



Daily Devotionals
Written by Members of Our Suncreek Family



Coming Events



Christmas Family Connection
Provide gifts for a child or an entire family.

Sign Up Online
by December 6th

www.SuncreekUMC.org/family



O Christmas Tree
A Christmas Pageant Musical
presented by our
W.A.M. Children's Ministry

Sunday, Dec. 8th
10AM in the MAC

BRING BAKED GOODS AND/OR ATTEND THE TABLE TO SUPPORT OUR SUNCREEK UMC

JUAREZ BAKE SALE

Provides Christmas dinner for our partners in Juarez
Sign Up to Help December 8th

Visit Our Website to Volunteer
www.SuncreekUMC.org/BAKESALE



The SunCreek Music Ministry
proudly presents

Gloria!
A Musical Celebration

Sunday, December 15th at 6PM in the Sanctuary

The Longest Night

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

Thursday, December 19th
7:00 p.m. in the Round Room



ChurchWide Christmas Caroling
accompanied by the SunCreek Strummers

"We wish you a Merry Christmas!"

Sunday, December 22nd
Leave from the church at 3:30 p.m.

Everyone is Welcome.
RSVP - SunCreekUMC.org/carol



CHRISTMAS EVE
CANDLELIGHT SERVICES

3PM	5PM	7PM	11PM
Family Children's Music	Traditional Adult/Youth Choirs Bell Choir	Contemporary Worship Team Band	Acoustic Coffee House Christmas

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 2024

In this year's Advent devotional, we are following the traditional weekly themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. That means throughout the first week, the devotions all touch on the theme of hope, the second week is focused on peace, the third is focused on joy, and the final partial week is focused on love. You will see the same themes guiding us in worship each week as well. As you read these scriptures and reflections on hope, peace, joy, and love, there will be a time for your own reflection on the theme at the end of each week.

I hope this devotional helps you in your faith journey through the season of Advent. 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 hope, peace, joy, and love have arrived and continue 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?

(Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture is taken from the NRSV)

12/1/24 - Day 1

Psalm 130:5-8

I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.
Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

Placing our Hope in the Lord

One of the things that I struggle with most in my life is the desire to have control over every aspect of my life and for instant gratification. In this age of technology, we can get things delivered with the click of a button in the same day. However, this instant gratification is not what God wants our relationship with him to be. He doesn't want us to have a transactional relationship with us, but have a deep and meaningful relationship that can withstand hardships. Throughout our life we will be faced with struggles, whether it be not getting into your dream college, losing a job, or struggling with relationships with friends. The most important thing to do in this situation is to put our hope into God and surrender our life to him. I struggle with the word surrender, but we need to let go of our desire to want to control and find hope and peace through conversation and prayer with Him. In this Psalm, David is crying out to the Lord for help during dark times and is in need of God's presence. He praises God for forgiveness and seeks out the Lord for discernment, sacrificing and surrendering his control while simultaneously waiting for God's reply and following it. We know that through Jesus's love and sacrifice on the cross, God will provide for us during these times. Through this example, we can learn how to have unfailing hope and will help us in stay faithful, knowing that he will provide for us and save us from sin.

Dear Lord,

Help us to surrender our control over to you. You know what is best for our lives and can help strengthen our faith during these difficult times. Let us remain hopeful even when things do not go our way and trust that you will rescue us from sin. Thank you for everything that you have given us and let us build a strong relationship with you.

