than you...

Christ makes us God’s friends by God’s participation in and through our death experiences, giving us the tangible take of reconciliation and sanctification as the joy of being God’s friend. We are called to join with others who are God’s friends, and we become a community of friends. This community tells stories and seeks the Good life by conforming to the cross through silence, gratitude, humility, and ultimately friendship. And because it is on the practice of friendship that all other cruciform practices rest, joy is the manifest disposition. Joy is the outward sign that we are in Christ, that we are friends with God, that we are sent into the world to be ministers in and through friendship.

Stephen E. Fowl, in his commentary, connects this to Philippians: “Given this abundance of references to joy and rejoicing in the epistle, it is not surprising that joy should play a significant role in Christian friendship. In the light of what I have already said, I would argue that joy and rejoicing are not so much ends in themselves as byproducts of the proper working of Christian friendships, what one should expect in the midst of a common life ordered in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

Sharing stories of God’s presence (even in the midst of darkness) participates in the life of God and produce joy... And when we are prayed for, it is joy, because it produces a communion of friendship that bears our burdens.

Joy, then, is the communal experience of life coming out of death, which produces union with God and neighbor. It can be an individual experience, but it always takes us into something beyond us. Paradoxically and profoundly, joy is interlaced with the cross. Because God reveals God’s being through the act of identifying fully with Jesus on the cross, the cross itself becomes the experience that brings humanity into union with God. And to feel this union is to tangibly feel it as joy. Joy is bound, then, in the being of God.

REFLECTING RADICAL JOY



Book Excerpt: *The Challenge of Jesus*, by N.T. Wright

Jesus' opening challenge as reported in the Gospels was that people should **"repent and believe."** The phrase "repent and believe" today would be heard as a summons to give up their private sins and to "get religion" in some shape or form. But that is not what the phrase "repent and believe" meant in the first century.

The Jewish historian Josephus, who was sent in A.D. 66 as a young army commander to sort out some rebel movements in Galilee, was tasked to persuade the hot-headed Galileans to stop their mad rush into revolt against Rome and to trust him and the other Jerusalem aristocrats to work out a better way. So when he confronted the rebel leader, he says he told him to give up his own agenda and to trust him, Josephus, instead. And the word he uses are remarkably familiar to readers of the Gospels: he told the brigand leader to **"repent and believe in me."**

This does not mean that Josephus was challenging the brigand leader to give up sinning and have a religious conversion experience. It has a far more specific and indeed political meaning. Jesus then, was telling his hearers 40 years earlier as he was going around Galilee, to give up their agendas and to trust him for his way of being Israel (People of God), his way of bringing the kingdom, his kingdom-agenda. He was urging them to abandon their other agendas (both religious and nationalistic, which were fused together in ancient Israel). Jesus was opposed to armed revolution because he saw it as, paradoxically, **a way of being deeply disloyal to Israel's God and to his purpose for Israel to be the light of the world.**

Along with Jesus' radical invitation was a radical welcome. Wherever Jesus went, there seemed to be a celebration, the tradition of festive meals at which Jesus welcomed all and sundry is one of the most securely established features of almost all recent scholarly portraits. And, the reason why some of Jesus' contemporaries found this so offensive, was not the Jesus was going around as an individual was associating with disreputable people; that would not have been a great offense. It was because he was doing so as a prophet of the kingdom and was indeed making these means their free-for-all welcome a central feature of his agenda.

The early Christians believed that the one true God had been faithful to the promise of the creator God righting the world's wrongs and had brought salvation through the king of the Jews, Jesus himself. Israel was called to be the light of the world; Israel's history and vocation had devolved on to Jesus, solo. He was the true Israel, the true light of the whole world. But what did it mean to be the light of the world? It meant, according to John, that Jesus would be lifted up to draw all people to himself. On the cross Jesus would reveal the true God in action as the lover and savior of the world. **This means that the church, the followers of Jesus Christ, live in the interval between Easter and the final great consummation, following Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and commissioned to be for the world what he was for Israel, bringing God's redemptive reshaping to our world.**

Let us be clear, too, about the relation between our present work, our present reshaping of our world and the future world that God intends to make. Some have so emphasized the discontinuity between the present world and our work in it on the one hand and the future world that God will make on the other that they suppose God will simply throw the present world in the trash can and leave us in a totally different sphere altogether. However, this is the way of dualism; it is a radically anti-creation viewpoint and hence is challenged head on by (among other things) John's emphasis on Easter as the first day of the week, the start of God's new creation. **And our task, as image-bearing, God-loving, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled Christians, following Christ and shaping our world, is to announce redemption to the world that has discovered its fallenness, to announce healing to the world that has discovered its brokenness, to proclaim love and trust to the world that knows only exploitation, fear, and suspicion.** Following Christ in the power of the Spirit means bringing to our world the shape of the gospel: forgiveness, the best news anyone can ever hear, for all who year for it, and judgment for all who insist on dehumanizing themselves and others by their continuing pride, injustice, and greed. We are called then, to be truly human—to be remade in God's image. As C.S. Lewis said in a famous lecture, **next to the sacrament itself your Christian neighbor is the holiest object ever presented to your sight, because in him or her the living Christ is truly present.**



LOVE

focus
Gratitude
fruit
Love

FOURTH WEEK

WEEK FOUR OVERVIEW



Fruit and Focus

“This week’s theme is the light of love comes and dwells among us. The call to worship Psalm presents a petition for help with a reference to Joseph, anticipating the need of salvation that Jesus comes to provide. The Old Testament reading from Isaiah recounts the sign of a young woman who will give birth to a son named Immanuel. The Gospel reading from Matthew quotes the sign given in our Isaiah reading and tells the story of Joseph’s marriage to Mary who is pregnant with Jesus. The epistolary text comes from the opening of Romans with its Christological confession that relates the coming of Christ in the context of God’s saving activity in history” (Rick Shallenberger: equipper.gci.org).

