



2021
Zoar Lutheran Church
Advent Devotional

Welcome to the 2021 Advent Devotional booklet.

In all my years of singing, I think my most favorite song is “Joy in the Morning.” Whether with a church choir of 12-15 people or the Lutheran Choral Association choir of 125, the song is wonderful. It is quick. It is happy. The promise is awesome.

“There will be joy in the morning on that day.”

“There will be peace and contentment evermore.”

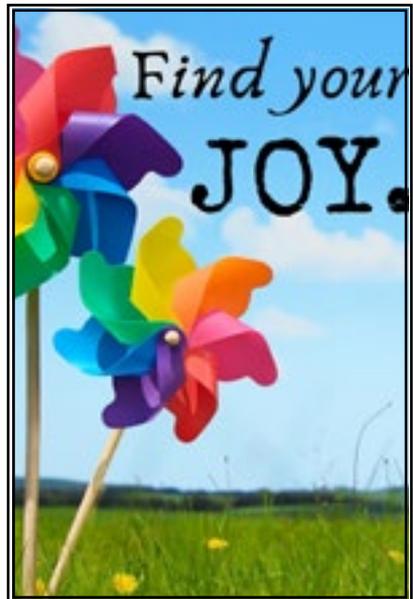
“There will be love and forgiveness everywhere.”

How can we not celebrate the promises? Such is the promise of life with our heavenly Father.

Join me this Advent season in finding your reasons for joy here and now.

God bless you all.
Pat Parker

P.S. You can hear my favorite song on You Tube. Look up “Joy in the Morning” by Natalie Sleeth.



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Sunday, November 28

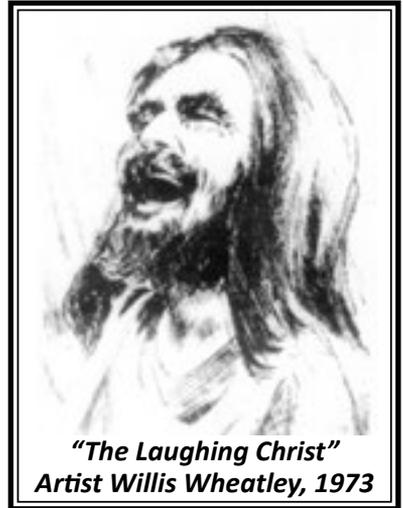
Psalm 16:11

“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

When I think of the word joy, a fond memory comes to mind.

Years ago, Mike, a beloved colleague of mine, walked up to a wall in his office, took down his personal picture of “The Laughing Christ” and gave it to me noting the joy the picture always brought me.

When I hesitated to accept his gift, he said it gave him great joy to give it to me. I will never forget Mike’s generosity and joyful gesture.



***“The Laughing Christ”
Artist Willis Wheatley, 1973***

When I ask myself where I tend to find joy, it is in relationships with my family and friends, hanging out with my dog, listening to music, and spending time in nature. I also find joy trusting our Lord is walking side by side with me and knowing He always has my back!

Where do you find joy? I ask you to prayerfully spend some time with that question then practice it and share it. Each night ask the Lord to guide your heart and actions. Give thanks and evaluate the day. Did you take time to marvel at even those ordinary things we tend to overlook in the midst of our busy lives?

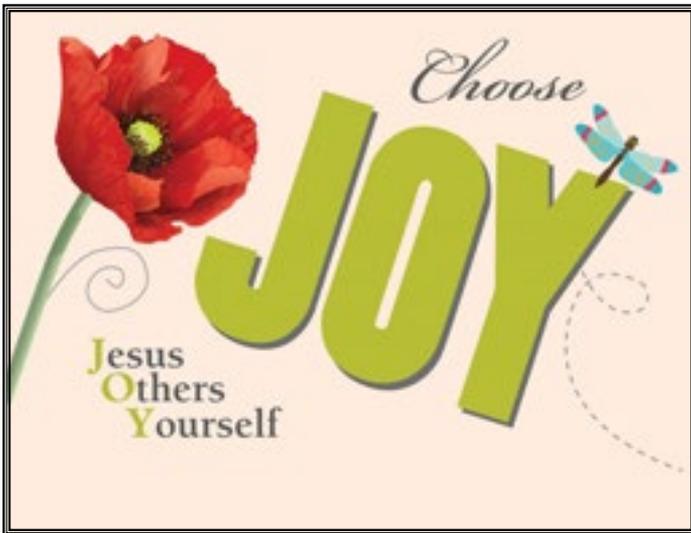
The path of life isn't always fun or easy, but rest assured, we are not alone. Our Lord Jesus Christ is always with us and he wants us to experience joy and confidence in the eternal pleasures at His right hand.

