



23 Daily Devotionals
Written by Members of Our Suncreek Family



Coming Events

Women's Ministry CHRISTMAS DINNER & Cookie exchange

Monday
December 4th
7:00 p.m. in the MAC

RSVP - SuncreekUMC.org/cookies



Can You Bake Treats for Boyd?

Needed by
Tuesday, Dec. 5th
Sign Up Here

Sign Up at SuncreekUMC.org/bakers

Chrismon Creations

Learn How to Make Chrismon Ornaments

Wednesday
December 6th
1PM in the MAC

RSVP Online at
SuncreekUMC.org/chrismons



You're Invited!

The Sun Creek Music Ministry
proudly presents

Gloria!

A Musical Celebration

Sunday, December 10th at 7PM in the Sanctuary

ChurchWide Christmas Caroling

accompanied by the Sun Creek Strummers

Sunday, December 17th
Leave from the church at 3:30 p.m.

Everyone is Welcome.
RSVP - SuncreekUMC.org/carol

*We wish you a
Merry Christmas!*



The Longest Night

A service of *Hope and Healing*
for those grieving during the holidays.

Thursday, December 21st
7:00 p.m. in the Round Room



CHRISTMAS EVE CANDLELIGHT SERVICES

3PM

Family
Children's
Music

5PM

Traditional
Chancel Choir
Bell Choir

7PM

Contemporary
Worship Team
Youth Choir

11PM

Acoustic
Simple Worship
in the MAC

Suncreek UMC - 1517 W. McDermott Dr. in Allen, Texas

Christmas Poinsettia Dedications

Available for \$15

Order Online

www.SuncreekUMC.org/poinsettias

Poinsettias can be taken after Christmas Eve services.

Advent Devotional 2023

This year's Advent theme in worship will be Love Came Down. To complement that, this Advent devotional provides a "lovely" tour of the Bible. Each scripture represents a different part of the Bible where the word love pops up. As we read from the early writings of the Old Testament through the letters sent well after Jesus's birth, death, and resurrection, I hope you get a sense of how love has come to humanity throughout all time.

Advent means arrival. It is a time of anticipation, preparation, and wonder for the arrival of Christ. This year, I hope you continue to see how divine love has arrived and continues to arrive among us in this special season and beyond.

Won't you join us on this year's journey through the season of Advent?

12/3/2023 - Day 1

Where has Wisdom Gone?

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

We live in an age where our collective Judeo-Christian wisdom is being challenged and dismissed by the media, the internet and many other outside influences. Moses tells us that we are to live out God’s message by our hands in service to others, and as we think about what we do and say. His wisdom is to come first and foremost in our lives.

Simon Pokagon of the Potawatomie tribe in the western Great Lakes area once said: “Often in the stillness of the night, when nature seems asleep about me, there comes a gentle rapping at the door of my heart. I open it; and a voice inquires, “Pokagon, what of your people? What will their future be?” My answer is: “Mortal man has not the power to draw aside the veil of unborn time to tell the future of his race. That gift belongs to the Divine alone. But it is given to him to closely judge the future by the present and the past.”

What is to become of our people? How are we to have the wisdom to make judgements of the future as it unfolds? Advent is the time of preparation for our Lord’s birth. Pass on the true meaning of the season to our children and grandchildren, be of service to others, and keep Him and his message in the forefront of our minds. The world desperately needs His wisdom to prevail.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, help us to find the words to pass on your message to a hurting world. Help us to be a source of your wisdom in all that we do and say. In your most holy name we pray. Amen.

By Bill Brady

12/4/23 - Day 2

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:17-18)

I won't lie. When I saw an open spot to write about a passage from Leviticus, I definitely had to do a little due diligence before putting my name down.

I love the essence of these verses- embracing everyone with grace and sometimes the even harder task of shutting down conversations that brew hostility. That's just what Jesus would do, elevating the outcast and convicting the wayward establishment. I'm 100% on board.

But read a few lines further and it's all about reparations you should give to other men for getting too friendly with their female slaves. Not a word about the injury to the slave, of course. Blood pressure rising.

Or admonitions to not eat meat after three days - no prob for this vegetarian. Or to wear mixed fabrics - I'm definitely out of luck there as I sit here in my very cozy but surely unholy pj's.

So, how do we square the confusing, the irrelevant, and the troubling passages with the ones that stir the deepest parts of our souls and compose the very essence of who we are?