In Jesus name I pray,
Amen

By Luke Cramer

12/2/24 - Day 2

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I had a leak in my house the other day, on the first floor in the kitchen. After a few panicky calls to friends who know of plumbing issues we narrowed it down to the water heater. The water heater is in the attic, a couple of floors and walls and numerous outlets away from my kitchen. How did water dribble across the upstairs floors, down a random wall and back into the kitchen; finally cascading through my kitchen light? It chose the path of least resistance. The water went where it wanted, whatever was easiest. We like to choose the path of least resistance. We cling to our earthly beliefs and hold on to our childish opinions for our own benefit. We don't make choices driven by love; we make choices based on our own understanding. Just like the people of Corinth, we are not listening. God has a plan for us, yet we hold tightly to what we think we know. We don't know; God knows. And he reminds us over and over; love never fails. We have a beautiful path in life, it starts with faith, endures with hope, and is revealed by love. When we act in love we are paving our way to heaven. The truest path of least resistance is following God's word, the greatest of these is love.

Dear Lord,

You are so faithful. God I seek your help. Soften my heart, let the words I speak reveal your love, let the decisions I make be rooted in love. Lord, let my actions reflect your love. Help me love my neighbor and see them as you see them, beautiful and worthy of love. In your name we pray, Amen.

By Catherine Fruit

12/3/24 - Day 3

Psalm 42:9-11

I say to God, my rock,
'Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?'
As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
'Where is your God?'
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

This psalm 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 read through the scripture once slowly and put it down. I encourage you to read through all of Psalm 42, including the segment highlighted above. 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?

Consider all the rich scenes the writer depicts in Psalm 42, such as: A deer longing for flowing streams, Joining a procession of loud praises up to the place of worship, Waves and cataracts thundering

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.

12/4/24 - Day 4

Romans 8:22-25

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Life often feels like a series of groans—deep, aching reminders that the world and we, ourselves, are not as we should be. The apostle Paul likens this experience to the pains of childbirth. This metaphor is both honest and hopeful. The groaning is not meaningless but points to something beautiful that is yet to come: the full redemption of creation and of our bodies.

As believers, we carry the "firstfruits of the Spirit," a glimpse of God's promises. The Holy Spirit within us is our assurance that the groaning we feel now is temporary. It signals the anticipation of something eternal: our full adoption as children of God and the renewal of all things. But waiting is hard, and hope can waver when we face suffering, loss, or prolonged silence.

Paul reminds us that true hope looks forward to what is unseen. If we had everything now, there would be no need for hope. But our hope rests on the unshakable promises of God. This hope is not wishful thinking but confident expectation rooted in His faithfulness.

The world groans. We groan. Yet, our groaning is not the end. It is the labor that will give birth to glory. In the midst of our waiting, the Spirit strengthens us, helping us endure with patience and faith.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for the hope we have in Christ. Though creation groans and we feel the weight of brokenness, help us to wait patiently for Your promises to be fulfilled. Strengthen us by Your Spirit, and remind us daily that our hope is secure in You. Teach us to trust in Your perfect timing, and use our lives to reflect the hope of redemption to the world around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

By Anonymous

12/5/24 - Day 5

Isaiah 40:28-31

“Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

The Helping Hand of God

Isaiah is sharing the news of the greatness of God, in a season of difficulty for many. The Lord is powerful enough to create every part of the world, but still gives time and effort to us in our time of need. Even when bad things happen in the world, God will never give us anything that we cannot handle, and always provides a path of light through Him.

I'm a pretty clumsy person. Even in my own home, I manage to stub my toe or bump my elbow into just about every surface. When I was younger, I would ride my bike everywhere. I would ride it to school, the park, or even a house on my same street. My parents encouraged my love to ride, but wanted to ensure my safety. One day, we were all able to take a biking tour in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I was excited to pedal my way through the new land. The route was simple and fun, and eventually we returned to the starting point. Confident in my abilities, I took my eyes off the path and looked around, not seeing the street poles in front of me. The cylinders stopped the bike, but unfortunately I kept going forward. My elbows and knees were skinned, but my ego was the only thing bruised afterward.