I conclude with a prayer written by Reverend David Platt.

Prayer: Oh God, we praise you for this kind of life, saved from sin, restored to you, in your presence where there's fullness of joy, where we're just able to take and eat. Oh God, lead us in this path of life today. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

Oh—and one more thing...Don't forget it's physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy to throw back your head and have a good belly laugh!

Jacque Corey



Monday, November 29

Psalm 51:12

“Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.”

This verse is part of a beautiful communion liturgy that you may recall from the past. It proclaims such an assurance and comfort for each of us as we reflect on our personal and collective adversities of the past couple years.

The challenges have become even greater this past year as the effects of climate change impact us directly. Many of us have family and friends who have experienced devastating issues. Those along with the ongoing pandemic have given us new perspectives and appreciation of our neighbors near and far as well as our planet.

Each morning with the light of a new day, we are showered with God’s abundant blessings. We start anew with gratefulness and joy to frame the day ahead. Looking through our rose-colored glasses, we see more clearly how we may respond to opportunities that the spirit may send our way.

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for this new advent season, for the joy, the light, the grace, and the spirit that greets us each new day so that we may see and respond in service to You!

Myron Mohr

Tuesday, November 30

Job 38:6-7

“On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?”

According to the classic New Oxford Annotated study Bible, the Book of Job was composed between 6,000 and 9,000 years ago. The Encyclopedia Britannica describes that period as the “Neolithic.” In other words, the story of Job dates to the late Stone Age: villages and cultivated fields instead of hunting and gathering, but no bronze yet.

My passage comes from near the end of the Book of Job, at the beginning of God’s first speech to Job. Job and his prehistoric friends have spent most of 37 verses pondering, lamenting and rationalizing to each other over a very modern problem: why it could be that God allows bad things to happen to good people. Job, who has been unfailingly righteous but has endured devastating suffering nonetheless, wants to state his case to God and get some answers. By the time we get to chapter 38, God is finally ready to engage, but Job gets more than he bargained for.

Instead of presenting Job with a code of rules and regulations for avoiding suffering, God paints a dramatic landscape in words to remind Job of all the magnificence that God has created. God marches Job past images of all the wonders of the earth, barbing this portrait with reminders that Job’s own role and power in Creation are miniscule. Is Job the one who keeps the oceans in their bounds? Has Job seen the dwelling places of light and darkness? Has Job been to the storehouses where snow and hail are kept? Is it Job who can send forth lightning and thunderbolts?

In other words, God responds to Job's self-absorbed questions about earthly justice by "zooming out," reminding Job that God created the heavens, the earth, and everything in them. God, the master builder, measured and laid the earth's foundation and sank its pillars:

³⁸ Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

² "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"

³ Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

⁴ "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵ "Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?"

Finally, when the earth's capstone had been set and God's task was done, the stars themselves burst into a chorus of song, dawn broke, and the stars shouted for joy as the newly fashioned earth was first revealed in the light of the sun:

⁶ "On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone

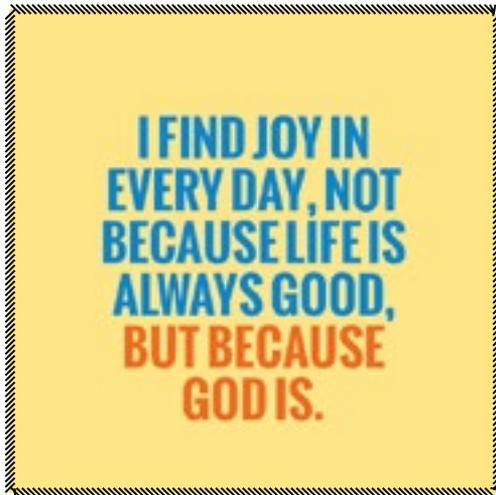
⁷ when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

Is this image of the first-ever moment of joy some kind of outlier in a speech that seems to focus on God's grandeur and on putting poor Job in his place? I don't think it's an accident or a Stone-Age editorial slip-up. Verse 7 proclaims the immense power of joy as part of the force and energy of God's creation. Joy has been there from the beginning. It is a gift that lights up the world, and it's there for us to tap into anew every day. We have to listen to God, and sometimes God needs to use God's booming "outdoor voice" to get through to us. When we do listen, God will lift up our eyes from ourselves and our cares,

and allow God’s joy to flow through us like the singing of the stars. We can sense the power that holds back the oceans and casts thunderbolts. Revitalized, we are ready to do God’s will in our lives.