Maybe it's in using the hearts, minds, and souls God gave us to align what we know of Jesus to what we know of the culture of the men writing the Bible, to finally where the Holy Spirit within us leads. For me, that means cherishing the message to extend love to everyone, and to be brave enough to call for grace when our world strives to exclude.

Lord, please help me use the gifts you have given me to discern your message and to live in a way that draws others closer to you. Amen.

By Courtney Aberle

12/5/23 - Day 3

'But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments; they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them. Even when they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, "This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt," and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go. You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. (Nehemiah 9:16-21)

Nehemiah helped the people of God look back over their history with God. Consider some of these questions not only to better understand the text, but also as a guide for your own history and current relationship with God:

1. Nehemiah says the people "stiffened their necks." What does that make you think of? Was there a time you stiffened your neck in response to God or someone else in your life? How might stiffening our necks prevent us from seeing God's wonders?
2. Nehemiah says God is "ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." These characteristics pop up over and over in describing God. Which word or phrase is most hopeful to you? Which is most challenging? What adjectives would you use to describe God?
3. Nehemiah recalls the wilderness stories from the book of Exodus (pillars of fire and cloud for guidance, manna and water, clothes not wearing out). Which of these images strikes you most powerfully? In what ways do you see God's love demonstrated in similar ways today?

12/6/23 - Day 4

Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps. (Psalm 85:7-13)

Below is a depiction of this psalm by the artist John August Swanson. Take some time today to meditate on both the words and the images, seeing and hearing how God might be speaking to you through them.



12/7/23 - Day 5

The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. (Psalm 103:6-18)

My mentor pastor in seminary, Rev. Dr. Katy Hinman, would always quote the first verse of this psalm whenever she had to pray over a church dinner or lunch, particularly when some people had already started eating and had their food to be blessed already within them. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me."

I love remembering her prayer of blessing over food on plates and food within bellies, especially in this time leading up to Christmas. Advent is a season of preparation and anticipation, Christmas is a season of celebration and feasting. We typically think of Lent as a time of fasting, but in some Christians traditions, a smaller scale fast was observed at Advent. This fast helped establish an atmosphere of preparation, and made the Christmas day feast even more delicious.

I'm not suggesting fasting for Advent, though if you start now you have a five day head start and it is one of the shortest Advents possible, so maybe it is the best year to try. Either way, I do hope this season is one in which we can all find a sense of blessing in the Christmas feast.

In addition to good food, may our celebration and feast include the very loving works of God mentioned in this selection of Psalm 103 - justice for all who are oppressed, mercy, grace, slowness to anger, not repaying for sins, compassion, righteousness, steadfast love. God has set the table before us with all these wonders, so that we might feast upon them. And guess what? There is plenty to share with the rest of the world.

And, if you have already dug into God's loving feast, you can rest assured that all that is already within you is blessed as well.

By Pastor Patrick Littlefield

12/8/23 - Day 6

“Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.” (Proverbs 10:12)

When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of the truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fail. Think of it- always.

Mahatma Gandhi

These ancient words from King Solomon Proverbs offer me the wisest path through our current turbulent times. As an ESL professor this semester, I have listened to the students from Afghanistan and Morocco despair over injustice and poverty around the earthquakes in both countries, Middle Eastern students share stories of violence against women fighting for their rights, and South American students describe how random gang violence has damaged them. They feel sad and sometimes angry- just as I do with the violence and injustice in the USA - but they always re-center around love.

Throughout my many years of teaching students from different countries with different beliefs, I have seen this universal constant of love. They care for each other, they care for me, and they care for their home and American communities. Their behavior and faith remind me that everyday love between people and among small communities could “cover all wrongs” and perhaps, as Gandhi believes, always has. This season may we act on the faith that despite the presence of hate, love has and always will be “the kingdom, the power, and the glory.”

Dear God, always, but especially during the difficult times during this hopeful Christmas season, help us to see the love all around us, among people we know and people we do not know. When we feel inclined to anger or despair, remind us of Your mighty power of goodness and love, and inspire us to share our love with others in both small and significant ways.

By Kristine Springate

12/9/23 - Day 7

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned. (Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

As a musician in my high school and college choirs, I sang the René Clausen setting of this passage several times. It has always been one of my favorites! I hate to admit that I was WAY too old before I realized the text was not about an animal...don't judge! Jessica Simpson had her "Chicken of the Sea" moment, I had my "Seal upon your heart" moment.