I believe that sometimes we stumble in the same way spiritually. Some days we are detail oriented, focused, and ready to receive God, but other days are harder. Sometimes, we get distracted and end up with our knees skinned on the concrete. God is the most powerful in those days. The Lord works as a renewer of light and hope, like an energy drink that never gives out. We are the strongest people that we can be when we lay our troubles to God. When David laid down his worries to the Lord, he was able to defeat Goliath. While we may not be having the same physical troubles, God is a renewer of strength at any time. He is the helping hand that reaches out to pick us up and brush us off, no matter how bruised we are.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank you for all that you have done to help us in our lives. We come to you in the ups and downs of our journey, where you welcome us with open arms. Help us in this advent season to do the same to others, welcoming them with your love.

By Eli Cramer

12/6/24 - Day 6

Romans 15:13

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.

Trusting God can be tough - especially as we go through difficult seasons in our lives. We often confuse the word hope and the word wish. We frequently use them interchangeably. But hopes and wishes are completely different.

We have a lot of dreams and wishes for our lives that center on our wants and desires. We have plans for our future and goals we wish would come true. But if we are blessed to live long enough, we soon learn that life doesn't always turn out the way we planned and that even if we work hard and follow Jesus - we still live in a broken world.

It is in these times we can find joy and peace through the God of hope. Hope that is grounded in knowing that God is with us and God is at work in our lives. Even when we hit those tough times and difficult seasons, we trust that we are not alone. Thanks be to God.

Dear God,

We give thanks to you for the gift of hope that comes through Jesus Christ, our savior and redeemer. Fill us with your Spirit so that we may overflow with peace and joy and share that hope with the world.

Amen.

By Kimmi Cramer

12/7/24 - Day 7

Hebrews 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

End of Week Reflection - Hope

You've encountered insights into the theme of hope this week in worship and through the devotions. Now you are invited to reflect on all you have heard and read, especially in light of this passage. How do you experience hope? How do you share hope with others? In what ways does hope deepen your faith?

Take a moment and think about what words or phrases or images stand out to you from the scriptures and devotions of this week. What thoughts and inspirations have warmed your soul? Write down these words of hope or draw a picture that represents them below. Then, pray for that sense of hope to be more present in your life and in our world.

12/8/24 - Day 8

Psalm 4:4-8 (NV)

Tremble and do not sin. When you are on your beds search your hearts and be silent. Offer the sacrifice of the righteous and trust in the Lord. Many, Lord, are asking "who will bring us prosperity?" Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound. In peace, I will lie down and sleep, for you alone Lord make me dwell in safety.

REFLECTION: "PEACE"

There have been times when I have felt overwhelmed, angry, anxious, sad, or hurt. As I reflect on the worries that have, at one time or another, kept me awake at night, I am reminded that true peace isn't found in solving every problem, but in surrendering my worries to God. Just as I lie in my bed at night trusting my loved ones to keep me safe, I am assured that God is my ultimate protector. When I am feeling overwhelmed, I can talk to God knowing He will hear my prayer and guide me to righteousness that brings true inner peace.

PRAYER:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
Keep me safe all through the night
And wake me with the morning light
Amen

By Norma Longabaugh

12/9/24 - Day 9

Matthew 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

When I hear peacekeeping, I think of keeping everyone happy. But keeping everyone happy is darn near impossible. I remember back in 5th grade, I would try to prevent fights in football at recess, and it would make things worse. It's like trying to stop a river with an already damp paper towel, almost impossible. My mom has a sign that reads, "You can't make everybody happy. You're not a taco." But here's the thing: peace isn't just the absence of tension. True peace is the presence of reconciliation. This goes deeper than just keeping things calm on the surface. Jesus didn't come to Earth to make people happy; he came to confront injustice, break barriers, and ultimately offer his life to restore the relationship between Earth and God. Peace, to Jesus, wasn't a compromise. It was a revolution. Being a peacemaker doesn't mean trying to please everyone; it means living in Christ and connecting people. Whether it's being a bridge between two friends who won't talk, or introducing new people to one another, peacemaking is about building those connections. Of course, it won't always be easy. Chances are, you'll be caught in some crossfire. All peacemakers end up getting hit at some point. Sometimes, it means choosing forgiveness over revenge.