Prayer: God, help us to listen for your voice, still and small or thunderous. Draw us up from our suffering and infuse us with your power so that we can turn our lives toward others in need.

Robert Manicke



Wednesday, December 1

1 Corinthians 13:6

“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”

This particular theme is especially tough for me. The truth is, I am not a morning person. My first thoughts upon waking in the morning are, “Oh great. I am awake. Why am I awake?” My mind begins making endless lists of what I need to do today, what I did not get completed yesterday and, what I have put off for so long that it needs to jump to the top of the list.

So what brings me joy...

As with everyone, it's been a rough couple of years. Illness, death, pain, stress, and grief have been my constant companions. How do you find your joy in the midst of all this oppression on the heart? I find joy in the sunset; it signifies that I made it through another day. With my children living in other cities and states, I find joy in the Snapchat photos and videos of their lives and finding TikTok videos that I know will make them laugh when I share it. I find joy getting lost in a novel, TV shows and movies, and a few games on my phone.

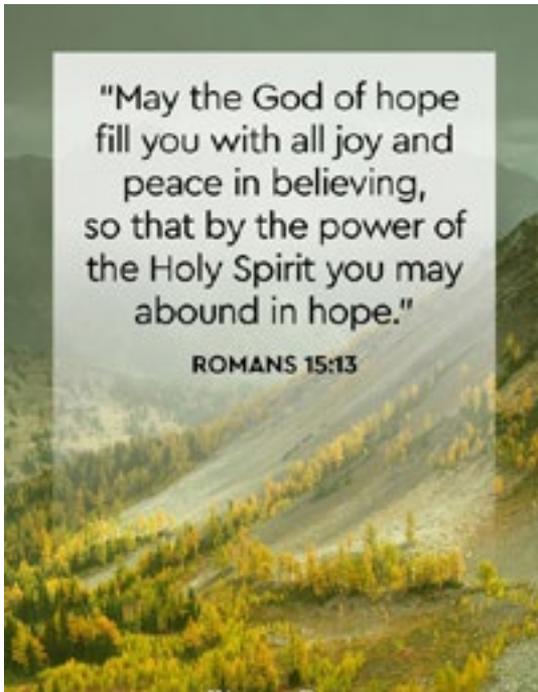
Joy...Love...Truth...

The truth is, I'm not finding a lot of joy in my life right now. I have the love of my family and friends. I strive to do what I can and what I should. I feel a sense of completion from taking tasks off my list. And I'm hoping to find joy during this Advent season when the sun goes down and I can light up the garlands that will decorate my house. The love of our family that may have one more Christmas together will certainly bring joy.

May we all find love and joy this Advent, even if social media strangers are the light you've been looking for.

Prayer: God, joy can be hard to find when times are difficult and we are filled with stress, but we know you are there in spite of our sadness. Father, open our eyes to see the true light so that we can see the joy around us and be the joy for others to see. Amen.

Jennifer Benz



Thursday, December 2

Isaiah 51:11

“Those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

With hope and courage and joy
Comes the morning.
God’s consolation, comfort
Freely expressed from him
Amidst trials and pain.
All eyes on him,
Not circumstances surrounding the day
Comes joy in the morning.
As Israelites seek return to Zion
A restoration is now sought.
Have joy in the morning.
No gladness taken away.
Joy is there to obtain,
Hold on to, to last.
He is our delight,
Our joy in the morning.

“Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus” by Helen H. Lemmel

Turn your eyes upon Jesus

Look full in his wonderful face

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim

In the light of his glory and grace.

Prayer: Dear God of all and everlasting, you are our joy in the morning. You overshadow all earthly things. As we focus on you, we give you praise and glory. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Valerie Coy



Friday, December 3

Luke 10:20

“However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Every morning we get up and look towards our day making plans. Maybe complete a project. Even better, perhaps visit friends and family. How about a trip to go hiking or fishing? So many opportunities for me! We feel joy when we make plans to do things we want to do. And well we should. Life is lived every day and the choices we make can be a great source of happiness. I rejoice in my choices - especially when they involve family, friends, and activities.