Prayer of Illumination

Open the eyes of our hearts, O God, as we meditate on your love. Prepare our minds to hear your Word, move our hearts to embrace what we hear, and strengthen our will to follow your way. This we pray through Christ, our Savior. Amen.

Scripture*

4th Sunday, December 18: Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

Monday, December 19: 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Genesis 17:15-22; Galatians 4:8-20

Tuesday, December 20: 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Genesis 21:1-21; Galatians 4:21-5:1

Wednesday, December 21: 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Genesis 37:2-11; Matthew 1:1-17

Thursday, December 22: Luke 1:46b-55; Isaiah 33:17-22; Revelation 22:6-7, 18-20

Friday, December 23: Luke 1:46b-55; 2 Samuel 7:18, 23-29; Galatians 3:6-14

Reflecting the Light

Passing the Peace: Paul writes “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14). Pass the Peace this week to as many people as you can by looking them in the eye as an image bearer of God and saying, “Peace be with you.” And/Or “The Lord is with you.”

Peace-making: Take a prayer walk in your neighborhood. Where do you see God at work? What attributes of God’s love are visible? Ask God to show you how you can celebrate and join in that love as a peace-maker (ambassador).

Practice Options

For More: See the Daily Practice Page, Communal Page, and the Practices Appendix

Breath Prayer: “I am your servant, Lord [inhale]; May your word to me be fulfilled [exhale].”

Communion: The last week of Advent is traditionally a time of celebrating The Eucharist (meaning, the meal of Thanksgiving, or Communion). It is a great example of a liturgy Jesus himself gave us. “Do this in remembrance of me” and by doing so to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

Christmas Readings: Prepare for Christmastide by reading Luke passages. Light the Christ candle on Christmas Eve.

The Word as Light to Our Path: Write, create, and/or memorize the passages below. Add them to your Advent box.

PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19

³ Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

⁴ O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?

⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

⁶ You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved...

¹⁷ ...But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.

¹⁸ Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

¹⁹ Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

LOVE REFLECTION



Book Excerpt: *Surrender to Love*, by David G. Benner

Christians often focus on obedience more than surrender. But while the two concepts are closely related, they differ in important ways. As we shall see, surrender is foundational to Christian spirituality and is the soil out of which obedience should grow. Christ does not simply want our compliance. He wants our heart. He wants our love and he offers us his. He invites us to surrender to his love.

Christianity puts surrender to love right at the core of the spiritual journey. Christ-following is saying yes to God's affirming Yes! to us. If it is anything less than a response to love, Christ-following is not fully Christian. Christianity is the world's great love religion. The Christian God comes to us as love, in love, for love. The Christian God woos us with love and works our transformation through love. In spite of the trivializing influence of romantic and sentimental views of love in Western culture, love is the strongest force in the universe. Gravity may hold planets in orbit and nuclear force may hold the atom together, but only love has the power to transform persons.

Only love can soften a hard heart. Only love can renew trust after it has been shattered. Only love can inspire acts of genuine self-sacrifice. Only love can free us from the tyrannizing effects of fear. There is nothing more important in life than learning to love and be loved. Jesus elevated love as the goal of spiritual transformation.

...Surrendering to love is about knowing ourselves to be deeply loved by God as the first step in becoming genuinely great lovers of others and God.

Imagine God thinking about you. What do you assume God feels when you come to mind?

When I ask people to do this, a surprising number of people say that the first thing they assume God feels is disappointment. Others assume that God feels anger. In both cases, these people are convinced that it is their sin that first catches God's attention. I think they are wrong—and I think the consequences of such a view of God are enormous...

Regardless of what you have come to believe about God based on your life experience, the truth is that when God thinks of you, love swells in his heart and a smile comes to his face. God bursts with love for humans. He is far from being emotionally uninvolved with his creation. God's bias toward us is strong, persistent and positive. The Christian God chooses to be known as Love, and that love pervades every aspect of God's relationship with us...

God's love is never compromised by anger. The presence of anger does not mean the absence of love—particularly in God. Love is God's character, not simply an emotion. What a small god we would have if divine character was dependent on our behavior. The Christian God is not like this. The Christian God is slow to anger and rich in mercy (see Exodus 34:6, echoed in Joel 2:13 and many other places in Scripture). He is quite unlike the god we would create if we were making him in our image...

Think for a moment about how Christ-following develops if you assume God looks at you with disgust, disappointment, frustration or anger. The central feature of any spiritual response to such a God will be an effort to earn his approval. Far from daring to relax in his presence, you will be vigilant to perform as well as you possibly can. The motive for any obedience you might offer will be fear rather than love, and there will be little genuine surrender. Surrender involves relaxing, and you must feel safe before you can relax. How could anyone ever expect to feel safe enough to relax in the presence of a God who is preoccupied with their shortcomings and failures?

What a different relationship begins to develop when you realize that God is head-over-heels in love with you. God is simply giddy about you. He just can't help loving you. And he loves you deeply, recklessly and extravagantly—just as you are. God knows you are a sinner, but your sins do not surprise him. Nor do they reduce in the slightest his love for you.

Perhaps you find yourself wanting to believe that this is true of God but still not convinced. Fortunately, we do not have to be uncertain about God's attitude toward us. It is clearly revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus.

LOVE REFLECTION



Waiting in God's Love

Loretta Ross, a woman of deep prayer, was describing what she had heard in response to the question she put before Jesus each morning: "What do you want me to tell the people?" For many years the response she received was, "Tell the people that I love them." Then one day the reply came: "Tell the people that I miss them."

Ephesians 3 says that we are rooted and established in love, and to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge. But what does God's love look like? I Corinthians 13 is a chapter that can give us a picture.

*Consider the ways God loves you by saying each phrase below slowly:**

- You love me with patience
- You love me with kindness
- You love me with acceptance
- You love me with humility
- You love me with gentleness
- You love me with freedom
- You love me with unhurried serenity
- You love me with infinite forgiveness
- You love me in the blossoming of truth
- You always cocoon me in your love
- You always trust me
- You always look for the best in me
- You always persevere with me
- Your love with me will never end.

Which quality do you identify with most now?