Being a peacemaker doesn't come without cost. It requires us to lay aside our pride and our comfort. But in doing so, we reflect God's heart. Jesus didn't shy away from the messiness of the world, but he stepped into it. He brought peace, not by avoiding the hard stuff, but by facing it head-on.

So today, think about this: how can you bring reconciliation into your relationships? Maybe it's forgiving someone who hurt you, or helping two people see each other's side. Whatever it is, step into the mess like Jesus did, and reflect his heart to the world.

I'll finish with a quick prayer, and I'll let y'all go on about your days. (I wasn't sure how to transition here!)

Dear heavenly Father,

Thank You for showing us what real peace looks like—not just keeping people happy, but bringing hearts together. Help us to be peacemakers, even when it's messy or hard. Give us the courage to step into tough situations, the grace to forgive, and the wisdom to reflect Your love in everything we do. Thank You for leading the way and showing us how to bring Your peace to the world.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

By Jackson Grenier

12/10/24 - Day 10

Numbers 6:24-26

“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”

Everlasting Blessing and Peace

How wonderful is it to rest in the embrace of God knowing that His love and peace surround us? The Lord is constantly and generously blessing and protecting us, even when we don't notice it. He is our father and we are His dear children that He loves so much. Just like how we desire to spend time with our families, God wants to spend time with us. Picture a child looking up and smiling at you when you surprise them with something good and unexpected. In the same way, God is smiling down on us, beaming with love, peace, and grace, as He sees us through the lens of forgiveness. He is always pouring out His blessings and showers us with comfort. So no matter the storm you weather, or when the clouds of darkness and despair shadow the face of the Lord, remember that He is our refuge from worry.

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank you for reminding that no matter the dark clouds that come into my life, You are still there and still the same. Help me to remember Your love, peace, and comfort. Help me to understand that You care for me and desire to give me comfort. Amen.

By Emily York

12/11/24 - Day 11

John 14.27

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

“The Gift of Peace”

My father fought in World War II for several years. Like millions of Americans, he graduated from high school and went immediately to a place and to a life completely foreign to their experience. He did the hard things that were asked of him. He never talked about the war much, no matter how often I asked. But he did talk about how good it felt when they got the word that the war was over. He just wanted to go home and see his mother, father, and sister – and live a quiet, peaceful life.

There are so many reasons that we might find ourselves especially longing for peace this year during the Advent season. Watching the news as wars rage in the Ukraine and in the Middle East – and elsewhere – can burden our hearts. The strife we see in local communities across the country can make us fearful. We can have conflict within our relationships, within our families and within our own hearts. We have just come through a time in the life of our beloved United Methodist denomination that was divisive and challenging. I cannot speak for anyone else, but sometimes I find myself longing for peace – a moment, a day, of peace.

The story of Scripture, from beginning to end, is the story of our search for peace. Families are divided. Nations are at war. Hearts are divided between faithfulness to God and idolatry. Like the people of old, we try to find peace in all kinds of ways. If we can just have power, we can find peace. If we can be successful, our hearts can find peace. If we can feel loved and noticed and get enough credit, we can breathe and relax, and grab hold of peace. The problem is that those targets are always moving in this world. Peace is illusive, for the world gives all things conditionally.

In John 14, Jesus is talking to the twelve and trying to prepare them for his death and departure. He tells them they do not have to be afraid or troubled. But this was beyond their imagination. They did not understand the “why” to all that lay ahead. Jesus understood their lack of understanding, so he offered them something better than understanding. He offered them peace. But his peace was different from the world’s peace. This peace would be stable and steady. Why? It is HIS peace that is offered. It is the peace of the gift of Jesus himself. True peace comes from the unconditional love and presence of Jesus.