[Clausen Set Me As a Seal St. Olaf Choir](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5EbklRKBU)
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5EbklRKBU>)

Give it a listen – it is gorgeous. (If you're looking at the paper form, look up Set Me As a Seal by Clausen St. Olaf Choir – you'll find it and it's totally worth it!) I think the writer of Song of Solomon would approve. If you can watch the video, you'll notice the choir holding hands – this is a tradition at St. Olaf. It connects the musicians together – they can feel when their neighbors breathe, and it forges them into one beautiful voice instead of many disconnected individuals.

Isn't this the perfect vision of the love described in the passage? A love so powerful the bride can feel her bridegroom breathe, one set upon the other's heart as a seal of love and devotion. A love so powerful it cannot be quenched by death nor grave, by flood nor all the riches in the world! This is the request of the bride to her groom. This is how God feels about the church – God's bride. This is why Jesus came. Can we ask for this devotion? It's already ours for the taking, a gift given in the most fierce and strong of loves. Can we return it?

By Cindy Peterson

12/10/23 - Day 8

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely'; and he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (Isaiah 63:7-9)

In Isaiah 63:7-9, we are invited to meditate on the kindness, compassion, and redeeming love of our God. The words of this passage are like a symphony of gratitude and awe, painting a picture of a God who not only created us but passionately cares for us.

Take a moment to consider the kindnesses of the Lord in your own life. Recall the moments of grace, the answered prayers, and the times when God's hand was evident. God's kindness is not just a distant attribute but a present reality in our lives. Let your heart overflow with praise for the God whose kindness knows no bounds.

God, through a covenant of love, claims us. We are not abandoned or forgotten. We are God's people. Reflect on the significance of being chosen and loved by the Almighty. As children of God, let us walk in gratitude for the salvation offered through our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our God is not indifferent to our struggles, but rather a compassionate Savior who enters into our distress. Picture the scene of God lifting you up, carrying you through challenges. Embrace the truth that God's love and mercy are the foundations of our redemption.

As we ponder Isaiah 63:7-9, let us be grateful for the God whose kindness, covenant love, and compassionate salvation define our relationship. In times of distress, remember that our God is intimately involved, ready to redeem, lift, and carry us.

By Anonymous

12/11/23 - Day 9

At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: 'Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.' (Jeremiah 31:1-6)

This vision of Jeremiah is full of wonderful images. I invite you to practice a form of Ignatian Prayer (outlined below) in order to allow those sensory images to come to life. This form of prayer was pioneered by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), a Spanish convert who started a new monastic order called the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits.

Here's how to do it:

Get settled in a comfortable chair and in a quiet place where you won't be distracted. Our first gesture might be to open our hands on our lap, and to ask God to open our hearts and imaginations.

Then pick a story out of scripture. Read through it once slowly and put it down. Now we begin to imagine the scene as if we are standing right there. What is around me? Who else is there? What do I hear in the scene? Any conversations? If I am in a house, what noises are in the house or in the street outside? What are the smells I can pick up?

Continue to allow the scene to form and transform in your mind. What is the mood – tense? joyful? confused? Angry?

Follow wherever your imagination takes you. Don't worry about historical accuracy, but do pay attention to how God is present in the passage and in your imagination.

After you have spent some time in the scene, slowly gather your attention back to the present moment, back to reality. Thank God for all the ways we can experience scripture.

Adapted from:

<https://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/Imagination/Intro.html>

12/12/23 - Day 10

“On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.” (Zephaniah 3:16-20)

One of the favorite Christmas carols we sing every year is “Joy to the World.” This yuletide song makes no reference to stars, shepherds, Mary and Joseph, or baby Jesus. It clearly celebrates the coming of the Lord to the earth:

Joy to the world, the Lord has come.

Let earth receive her King.

Six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Zephaniah sang a song of joy about God’s immanent coming to Jerusalem with victory, gladness and love. This long-expected savior would right the wrongs and help those who were rejected. This victorious Lord would have the ability to change shame into praise. This awaited one would gather the scattered and restore the fortunes of the hapless.

This vision of Zephaniah was only anticipated until a star come over the little town of Bethlehem when hope was born for all the world. This vision of Zephaniah became reality which provided the inspiration for the Christmas carol Joy to the World! we love to sing.

Prayer: God of hope and joy, may we greet you with the same enthusiastic expectation of Zephaniah this holy season and repeat the sounding joy of the holy prophet Zephaniah.

By Pastor Milton Guttierrez

12/13/23 - Day 11

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

Encounter this passage through the early church tradition of "lectio divina." Lectio divina is a Latin phrase that means sacred reading. You can follow these 4 steps to dig into the scripture deeper.