Which quality surprises you?

Which quality is difficult for you to believe? Practice surrendering this to God and receiving love in return.

Spend some time to picture what it looks like for God to love you in that way—to feel it, experience it, and soak it in.

**Exercise created by Sheryl Fleisher*



Christmas

*Jesus Christ,
Light
of the
World!*

The Darkness
has not overcome.

CHRISTMAS



AΩ

Fruit and Focus

Christ is the light of the world, the living Word that lights our world. We are called to shine his love and light.

Prayer of Illumination

LIGHT: the three purple candles the rose candle, and the white Christ candle in the middle.

PRAY: Open wide the window of our spirits, O Lord, and fill us full of light; open wide the door of our hearts, that we may receive and entertain thee with all our powers of adoration and love. Amen.

Scripture

READ: 1 John 8:12

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

READ: 1 John 4:9-15

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God.

Reflecting the Light

From Tsh Oxenreider, Shadow and Light

"John reminds us that the light shines through us by our love for each other. We reveal God's light and love each day when we love one another. This is how we abide in Christ: We let the love of God, first fully shown to us through the miracle of Jesus's arrival celebrated on Christmas Day, pour out of us and onto others. This is how we live in the shadows while celebrating the glorious light of Christ's birth.

Daily love, daily confession of Christ as Messiah for the world. The light we long for during Advent is already in us, because God dwells in us. Let the hope, faith, joy, and peace of Christmastide dwell in you, starting today, as you celebrate the arrival of Christ. Christ has come. Christ will come again—alleluia!"

Practice Praise

Before the night sets, praise God for his light on this day—all the blessings, especially the first fruits of the Kingdom that we have experienced during this season.

Prayer

Pray that you may follow Christ Jesus on his Way of Love with your whole heart, mind, body, and spirit.

"May the people around the world, especially those who must be apart from loved ones, those who have no meal to share and no guest to host, experience the love and light of your presence. On this day, be with us in a special way through Jesus, your gift to us. Amen."

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

JOHN 1:5



APPENDIX

DAILY PRACTICE

This page is meant as scaffolding to help cultivate a daily practice of engaging God through prayer and Scripture.

Praise

- Mother Teresa would start her day by exclaiming, "Hello Jesus!" Say hello...
- Spend a few moments praising God.
- If you are outside, begin by noticing God's good creation.
- Say or Sing aloud: *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen* (from Isaiah 60:1, Ephesians 3:21).

Praying the Psalms

- Light an Advent candle.
- Spend a few moments in silence in God's presence.
- Optional Breath Prayer: "Let your face shine [inhale]; that I/we may be healed [exhale]."
- Read aloud Sunday's Psalm, or the day of the week Psalm.
- Reflect God's light in silence.
- Thank God for his loving presence and the spiritual fruit of hope.

Pray for Others

"Abba (Father), reveal to me by your light those to hold in prayer now and this day..."
Wait in silence. Feel free to journal/write any names God gives you. Pray for them.
Conclude by reciting aloud *The Lord's Prayer: Matthew 6:9-13*

Proclamation

Revelation 4:8

"Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come."

Prayers for Midday and Evening (Optional)

- Choose another passage from the daily readings.
- Find a consistent: (1) sacred time, and (2) sacred space
- Choose your own adventure:
Lectio Divina (see *Practices* page), *Solitude*,
Prayer Walk, or *Online Resource* (Below)

Daily Practice Resources

The websites below are also available as Apps:

- *DailyLectio.net*
- *24-7Prayer.com/DailyDevotional* (App: *Lectio 365*)
- *LectioDivinaJournal.com*
- *Pray-as-you-go.org*
- *CommonPrayer.net* (App: *Book of Common Prayer*)
- *BookofCommonPrayer.net*

Advent Music

"Advent" Playlists on Spotify:

- "Shadow and Light Advent"
- "Advent Worship 2022"
- "Simple Advent"
- "Kids Worship Fully"
- "An (Unconventional) Advent Playlist"
- "Advent with Sacred Ordinary Days"
- "Advent (Abridged):
An "Art & Theology Playlist"

COMMUNAL PRACTICE

This page is meant as an example of how to engage God through prayer and Scripture in community.

Advent Candle

- Light the week's Advent candle (see Wreath page). Spend a few minutes in silence and waiting.
- Spend a few moments discussing the meaning of Advent and the week's candle. Use the Examen below:
Where do you need _____ (hope, faith, joy, peace) in this season?
Where have you experienced _____ (hope, faith, joy, peace) in this season?

Praise/Worship

- Spend time praising God for what has been shared—both the seen and unseen fruit (2 Corinthians 4:18).
- Play and/or sing an Advent song that represents the theme of the week.

Pass the Peace

Give one another a blessing, or simply say, "Peace be with you..." (response: "And also with you.")

Praying the Psalms

- Read aloud Sunday's Psalm, or Psalm of today's date, Lectio Divina style (see below)
- Before the first reading, ask God to illuminate his Word. After the readings, wait in silence.
- Share your words from the Word (John 1:1), who is the Light of the World (John 8:12) with one another.

Scripture

- You, Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light (Psalm 18:28).
- Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path (Psalm 119:105).
- The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord that sheds light on one's inmost being (Proverbs 20:27).

Breath Prayer

You, O LORD, are our lamp [inhale]: You make our darkness bright [exhale].

Examen

- Where are you experiencing darkness?
- Where are you experiencing God's light?

Pray for Others

- Ask God to illuminate people in your life in need...
- Feel free to journal/write any names God gives you.
- Pray for them. Are there any simple steps of love to take?
- Conclude by reciting aloud *The Lord's Prayer* (Mt. 6:9-13)

Proclamation

Revelation 22:20-21

"He who testifies to these things says,

"Yes, I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus ("Maranatha!")

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.

Lectio Divina

Simple Snapshot

(see: *Spiritual Practices page*)

Read the passage aloud 3-4 times slowly, pausing each time between the readings, using the guide below:

First Reading: What word or phrase stands out to you?