By Barry Hughes

12/12/24 - Day 12

Isaiah 54:9-10

This is like the days of Noah to me:
Just as I swore that the waters of Noah
would never again go over the earth,
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
and will not rebuke you.
For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

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.

12/13/24 - Day 13

Colossians 3:14-15

NIV – 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.

The Message – And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness.

Living Bible – Most of all, let love guide your life, for then the whole church will stay together in perfect harmony. Let the peace of heart that comes from Christ be always present in your hearts and lives, for this is your responsibility and privilege as members of his body. And always be thankful.

Gratitude. Peace. Love. In our very online, endlessly divided culture, how often are these the themes? I guess it depends on your algorithm. It seems bitterness and discord are easier to find. Common ground, community, forgiveness, agape love? Pie-in-the-sky.

But the Christ. The Savior came to us, and the Savior STILL comes to us! Jesus didn't enter a perfect world. Political situations were fraught. Hope seemed all but lost. Legalism ruled religious practice. The Prince of Peace still came. The Prince of Peace loves us so much that He embodied our broken reality to be ever-present with us. The Prince of Peace commanded us – commands us – to love. When He rose from the grave, He spent time reassuring His followers that He would still be with them, always. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Jesus didn't give this news to people living charmed lives. These people, cast out and lowly and persecuted – were commanded to love and peace. Certainly we are, too.

This season, let love be our guide. Let thankfulness abound. Let Christ's peace fill our hearts and lead us. Peace be with you.

By Cindy Peterson

12/14/24 - Day 14

Romans 12:14-18

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

End of Week Reflection - Peace

You've encountered insights into the theme of peace this week in worship and through the devotions. Now you are invited to reflect on all you have heard and read, especially in light of this passage. How do you experience peace? How do you share peace with others? In what ways does peace deepen your faith?

Take a moment and think about what words or phrases or images stand out to you from the scriptures and devotions of this week. What thoughts and inspirations have warmed your soul? Write down these words of peace or draw a picture that represents them below. Then, pray for that sense of peace to be more present in your life and in our world.

12/15/24 - Day 15

Zephaniah 3:16-19

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.

“Tidings of Comfort and Joy”

The seventh century prophet to Judah, Zephaniah, ends his oft-timed harsh chapters of prophesy with a song of joy. We can almost hear the refrain of the Christmas carol:

O tidings of comfort and joy!

So, what “tidings” come to us from this ancient prophet as we journey in what at times can seem to be a dark and dreary world?

- We can hear the tidings **“Don’t be afraid”**
(Joy means fear no longer has control of our life)
- We can hear the tidings **“Don’t give up”**
(Joy means having the courage to take the next step)
- We can hear the tidings: **“God’s love offers new life”**
(Joy means we can experience renewal in an environment of frustration)
- We can hear the tidings: **“God has ended the threat of doom”**
(Joy means we can find divine hope in the midst of hellish circumstances)
- We can hear the tidings : **“God will bring you home”**
(Joy means we can trust God to lead us into our unknown future)

May the tidings of Zephaniah spoken so many years ago offer each of us comfort and joy as we look forward expectantly to hear the holy tidings:

We are not alone...God is with us...Thanks be to God!

By Milton Gutierrez

12/16/24 - Day 16

John 16:19-22

Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

In this passage, Jesus is acknowledging to his disciples (and to us!) the unavoidable nature of grief in human life, but he is also emphasizing the joy that can always be relied on to reappear when we need it most. Isn't it wonderful that Jesus's example of joy is the birth of a child— An experience that is basic to our very human nature? Isn't it wonderful to reflect on the ways our birth brought joy into the world, and the ways our very existence continues to spread our inherent joy to others? Isn't it wonderful to consider the joy experienced by Mary and Joseph as they welcomed their baby boy in Bethlehem? We have much to grieve, and Jesus allows us the space we need to weep and mourn. But, we are also creatures of JOY, and Christmas is the perfect season to tap into our depths of joy and to find ways to sprinkle that joy everywhere we go. May we rejoice today in hot cocoa with extra marshmallows, in beautiful Christmas carols, in extra warm hugs between friends and family, and in Jesus's promise to be present with us in our grief as well as our joy.