1. Lectio (reading) - Slowly read the passage and begin chewing on it.
2. Meditatio (meditation): Read again and consider certain words or phrases from the passage. Pick a specific word or phrase to focus on and allow the Spirit to speak to your heart and mind through it.
3. Oratio (prayer): Talk with God and others about the passage. Share the word(s) or phrase(s) that have rested on your heart.
4. Contemplatio (contemplation): Read one more time. Rest in and savor the words of Scripture. Consider how they bring you closer to God and into new rhythms of life.

12/14/23 - Day 12

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' (Mark 12:28-31)

As a child, I could not fall asleep on Christmas Eve. I was so excited, I could nearly give myself a stomachache. As a child, all I could think about was me. And everything I would receive. Waiting patiently was not going to happen.

In today's Bible verse, we talk about the greatest commandment, which is love. How does love help in waiting? Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love your God with all your heart. He says the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor.

Matthew 25:37, says "Lord, when did you say we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty, and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothes you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go visit you? The king will reply, "truly I will tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me"

First, Corinthians 13:4-7 says "love is patient and kind... Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

As we anticipate the birth of Christ, let's love God and our neighbors, through our actions of giving, caring and sharing. Child me would have slept a little easier if in her prayer she was blessing others and not just thinking me me me!

Dear God, I eagerly await the Holy Spirit to fill my heart this season with the desire to share and care for others around me. Allow me to seek opportunities to love my community and be an example of your love. I pray for patience and kindness during this season of worldly expectations. Let the light of baby Jesus shine through me. With love and expectancy. Amen.

By Catherine Fruit

12/15/23 - Day 13

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15:9-17)

More Than a Feeling

In these verses, Jesus is talking to the disciples about love. God loves him and he loves us and because of that, Jesus commands us to love each other. We realize that it is one thing to read these words and to talk about loving others, but it is a much bigger challenge to actually obey these words. There are so many distractions in the world. Our egos and our feelings get in the way and some people are easier to love than others.

But Jesus says that he chose us, he appointed us to do this very thing. When we do love each other, we bear fruit. And that fruit, Jesus says, is something that will last. It is something that matters. These words remind us that love isn't just about how we feel or that love is an option.

These words remind us that love is a command from Jesus who showed us what love is by laying down his life for us and calling us friends. So, we want to take the opportunity to live out that love by feeding the hungry, comforting people that are sad, including people that are left out, celebrating other people's success and being patient with each other when we start to get frustrated. We want to live like friends of Jesus.

By SunCreek Youth

12/16/23 - Day 14

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

‘For your sake we are being killed all day long;

we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

In Romans 8:35-39, the Apostle Paul paints a vivid picture of the unyielding and unwavering love of God for us. These verses declare that no circumstance, no trial, and no power in the universe can sever us from the boundless love that is found in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Inseparable Love:

Life is filled with challenges and trials. We face uncertainties, hardships, and moments of distress. Yet, in the midst of it all, Paul reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. It's a love that stands firm in the face of trouble, persecution, and every adversity. Take a moment to reflect on the times when you felt the presence of God's love, even in the midst of difficulty.

More Than Conquerors:

Through Christ, we are not just survivors; we are more than conquerors. Our victory is not defined by the absence of trials but by the overcoming power of God's love.

Consider the areas in your life where you need victory, and remember that through Christ, you have the strength to conquer every challenge.

The Unyielding Scope of God's Love:

Paul lists an exhaustive array of circumstances and powers, emphasizing the comprehensive nature of God's love. Whether it's the challenges of life or the mysteries of the spiritual realm, nothing has the power to separate us from God's love. Take comfort in the fact that God's love transcends every circumstance and surpasses every force in existence.

Conclusion:

As you reflect on Romans 8:35-39, let the truth of God's unshakable love anchor your soul. In moments of trial, remember that God's love remains steadfast. In seasons of victory, acknowledge that you are more than a conqueror through the One who loves

you. Embrace the truth that nothing—absolutely nothing—can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

By Anonymous

12/17/32 - Day 15

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. (Romans 12: 9 – 13 NIV translation)

J.O.Y. of the Season

During this busy holiday season, it is easy to get distracted by all the parties and events and all we have to do for our family in order to be ready for Christmas. Busy, busy, busy.

One model for how we are to practice our faith is J.O.Y. – Jesus, Others, Yourself.

Our highest duty is faithful prayer and spiritual fervor.