Second Reading: How does this word or phrase connect with your life now?

Third Reading: What do you think is God's invitation to you through this?

Fourth Reading: Simply rest in God's love through this word/phrase.

ST. NICHOLAS DAY ♦ DEC 6



Book Excerpt:

Shadow and Light: A Journey into Advent, by Tsh Oxenreider

Nicholas was a third-century Christian who became well known for his generosity to those in need. We would do well to mimic his posture. God is gracious and merciful, full of love and compassion for all people. All creation looks to him to provide what is needed—and there are times when provision comes through people prompted by him to share their abundant blessings. God is honored when we give generously, joyfully, and without need for recognition. As you commemorate Saint Nicholas, remember his love for his neighbors. He used his position in life primarily to bless others, not to make a name for himself. May your heart draw near to the Lord so that you may hear who in your life needs blessing through you.

He was born in the third century in the village of Patara, in modern-day southern Turkey. His parents were wealthy, but they died while he was young. He supposedly spent his inheritance helping the sick and poor in his village and eventually was made bishop of the town of Myra. He lived during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian, known for his persecution of Christians. Nicholas was imprisoned at some point of his service, but he was also present at the Council of Nicaea.

Nicholas was known for his generosity in the name of Christ by sharing his wealth among those who needed it most. The most well-known legend of his service involves three poor sisters who had no dowry, which meant they were unable to marry (and, in fact, could possibly be sold into slavery, as was the custom in those days). One morning, the family woke to three bags of gold mysteriously waiting for them in their home—dowries for the girls. Some versions of the story say that Nicholas tossed the bags of gold into their window at night so as to remain anonymous (with the gold landing in socks or shoes drying by the fireplace).

I love celebrating the example of the historic Saint Nicholas and his symbol of generosity during the holiday season. Learning about his life also helps answer children's questions about what Santa Claus has to do with Jesus and Christmas: Saint Nicholas was a Christian and loved giving in the name of Christ. We, too, do this on Christmas. Adding a day to honor Nicholas on December 6, during Advent, adds to our expectant hope.

The evening of December 5, our kids leave their shoes outside the front door (or if it's cold, inside by the door). We'll then read a book about the historic Saint Nicholas for story time before bed, then proceed with our Advent reading. In the morning, the kids find a few chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil in their shoes. As a family, we also like to give a few dollars anonymously on this day, to pay homage to Saint Nicholas's reminder to give generously without a need for recognition. Some years, we ask our church for the name of a family who could use a little extra cash, then we put \$20 in their mailbox with a typed note saying we love them and are thinking of them. Other years, we dine out and leave a generous tip for our server (doing our best to leave the restaurant as fast as possible!). Sometimes, we'll donate to a charity we like.

These ideas serve as simple, tangible reminders of the real Saint Nicholas and how he is worthy of emulation. But if recognizing his feast day feels overwhelming, release any burden to do so. Advent is still very much Advent with nothing more than a simple remembrance of Nicholas's life.

Below is an additional Saint Nicholas Day practice for December 6.

PRAY: Psalm 145:8-9,14-18.

ASK: Whom in your life might you bless today? In what small, simple ways can you give generously?

LISTEN: "We Labor unto Glory" by Craig Harris and Isaac Wardell

REFLECT: Saint Nicholas Gives Alms (1685) by Jan Heinsch

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

The PURPOSE of PRACTICE

“By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done... They are the means by which we place ourselves where God can bless us.” ~Richard Foster

“...Any practiced that allows us to receive God’s love and give it away.” ~Sheryl Fleisher

“The focus of Spiritual Formation is not on solving problems but on the Problem Solver—namely, the person of the Holy Spirit. These practices do not rely on behavior modification. Instead, they seek to address the core of the inner life of the heart where transformation takes place. This gives us power to fight the deceptions of the enemy, who would tell us to work harder, do more, and also resist the longings of the flesh to be in control. This means we must develop a more intimate relationship with God. By engaging these timeless spiritual practices to shine the light of love on these tender, sensitive places at our core, we learn to trust the eternal God to heal the blemishes of the past. We are energized, and our hearts are stirred for the kingdom work ahead.” ~Brenda Darby

PRAYER *as* SILENCE & SOLITUDE

“Over and over Scripture invites us to abide in God. To rest in God. To dwell in God. As Paul says frequently, to be ‘in Christ.’ Prayer is not just about activity and speaking but also about listening and resting in God.

A primary purpose of prayer is to impress on us the personality and character of Christ. We want to become like Jesus, so the life that we live is no longer ours but Christ living in us and through us.

Prayer is less about trying to get God to do something we want God to do and more about getting ourselves to do what God wants us to do and to become who God wants us to become. There are times when we speak, weep, groan, and shout at God. But there are also times when we simply sit in silence and are held by our Beloved. We remember the character of God, the fruit of the Spirit, and the incarnation of Jesus as he reveals to us what God is like with flesh on. And we pray that God’s character will become our character. The monks have been known to say, “If your speaking doesn’t add something beautiful to the silence, don’t speak.” For many of us in the high-paced, cluttered world of materialism and noise, silence is a way we can free up the space to listen to God.

In most of our lives, silence gets interrupted pretty quickly. Teresa of Avila, who was distracted by her own thoughts in prayer, said she learned not to fight them but to let them come and go like waves in the sea, trusting that God was an anchor who could hold her through any storm.

Prayer, through solitude and silence, is about tending to the lines that anchor us in Christ, to be ‘rooted and established in his love (Ephesians 3:17).’ ~From Common Prayer, by Shane Claiborne et al.

Prayer of Illumination

Open the eyes of our hearts, and let the light of Your truth flood in. Shine Your light on the hope You are calling us to embrace. Reveal to us the glorious riches You are preparing as our inheritance (Ephesians 1:18, VOICE).

Practice of Presence

Lord, open the eyes of our hearts... Spend a few moments looking at creation and identifying:

- 5 Sights
- 4 Sounds
- 3 Smells
- 2 Touches
- 1 Taste



SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

This page highlights a few practices from FloodChurch.org/Practices to help you choose your Advent adventure.