Lord, thank you for the gift of joy. Please use me today to bring joy to others, and as I anticipate Christmas today, remind me to rejoice in your presence and your promise. Amen.

By Erin Littlefield

12/17/24 - Day 17

Proverbs 17:22

A cheerful heart is a good medicine,
but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.

Joy is a powerful gift from God. In this verse, Solomon reminds us that a cheerful heart—a heart filled with joy and gratitude—has tangible benefits for our well-being. It's like good medicine, bringing healing not only to our souls but also to our bodies. Conversely, a crushed spirit, weighed down by worry, bitterness, or despair, drains us, leaving us feeling dry and lifeless.

But where does this joy come from? True, lasting joy doesn't rely on circumstances. It flows from knowing and trusting God. The world offers fleeting happiness tied to temporary things, but the joy God gives is rooted in eternal promises. When we focus on God's love, grace, and faithfulness, our hearts are lifted, even in the midst of challenges.

Joy doesn't mean ignoring pain or pretending everything is fine. Instead, it's a deep assurance that God is with us and for us, no matter what we face. This perspective changes how we respond to life's difficulties. A cheerful heart isn't just about feeling good—it's about seeing life through the lens of God's goodness and choosing gratitude in every circumstance.

When we cultivate joy, it doesn't just transform us; it impacts those around us. A cheerful heart becomes a source of encouragement, spreading light to others and reflecting the hope we have in Christ.

Two more thoughts:

Use your words to uplift others. A cheerful heart is contagious—let your joy spill over into your relationships.

Practice Gratitude: Take note of the blessings in your life. Even small moments of beauty or kindness can remind you of God's goodness.

Prayer:

Lord, thank You for the joy You offer, a joy that heals and strengthens us. Help us to cultivate cheerful hearts, even when life feels hard. Teach us to trust in Your goodness and to focus on the blessings You've given us. May our joy reflect Your love and draw others closer to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

By Anonymous

12/18/24 - Day 18

Luke 15:3-7

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

God takes joy in us, not when we do things perfectly, but when we draw close and welcome God's love into our lives. Sometimes the things that happen in our days wear us down and we can dwell only on the times we've strayed from God and neighbors.

I invite you to try out a practice called the prayer of examen. This method of prayer helps us see more clearly how God shows up in our lives. You can follow these simple steps, and I encourage you to pay special attention to how God's joyous care for every single one of us was evident in the day you are reflecting on (yesterday if you are doing this in the morning or today if you are doing it in the evening).

1. Place yourself in God's presence. Give thanks for God's great love for you.
2. Pray for the grace to understand how God is acting in your life.
3. Review your day — recall specific moments and your feelings at the time.
4. Reflect on what you did, said, or thought in those instances. Were you drawing closer to God, or further away? Pay special attention to how God's joy was present with you.
5. Look toward tomorrow — think of how you might collaborate more effectively with God's love and joy.

12/19/24 - Day 19

Psalm 30:4-5

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.
For his anger is but for a moment;
his favour is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

Throughout the whole of Psalm 30, the psalmist powerfully captures the ups and downs of life, times of pain, distress, and abandonment as well as times of healing, rejoicing, and dancing. It is in this full scope of life that the psalmist directs our attention to joy. So, whether the holiday season is overflowing with happiness or if it is full of painful memories of loss, I believe this psalm can be a faithful guide.

The thing that sticks out to me most is how in verse 4, the psalmist ties the act of giving thanks to the joy that comes in the morning. Whether thanksgiving comes before or after the joy (or both), it is clear that acts of gratitude can connect us to joy.