Our next duty is to others. Love for all. Doing our part to help those who are less fortunate. And all with a humble heart rather than calling attention to our deeds.

Prayer:

Holy One, during this season which can be so busy, help me remember to put you first. Help me remember that I am called to be genuine in love and to share with those who are in less fortunate circumstances than I am. Help me focus on serving those in your kingdom.

By Ann Seward

12/18/23 - Day 16

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:1-7)

Sometimes we make love complicated (or make life complicated and forget the simplicity of love). So, here are Lucy and Isaac's ten simple ways to know and share love, based on what Paul says in 1 Corinthians.

1. God shows us this kind of love through Jesus.
2. I show kind love when I help family and friends. I help people who are hurt at school. (Lucy)
3. I show love when I play games with people and at the playground. (Isaac) And I feel love when Isaac plays with me. (Lucy)
4. I share love when I laugh with people who are being funny. (Lucy)
5. I see love when Lucy eats fruit bars with me. (Isaac)
6. I share love when I mail cards and letters to people. (Lucy)
7. I see love when people take care of me. (Isaac)
8. Not insisting on our own way sounds the hardest (in the list from the Bible). I do that when I let people help me. (Lucy)
9. We know love when mommy helps us get ready for bedtime.
10. I feel hope when people are kind to me. (Lucy)

Let's keep love simple and keep love kind!

By Lucy and Isaac Littlefield

P.S. Lucy says: These are some good words about God. And following these ways of showing love helps us be good.

12/19/23 - Day 17

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. (Galatians 5:22-26)

The Struggle is Real

When we read this list of attributes called the fruit of the Spirit, we thought, “who wouldn’t want to be a person like that?” and “who wouldn’t love a person like that?” But then it says that those who belong to Christ should be like that because they have turned their back on living like the world. We wish that was as easy as it sounds. We find the struggle to be real. We think we do some of these pretty well, like love and joy. But others, not so much. Self-control is sometimes hard - just ask our parents or our teachers. And in a world where, in an instant, we can checkout of any conversation or pursue anything we are interested or disconnect with other people through a few clicks on our phone, patience seems to be the most difficult one of all.

So maybe that is why love is listed first of all. If we truly love, we will be slow to judge. If we truly love, we will find patience with the struggles of others. If we truly love, we will live in grace, and the Spirit can grow all the others in us along the way.

By Suncreek Youth

12/20/23 - Day 18

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:4-10)

As you read the scripture for today, grab a pen, pencil, or a variety of drawing tools and use the blank space on this page to draw. Read the passage and then illustrate what you see in your mind. Stick figures are totally fine! Pay attention to the details and how they come to life. How does this practice help you understand the scene better? What details were you able to attend to more through this practice?

12/21/23 - Day 19

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. (Colossians 3:12-15)

Dressing in Layers

As a schoolteacher, I admire Paul for his use of figurative language. I've always been fond of the "fruits of the spirit" which he lists in Galatians 5:22-23. He refers to a similar list of traits in today's passage as garments we should wear. (I'll take this over the "full armor of God" in Ephesians 6 any day. I'm a lover not a fighter, my karate purple belt notwithstanding!) Images of fruit and clothing are things I can embrace for sure.

This Advent season, I will be doing my best to honor the memory of my mother. She departed from this life on Christmas Eve last year, but she left behind a legacy of gentleness. Each time I grab an item from my closet, I will intentionally remember Mom and do my best to clothe myself in her spirit of gentleness. There are several virtues listed in verse 12; which one might you be donning? Let's all remember to add a layer of love.

Heavenly Father, help us to clothe ourselves for the season, with love as the outer-layer. Amen

By Sandy Schneider

12/22/23 - Day 20

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. (1 Peter 4:8-10)

Whether we are Christian or not, whether we are religious or not, two things we hear about during this season, whether we like it or not, are love and gifts. We may grow a little nostalgic about people and places we love. We may grow happy at such trips down memory lane. We may grow a little sad that we miss them, both people and places. We may see something that reminds us of another person so much that we purchase it and send it along to show that we are thinking of them, or we might receive a gift of someone's thoughtfulness toward us. I imagine that even my uncle, who each year put out his holiday door mat that read "GO AWAY", felt a little something about love and gifts each year at this time. I guess I'll never know.

The writer of the little letter we call 1 Peter writes of love and gifts in an interesting way. "Love covers a multitude of sins", and I don't think he means just our own sins. Our love, expressed in compassion and support, can help another person through the pain or awkwardness of the consequences they may endure for their sins as well. What a gift that would be to give to someone this year. Instead of judging or piling on in their struggle, we can love them through their hard days.