Lectio Divina

“The spiritual life receives its very heart and soul in prayer, a practice that for Christians is embedded in meditation on scripture. What makes our reading spiritual has as much to do with the intention, attitude, and manner we bring to the words as it does with the nature and content of those words. Spiritual reading is reflective and prayerful. It requires unhurried time and an open heart. It is concerned not with speed or volume but with depth and receptivity. That is because the purpose of spiritual reading is to open ourselves to how God may be speaking to us in and through any particular text. In a certain sense, when we are engaged in spiritual reading it is not so much we who read the Word as the Word who “reads” us! If the purpose of our reading is to be addressed by God, we will need to practice attentive listening and a willingness to respond to what we hear” (Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*).

- PRAYER: “God, give me the grace to be completely open to you in this time” (Ignatius).
- PREPARE: Be still in silence for a few minutes with God, the lover of your soul. Choose a word like “love” or “grace” as an anchor when distraction comes.
- READ the prayer to take in it’s meaning. Read 1-2 more times, but slower, like one would a love letter (vs. a newspaper). What word or phrase stands out to you? Don’t judge. Stay open.
- REFLECT: How does this word/phrase intersect with my life right now?
- RESPOND: What do you sense God inviting you towards through this word/phrase? What is your truest response to God’s invitation? The key here is honesty. Where do you have resistance (fear, doubt, sadness), and resonance (hope, joy, peace)?
- REST in God’s love through this word/phrase for the remainder of the time.

Gratitude

“Meister Eckhart, the Christian mystic, asserted that if the only prayer we ever prayed our whole life was ‘Thank you,’ that would be enough. Gratefulness cultivates a visceral experience of having enough. When we are mindful of what we have, and give thanks for the many gifts we have overlooked or forgotten, our sense of wealth cannot help but expand, and we soon achieve a sense of sufficiency we so desire. Practice thanksgiving before meals, upon rising, when going to sleep. Friends, family, food, color, fragrance, the earth, life itself—these are all gifts, perfectly gratuitous. How can we not give thanks? During Sabbath time we are less concerned with what is missing, focusing instead on sharing our gratefulness for what has already been given” (Wayne Muller, *Sabbath*).

- Thank you for...
- Thank you for...
- Thank you for...

Being Still

“Be still, and know that I am God...” (Psalm 46:10a)

- Begin with a minute of silence, quietly inviting God to fill your mind, heart, and soul.
- Recite Psalm 46:10a eight times, subtracting the last word each time
- Pause between each reading for at least a minute. Try and expand the pause each time.

Example: “Be still, and know that I am God...” (1 min. pause)

“Be still, and know that I am...” (1 min., 30 sec. pause)

“Be still, and know that I...” (2 min. pause)

What was it like to be still and silent before God? What surfaced?

Did you hear any invitations? What did you notice about God? Yourself?

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

This page highlights a few practices from FloodChurch.org/Practices to help you choose your Advent adventure.

Prayer of Examen

“One way to develop our capacities to recognize the presence of God is to engage in what is identified in ancient tradition as the examen of consciousness, or what we might call a daily review. This is a simple discipline that helps us to become more God conscious, heightening our awareness that God is indeed with us when we lie down to sleep, when we wake up and in every moment in between. We discover that we really are being led by the hand of God. Even when things seem dark, a light comes from God that can illuminate the deepest darkness. The examen of consciousness involves taking a few moments at the end of each day to go back over the events of the day and invite God to show us where he was present with us and how we responded to his presence. We might ask ourselves, How was God present with me today? What promptings did I notice? How did I respond or not respond?” (Ruth Haley Barton, Sacred Rhythms).

QUESTIONS FOR A MODIFIED EXAMEN*

**From: Sleeping With Bread: Holding What Gives You Life, by Dennis Linn, Sheila F. Linn and Matthew Linn*

Light a candle as a symbol of God's Presence.

Read Psalm 139:23-24

*Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Choose a pair of questions below to begin the Examen:

- *For what moment today am I most grateful?*
- *For what moment today am I least grateful?*
- *When did I give and receive the most love today?*
- *When did I give and receive the least love today?*
- *When did I feel most alive today?*
- *When did I most feel life draining out of me?*
- *When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, God and the universe?*
- *When did I have the least sense of belonging?*
- *When was I happiest today?*
- *When was I saddest?*
- *What was today's high point?*
- *What was today's low point?*

Communion

Light a candle as a symbol of God's presence.

Spend a few moments in prayer, pondering God's love for you, your family.

Next, spend some time considering if there is any obstacles between you and God, or you and another. Confess this to God and ask for his love “that covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

READ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, and Receive the bread and cup (wine or juice).

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

JESUS PRAYERS

THE LORD'S PRAYER ("Our Father Prayer")

Matthew 6

⁹ *"This, then, is how you should pray:*

*"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,*

¹⁰ *your kingdom come,
your will be done,*

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ *Give us today our daily bread.*

¹² *And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

¹³ *And lead us not into temptation,[a]
but deliver us from the evil one.'*

[for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]

THE JESUS CREED

When asked by an expert in the law where to begin with spiritual formation, Jesus answered by giving the Jesus Creed. The Jesus Creed defines what spiritual formation is (Mark 12:28–33; Luke 9:57–62):

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul,*

with all your mind, and with all your strength."

The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

There is no commandment greater than these.

Jesus thereby amends the most sacred prayer of Judaism, The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–9) by adding Leviticus 19:18. So, Jesus revises the Shema in two ways: loving others is added to loving God, and loving God is understood as following Jesus. This is the Jesus Creed, and it is the foundation of everything Jesus teaches about spiritual formation. Jesus, too, knows what life is all about, and that life is about love—for God and for others.

So, a scribe asks Jesus about the essence of spiritual formation, and Jesus gives him an old answer with a revolutionary twist: Love God and love others, and love God by following me. The scribe realizes that he will need to recenter everything (McKnight. Jesus Creed).