In his books about Winnie the Pooh and Piglet, A. A. Milne wrote, "Piglet noticed that even though he had a very small heart, it could hold a rather large amount of gratitude." I love that image and how it reminds us that in any season of life, we have capacity to give thanks to God. It may look radically different in the low times compared to the positive times, but whatever gratitude we can hold in our hearts might draw us into the joy of the morning.

Sometimes, when I have to get on to my children, Lucy and Isaac, I worry that they will be mad or resent me for a long time. I've heard this can get harder the older they get, but I am always amazed by how quickly they can move into a state of joy. Their hearts, which are small only in size, hold a rather large amount of gratitude, which they show Erin and me all the time, even if they forget to say 'thank you.' And their gratitude and love help them find joy over and over again.

I'm inspired to follow their example and hold such grateful joy in my heart as well. It's a grateful joy that comes into our hearts from God and which we can respond to every day. Even when our hearts feel small, they can hold the abundant gratitude God gives us.

Dear God, help us see how weeping and anger are temporary and how they give way to joy and grace. Inspire us with gratitude that can serve as a way to transition us into a new morning in our relationships with others, ourselves, and you. Amen.

By Patrick Littlefield

12/20/24 - Day 20

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again. Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition, bring your request to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your heart and minds in Christ Jesus.

Devotional:

If I had to pick my absolute favorite passage from the Bible, it would be this one. Let me tell you why.

Rejoice in the Lord Always

As a child, this first part resonated deeply with me. I attended a huge Methodist church in Houston - Memorial Drive United Methodist Church. Coincidentally, Cantate sang there on their tour of the Deep South over the summer. While I didn't quite recognize the new buildings and modern touches in the pictures my daughter shared, I will never forget the experiences that shaped my faith.

When I was growing up there in the 80's, we ended every service with "Rejoice the Lord is King". "Rejoice, give thanks, and sing of gladness evermore" are just a few of lyrics that stuck with me. It's a pretty powerful thing to instill a message like that over and over for years. Many of you know what I mean - just think of how much Cantate's rendition of "Be Not Afraid" seeps into your consciousness when anxiety is starting to creep in. Or, for those of you that were here in the Pastor Kathleen days, doesn't "Glory Be!" Pop out of your mouth unexpectedly when God's presence makes itself happily known?

Repetition of important messages like that makes a lasting impression in our minds and hearts. For me, I learned God is Joy. God wants us to be happy. And, many times we can find a silver lining even in the darkest of times. It's not an easy thing to remember in the midst of profound grief, disillusionment, or fear but sometimes it's just the light at the end of the tunnel promising happier days ahead.

Let Your Gentleness Be Evident to All.

As I consider Mr. Rogers one of my all time favorite role models, I feel like I could write about this line forever, but I'll spare you that! In a world that too often equates strength with power over other people and where showing kindness is often seen as a sign of weakness, I find these words to validate the core of who many gentle souls try to be to the world every day. Gentleness is not something to be stripped out of people so they can be seen as strong, it's something we're told here to share freely. I hope it's something that is experienced as inviting people into relationship, both with us as a church and into personal relationship with God.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition, bring your request to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your heart and minds in Christ Jesus.

I can be a bit of an over-thinker. On good days, that makes me conscientious. On not so good days, that means I can let myself worry too much, especially about those things that are truly out of my control. Maybe that resonates with some of you too? During those hard times, this is the verse I turn to over and over again to help me feel a sense of peace. For me, sharing my rational and irrational worries with God means I'm not carrying that burden alone. And, remembering that God is way smarter than me and has never let me down in the past 50 years helps to get me to that place where the light of peace starts to break through the anxiety.

Don't you just love that it calls out both heart and mind here too? God totally gets it. We need that peace both to calm the worry in our hearts and to interrupt those obsessive thoughts that add fuel to the fire. Then, we can experience the true joy that having God on our side can bring.