The writer continues to tell us that we all have received gifts of the "manifold grace of God". These gifts may not all look the same, but they all are from the same source, the grace that is the defining characteristic of God's relationship with all people. We receive these gifts, not only for ourselves, but as a means to serve one another. In other words, the gift of God's grace is the original gift that is to keep on giving through everyone who receives it.

That's the funny thing about both gifts and love from the spiritual point of view. Neither one is given to us to be kept by us. Both come from God as a blessing to be shared as a blessing for others. Love came down at Christmas, and love continues to come through us as we continue to share.

By Pastor Barry Hughes

12/23/23 - Day 21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:7-11)

This is one of the clearest biblical expressions of God's loving nature and how we can know God's love in our world. May the following questions help you dig even deeper in the expansive promises conveyed in this passage.

1. In a way, John is offering a kind of flow chart of love. Map out the flow of love represented here in your head or on paper. What strikes you about this dynamic movement of love from God to us to others?
2. John Wesley claimed 1 John 4:19 was the "sum of the whole gospel." Read on to that verse in your own Bible and consider why he might believe that, and whether or not you agree.
3. How have you experienced and known the love of God in your own life? How is God's love being revealed to you new each day?
4. What really compels you to love those around you? In what ways can you show them love today?

12/24/23 - Day 22

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (John 3:16-17)

CHRISTMASTIME IS HERE

Christmastime is here, Christmastime is here ...

Time for friends and family, for fellowship and cheer.

Christmastime is here, Christmastime is here ...

Bells will ring and choirs sing, our loved ones will draw near.

Christmastime is here, Christmastime is here ...

Angels sang about Your birth to shepherds in the fields.

Wise men saw a star, shining in the East ...

They followed it to where You lay, the newborn Prince of Peace.

Jesus, Son of God - Jesus, God with us ...

Born to save our souls from sin, to die upon a cross.

You so loved the world, You so love all men ...

You made Yourself the Sacrifice, our new lives to begin!

Faith is all it takes, child-like faith to believe ...

Ask Him into your heart today and new life you'll receive!

Jesus, Son of God - we praise Your Holy Name ...

Christmastime reminds us of the reason that You came!

Christmastime is here, Christmastime again ...

Proclaim His Name through all the earth, the Saviour of all men

I have always loved Christmas! Of all my childhood memories, those surrounding Christmas are far and away my favorite! The glorious music, the beautiful decorations, the TREE!! the gifts, SANTA!, the special foods, that over-arching sense of joy and general good-will to everyone - these sights, sounds, and sensations always come to mind when I have thoughts about Christmas. But I wasn't raised in Christian home, a church-going home, a home that focused on the actual REASON for Christmas. I was overwhelmed by all the other sensations. I can't remember when I first realized that Christmas wasn't about all of that OR even about Santa Claus! Perhaps my first real understanding occurred in High School. I was always in choir throughout my school years and my best friend was a girl named Camille. Camille was in her Methodist Church choir in addition to our school choir and told me all about their Christmas music: they sang about Jesus & His birth! There were no songs about snow or jingling bells - they sang about Angels, about a Baby in a Manger, about that Silent Night so long ago. Did Camille invite me to their Christmas Eve service? I can't remember. But I do remember that after asking Jesus to be my Savior and forgive me of my sins (at age 34!) THAT Christmas hit me like a bolt of lightning! It suddenly meant SO much to me! Yes, I decorated a tree, wrote Christmas cards, and bought presents, but all I could really think of was that we were celebrating THE Baby, God's only Son, precious Jesus! Jesus Christ, a Baby born so long ago Who would become my Savior. Jesus! Who loved me and anyone and everyone who would accept Him for the sacrifice He made on that Roman cross 2000 years ago! Jesus! Wonderful, Counselor, Prince of Peace!

A CHRISTMAS PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, please give me the ways to show you how grateful I am for the unimaginable gift of Jesus. Let my light so shine before those who don't know You that they may see You in my actions, not only my words. And please, Dear Lord, give me the words to say when the traditional gifts of this season present opportunities to tell others about You!

In Your Name I pray, Amen.

By Norma Gilpin

12/25/23 - Christmas Day

If you find a lull in the festivities today, take a moment and read (or re-read) the story of Jesus's birth. Enjoy this day and this good news!

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:8-20)

Merry Christmas!