PRAYING THE PSALMS

Book Excerpt: The Case for the Psalms, by N. T. Wright

THE PSALMS, which make up the great hymnbook at the heart of Scripture, represent the Bible's own spiritual root system for the great tree we call Christianity. The Psalms offer us a way of joining in a chorus of praise and prayer that has been going on for millennia and across all cultures.

Regular praying and singing of the Psalms is transformative. The Psalms thus transform what I have called our "worldview." I use this term in a specific way that I have developed over the last twenty years. A "worldview" in this sense is like a pair of spectacles: it is what you look through, not what you look at.

The problem we face when we read, pray, or sing parts of the Bible is not that it is "old" and our current philosophy is "new" (and therefore somehow better). The problem is that, out of many ancient worldviews, the Bible resolutely inhabits one, and much of the modern Western world has resolutely inhabited a different one. When the Psalms do their work in us and through us, they should equip us the better to live by and promote that alternative worldview. The biblical worldview.

It seems wisest to think of the Psalms, in their present form, being collected and shaped in the time of the exile in Babylon (beginning in the sixth century BC), when paradoxically the people who found it unthinkable to sing the Lord's song in a strange land may have found that actually singing those songs (and writing some new ones) was one of the few things that kept them sane and gave them hope. Thus, the worship was that of the whole people of God, even if some people were set apart, trained and equipped to offer it publicly.

This means, of course, that the Psalms were the hymnbook that Jesus and his first followers would have known by heart.

Paul would have prayed and sung them from his earliest years. What Jesus believed and understood about his own identity and vocation, and what Paul came to believe and understand about Jesus's unique achievement, they believed and understood within a psalm-shaped world.

Jesus himself quoted and referred to the Psalms in the manner of someone who had been accustomed to praying and pondering them from his earliest days. Paul referred to several psalms and wove them in quite a sophisticated way into his remarkable theology. But behind those explicit references there stands, I believe, an entire world in which Jewish people were singing and praying the Psalms day by day and month by month, allowing them to mold their character, to shape their worldview, to frame their reading of the rest of scripture, and (not least) to fuel and resource the active lives they were leading and the burning hopes that kept them trusting their God, the world's creator, even when everything seemed bleak and barren.

"Jesus was a master of the Psalms. Wherever he heard them, in the synagogue and at the temple, he took them to heart, for the Psalms spilled constantly from his lips. Because of this, anyone who follows Jesus into the Church to pray will quickly learn that praying with Jesus means using the Psalms: His entire life was bathed with psalms. The Beatitudes pronounced blessings on people with words taken from the psalms. Thus, we know 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth' by heart, but this is a virtual quotation from Psalm 37. When Jesus was confronted with arguments, he responded by quoting the Psalms."

~ Scot McKnight, *Praying with the Church*

THE NICENE CREED

The final version of this confession of faith dates back to 381 A.D.

We believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
begotten from the Father before all ages,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made;
of the same essence as the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,
and was made human.
He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried.
The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again with glory
to judge the living and the dead.
His kingdom will never end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life.
He proceeds from the Father and the Son,
and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.
He spoke through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,
and to life in the world to come. Amen.

THE “SECOND COMING” ?

Book Excerpt: *Surprised by Hope*, by N.T. Wright

To speak of the “Second Coming” begs the questions: The coming of what? What are we waiting for? And what are we going to do about it in the meantime?

First, it is about the ultimate future hope held out in the Christian gospel: the hope, that is, for salvation, resurrection, eternal life, and the cluster of other things that go with them. Second, it is about the discovery of hope within the present world: about the practical ways in which hope can come alive for communities and individuals who for whatever reason may lack it.

What creation needs is neither abandonment nor evolution but rather redemption and renewal; and this is both promised and guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is what the whole world’s waiting for.

This is important because most people, in my experience—including many Christians—don’t know what the ultimate Christian hope really is. Most people—again, sadly, including many Christians—don’t expect Christians to have much to say about hope within the present world. Most people don’t imagine that these two could have anything to do with each other.

The early Christians did not believe in progress. They did not think the world was getting better and better under its own steam—or even under the steady influence of God. They knew God had to do something fresh to put it to rights. But neither did they believe that the world was getting worse and worse and that their task was to escape it altogether. They were not dualists. Since most people who think about these things today tend toward one or other of those two points of view, it comes as something of a surprise to discover that the early Christians held a quite different view. They believed that God was going to do for the whole cosmos what he had done for Jesus at Easter.

This was imagined in the great poem Colossians 1:1-15. Redemption is not simply making creation a bit better, as the optimistic evolutionist would try to suggest. Nor is it rescuing spirits and souls from an evil material world, as the Gnostic would want to say. It is the remaking of creation, having dealt with the evil that is defacing and distorting it. And it is accomplished by the same God, now known in Jesus Christ, through whom it was made in the first place.

And the New Testament insists that the one who has gone into heaven will come back. At no point in the gospels or Acts does anyone say anything remotely like, “Jesus has gone into heaven, so let’s be sure we can follow him.” They say, rather, “Jesus is in heaven, ruling the whole world, and he will one day return to make that rule complete.” But what is this second coming all about?

For many millions of believing Christians in today’s world, the second coming is part of a scenario in which the present world is doomed to destruction while the chosen few are snatched up to heaven—growing out of some millenarian movements of the nineteenth century. Later adherents attempted to correlate these prophecies with the geopolitical events of the 1960s and 1970s, which reached a height in Hal Lindsey’s bestselling book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. And since the late 1990s, it’s place has been taken by the fictional *Left Behind* book series—of which the theology still persists, even to this day. We are therefore faced, as we look at today’s large-scale picture, with two polar opposites. At one end, some have made the second coming so central that they can see little else. At the other, some have so marginalized or weakened it that it ceases to mean anything at all.

Both positions need to be challenged. I shall show that the focus on the so-called rapture is based on a misunderstanding of two verses in Paul and that when we get that misunderstanding out of the way, we can find a doctrine of Jesus’s coming that remains central and vital if the whole Christian faith is not to unravel before our eyes.