By Courtney Aberle

12/21/24 - Day 21

1 Peter 1:6-9

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

End of Week Reflection - Joy

You've encountered insights into the theme of joy this week in worship and through the devotions. Now you are invited to reflect on all you have heard and read, especially in light of this passage. How do you experience joy? How do you share joy with others? In what ways does joy deepen your faith?

Take a moment and think about what words or phrases or images stand out to you from the scriptures and devotions of this week. What thoughts and inspirations have warmed your soul? Write down these words of joy or draw a picture that represents them below. Then, pray for that sense of joy to be more present in your life and in our world.

12/22/24 - Day 22

Galatians 5:22-25

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.

The fruit of the spirit is certainly something we should cultivate in our own lives, and I hope you reflect on how you are living a life based on each of these values. I invite you to take a moment and pray about how you have lived out the fruit of the Spirit, and how you can make these values more a part of your life.

You can use this guide, based on the practice of breath prayer, if it is helpful:

For the first 30 seconds, sit comfortably and plant your feet squarely on the ground. Let any stray thoughts slip through your mind and out into God's care.

Then, with each inhale and exhale, work through each fruit of the Spirit like this:

Inhale: The Spirit is love.

Exhale: Let me be love.

Inhale: The Spirit is joy.

Exhale: Let me be joy.

Inhale: The Spirit is peace.

Exhale: Let me be peace.

Inhale: The Spirit is patient.

Exhale: Let me be patient.

Inhale: The Spirit is kind.

Exhale: Let me be kind.

Inhale: The Spirit is generous.

Exhale: Let me be generous.

Inhale: The Spirit is faithful.

Exhale: Let me be faithful.

Inhale: The Spirit is gentle.

Exhale: Let me be gentle.

Inhale: The Spirit has self-control.

Exhale: Let me have self-control.

For the final 30 seconds, breathe naturally and readjust to the day before you.

If you are interested in spending more time with this passage, I invite you to do the same breath prayer, but this time focus on how you see the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of those around you, and give a prayer of thanks for the people who inspire you to bear these fruits.

12/23/24 - Day 23

1 John 4:7-12

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. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Reflection:

In 1 John 4:7-12, we are reminded that love originates from God because God is love. This truth reshapes how we understand love—it's not merely an emotion or a human achievement, but a divine gift and calling. The passage highlights the depth of God's love, made visible through Jesus Christ, who was sent into the world so that we might live through Him. This sacrificial love is not based on our worthiness but on God's grace, freely given even when we were undeserving.

When we love one another, we reflect God's presence in our lives. True love, modeled after God's example, is active, selfless, and sacrificial. It seeks the good of others without expecting anything in return. By loving others, we allow God's love to be perfected in us, fulfilling its purpose of transforming lives and revealing His character to the world.

Let this passage challenge us to look beyond superficial or conditional expressions of love. Instead, may we embody the deep, unconditional love that flows from God. When we love as He does, we become living testimonies of His presence and His redeeming work in the world.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for showing us what true love looks like through Jesus Christ. Teach me to love others as You have loved me—selflessly, sacrificially, and unconditionally. Let my actions and words reflect Your love, so others may see You through me. Perfect Your love in my heart, Lord, and help me be a vessel of Your grace and goodness. In Jesus' name, Amen.

By Jolene Beesley

12/24/24 - Day 24

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

End of Week Reflection - Love

You've encountered insights into the theme of love this week in worship and through the devotions. Now you are invited to reflect on all you have heard and read, especially in light of this passage. How do you experience love? How do you share love with others? In what ways does love deepen your faith?

Take a moment and think about what words or phrases or images stand out to you from the scriptures and devotions of this week. What thoughts and inspirations have warmed your soul? Write down these words of love or draw a picture that represents them below. Then, pray for that sense of love to be more present in your life and in our world.

12/25/24 - 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!

Luke 2:8-20

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.

Merry Christmas!