The word *eschatology*, which literally means “the study of the last things,” doesn’t just refer to death, judgment, heaven, and hell, as used to be thought (and as many dictionaries still define the word). It also refers to the strongly held belief of most first-century Jews, and virtually all early Christians, that history was going somewhere under the guidance of God and that where it was going was toward God’s new world of justice, healing, and hope. The transition from the present world to the new one would be a matter not of the destruction of the present space-time universe but of its radical healing. The New Testament writers, particularly Paul, looked forward to this time and saw Jesus’s resurrection as the beginning, the firstfruits, of it...the entire sense of God’s future for the world and the belief that that future has already begun to come forward to meet us in the present. The presence we know at the moment—the presence of Jesus with his people in word and sacrament, by the Spirit, through prayer, in the faces of the poor—is of course related to that future presence, but the distinction between them is important and striking

The Greek word word for this is *parousia*. This is usually translated “coming,” but literally it means “presence”—that is, presence as opposed to absence. The word *parousia* occurs in two of the key passages in Paul (1 Thessalonians 4:15 and 1 Corinthians 15:23), and it is found frequently elsewhere in Paul and the New Testament. It seems clear that the early Christians knew the word well, and knew what was meant by it...

“SECOND COMING” *continued*

The word *parousia* had two lively meanings in non-Christian discourse at the time. Both of these seem to have influenced it in its Christian meaning. The first meaning was the mysterious presence of a god or divinity, particularly when the power of this god was revealed in healing. People would suddenly be aware of a supernatural and powerful presence, and the obvious word for this was *parousia*. The second meaning emerges when a person of high rank makes a visit to a subject state, particularly when a king or emperor visits a colony or province. The word for such a visit is royal presence: in Greek, *parousia*. In neither setting, we note, obviously but importantly, is there the slightest suggestion of anybody flying around on a cloud. Nor is there any hint of the imminent collapse or destruction.

Now suppose that Paul, and for that matter the rest of the early church, wanted to say two things: that the Jesus they worshipped was near in spirit but absent in body but that one day he would be present in body and that then the whole world, themselves included, would know the sudden transforming power of that presence. The natural word to use for this would be *parousia*.

At the same time, suppose they wanted to say that the Jesus who had been raised from the dead and exalted to God's right hand was the rightful Lord of the world, the true Emperor before whom all other emperors would shake in their shoes and bow their knees in fear and wonder. They would use a well known reality in their world. In the first century, when the emperor visited a colony or province, the citizens of the country would go to meet him at some distance from the city. It would be disrespectful to have him actually arrive at the gates as though his subjects couldn't be bothered to greet him properly. When they met him, they wouldn't then stay out in the open country; they would escort him royally into the city itself. When Paul speaks of “meeting” the Lord “in the air,” the point is precisely not—as in the popular rapture theology—that the saved believers would then stay up in the air somewhere, away from earth. The point is that, having gone out to meet their returning Lord, they will escort him royally into his domain, that is, back to the place they have come from. Again, The natural word to use for this would be *parousia*.

The meaning is the same as in the parallel in Philippians 3:20. Being citizens of heaven, as the Philippians would know, doesn't mean that one is expecting to go back to the mother city but rather means that one is expecting the emperor to come from the mother city to give the colony its full dignity, to rescue it if need be, to subdue local enemies and put everything to rights. The reality to which it refers is this: Jesus will be personally present, the dead will be raised, and the living Christians will be transformed. That, is pretty much what the rest of the New Testament says as well.

Another historical key is found at the end of 1 Corinthians 16:22, where Paul suddenly writes a phrase in Aramaic: Maranatha. It means, “Our Lord, come!” and goes back (like the word Abba, “father”) to the very early Aramaic-speaking church. The early church was from the beginning praying to Jesus that he would return. We see this again in Colossians 3:4, “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” Here we have in a nutshell Paul's theology of resurrection and ascension as applied to present Christian living and future Christian hope.

This is clearly in the same ballpark as the other texts we've been looking at. But notice the key thing: that instead of “coming,” or the blessed word *parousia*, Paul can here use the word *appear*. It's the same thing from a different angle, and this helps us to demystify the idea that the “coming” of Jesus means that he will descend like a spaceman from the sky. Jesus is at present in heaven. But heaven, being God's space, is not somewhere within the space of our world but is rather a different though closely related space. The promise is not that Jesus will simply reappear within the present world order, but that when heaven and earth are joined together in the new way God has promised, then he will appear to us—and we will appear to him, and to one another, in our own true identity.

This is, in fact, remarkably close to a key passage in the first letter of John (1 John 2:28 and 3:2): Here we have more or less exactly the same picture as in Colossians, though this time with appearing and *parousia* happily side by side. Of course, when he “appears” he will be “present.” But the point of stressing “appearing” here is that, though in one sense it will seem to us that he is “coming,” he will in fact be “appearing” right where he presently is—not a long way away within our own space-time world but in his own world, God's world, the world we call heaven. This world is different from ours (earth) but intersects with it in countless ways, not least in the inner lives of Christians themselves. One day the two worlds will be integrated completely and be fully visible to one another, producing that transformation of which both Paul and John speak.

What we have here is a remarkably unanimous view spread throughout the early Christianity known to us. There will come a time, which might indeed come at any time, when, in the great renewal of the world that Easter itself foreshadowed, Jesus himself will be personally present and will be the agent and model of the transformation that will happen both to the whole world and also to believers.

The second coming of Jesus cannot be negated to the margins of our thinking, our living, and our praying; if we do, we shall pull everything else out of shape.

RESOURCES

Online

Ruth Haley Barton

- Advent Podcast - TransformingCenter.org/Podcast
- TransformingCenter.org/2020/06/bring-rhythms-of-fixed-hour-prayer-to-your-family
- Calendar: TransformingCenter.org/lectionary-calendar
- Daily Office (Fixed Hour Prayer Liturgy): TransformingCenter.org/Downloadables

See also: **SoulShepherding.org**

Most of the websites below are also available as Apps:

- 24-7Prayer.com/DailyDevotional (App: *Lectio 365*)
- BookofCommonPrayer.net
- CommonPrayer.net (App: *Book of Common Prayer*)
- EmotionallyHealthy.org (Podcast; *Daily Office Book of Prayers*)
- DailyLectio.net
- LectioDivinaJournal.com
- Pray-as-you-go.org
- Theodyssey.org

Bibliography

Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ, by Fleming Rutledge

Desiring the Kingdom, by James K. A. Smith

Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading, by Eugene H. Peterson.

Everything New, by Jeff Cook

God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Praying with the Church: Following Jesus Daily, Hourly, Today, by Scot McKnight

Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as a Exercise in Hope, by Esau McCaulley

Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation, by Ruth Haley Barton

Shadow and Light: A Journey into Advent, by Tsh Oxenreider

Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life, by Marjorie Thompson

Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church, by N.T. Wright

Teach Us to Pray: The Lord's Prayer in the Early Church and Today, by Justo L. González

The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential, by N.T. Wright

The Challenge of Jesus, by N.T. Wright

The End of Youth Ministry?, by Andrew Root

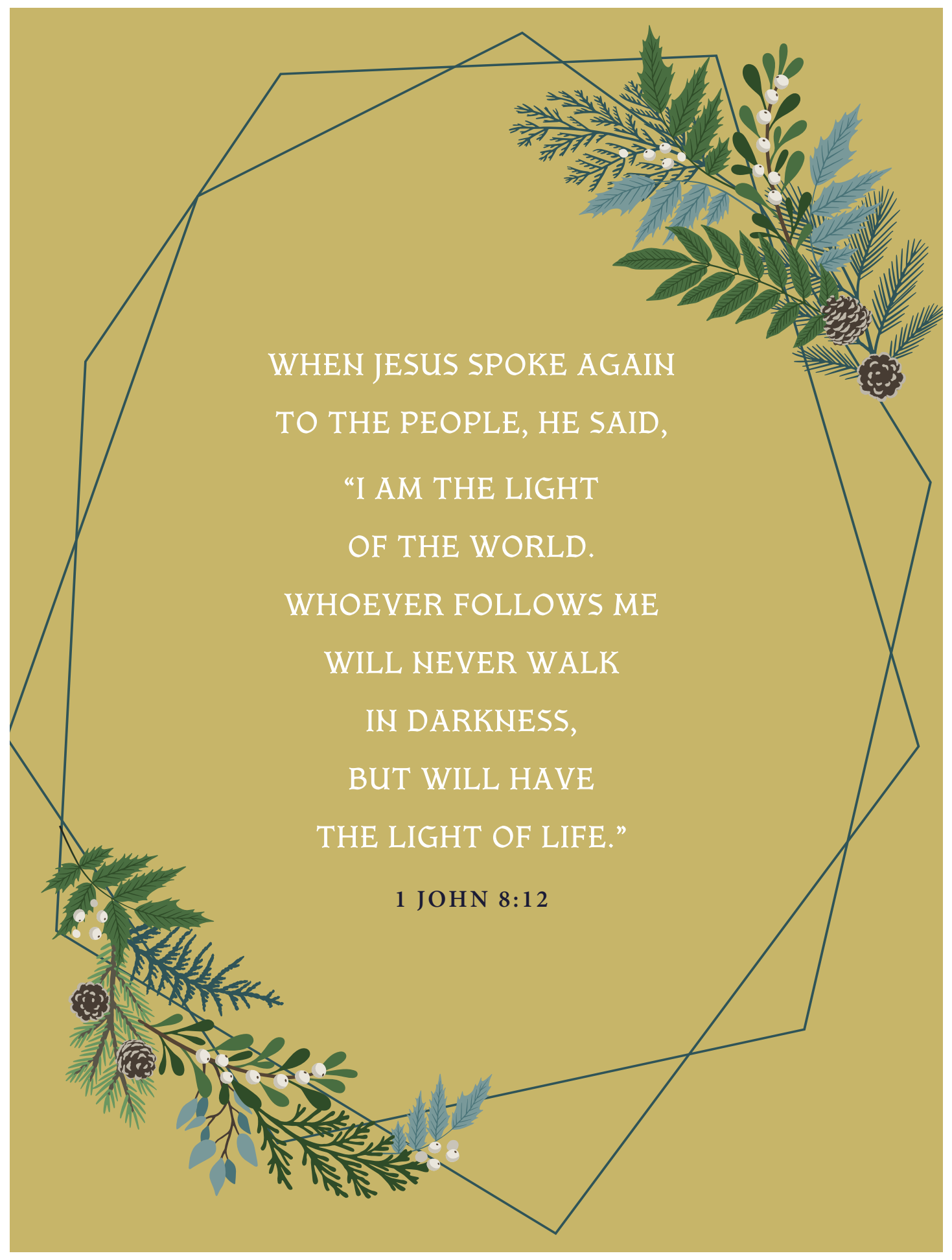
The Liturgical Year, by Joan Chittister

Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Annie Dillard, et al.

You Are What You Love, by James K. A. Smith

Advent Guide Attribution

Scott Wildey, MDiv, began volunteering in pastor Matt's High School ministry in 1997 and was a part of the original group that began Flood Church in 2000. In 2003 Scott joined the Flood staff and has served as an associate pastor overseeing various ministries including engaged, marrieds, groups, and graphic design. Scott is certified in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and has Spiritual Direction certificates from both Theodyssey (2011) and The Transforming Center (2020). Scott is married to Linsey, a Spiritual Director, and they have two amazing kids: Hunter (15), and Piper (13).



WHEN JESUS SPOKE AGAIN
TO THE PEOPLE, HE SAID,
“I AM THE LIGHT
OF THE WORLD.
WHOEVER FOLLOWS ME
WILL NEVER WALK
IN DARKNESS,
BUT WILL HAVE
THE LIGHT OF LIFE.”

1 JOHN 8:12