Life sometimes feels like everything is so good in the here and now. Luke, however, gives us even more to rejoice. He reminds us that our names are written in heaven - not that we have planned our way there, or made choices in some temporal way - but rather that our names are written there. What a gift to rejoice! We have not made the spirits submit to us - we have been given a gift to be discovered.

Prayer: Father - Allow us to remember the gift you have given and to rejoice not only in our lives here but also to rejoice that you have made a place for us. Amen.

Noel Hygelund

Saturday, December 4

Psalm 119:111

“Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.”

The last year and half we have looked through dark glass of wildfires and Covid and all the negative stuff that was and is happening. A little over a year ago I was reading an article by Jonathan Kesterbaum. And this short story was something that I wanted to share.

A young couple moved into a new neighborhood. The next morning while they were eating breakfast, the young woman saw her neighbor hanging the wash outside.

“That laundry is not very clean; she doesn’t know how to wash correctly. Perhaps she needs better laundry soap.”

Every time her neighbor hung her washing out to dry, the young woman made the same comments.

A month later, the woman was surprised to see a nice clean wash on the line and said to her husband, “Look, she finally learned how to wash correctly. I wonder who taught her this?”

The husband replied, “No one. I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows.”

And so it is with life... What we see when watching others depends on the clarity of the window through which we look. So don’t be too quick to judge others, especially if your perspective of life is clouded by anger, jealousy, negativity, or unfulfilled desires.

“Judging a person does not define who they are. It defines who you are.”

Prayer: God help us look through clean glass and find Joy. Amen.

Dave Wichman





Sunday, December 5

Psalm 66: 1-2

“Shout with joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious!”

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to “shout with joy to God” when everything in our lives is going really well? Of course you have. Me, too. Singing and shouting praises to God’s gloriousness is easy and fun, when life is easy and fun.

But what about when things are sad or challenging or downright awful? I’d have to say that “praising God gloriously” at THOSE times has not been my “go to.” Praying? Sure! Absolutely! Darkness comes waltzing in, and I’m on my knees, praying for deliverance, and strength, and inner calm, etc. Me. Asking God for stuff. Always Asking. To be honest, until recently, it never really occurred to me to just up and sing and praise when life’s yucky and messy, especially when I’ve got the mess smeared all over myself.

Then my health took an “interesting” turn at the beginning of 2021. I didn’t really have time to process what was happening, as it was all happening SO FAST. I was churning out the recordings of the worship music we’d need for the services that I couldn’t be present for after surgery. And those hymns were hymns of praise that we’d already planned BEFORE I knew that I was gonna get a cancer diagnosis. There I was, in the midst of whatever-the-heck was growing in my body, singing Songs of Praise to our Creator with all the rest of creation! It’s my job. Thankfully, it’s my job.

While singing and playing for the recordings, I began to notice that I’d stopped feeling even remotely anxious about my situation. I felt caught up in a curious loop of loving energy, the likes of which I’d never felt before.

When my father's health took an interesting and shadowy turn in April, a month after my own health anomaly, there I was...again...showing up for our services and leading songs of praise. Flowing love and delight toward the Creator of all things, whose love is constantly, unerringly flowing to me!! To all of us! To all creation! My fear left again. It would seem that fear cannot enter that loop of loving energy.

Many people, who I love, died this year. To be the musician who brings music into such a sacred space is an honor that I take very seriously. My understanding of what it means to praise God's gloriousness during THESE times has deepened this year. Entering into the practice of praising God has become an essential daily, nearly hourly, practice for me these past few months. Playing the piano at a memorial service has always been a relatively easy thing for me to do. Singing has proved to be otherwise, at such times. Learning to offer up my voice in praise and joy, instead of grief or sadness, has brought new meaning to my gifts as a musician/singer.

My practice of praise looks like this: Sometimes, I sing. Sometimes, I just laugh. Sometimes, I get quiet and just direct my thoughts until I'm vibrating joy. I now notice how the trees are nearly constantly dancing in delight above my head as I'm walking in my neighborhood; how the clouds shift, and merge, and roll joyfully in the sky; how the birds are playing and singing constantly. And I join in.

This is creation praising its Creator, and in turn, flowing that amazing loop of loving energy through which fear and sadness cannot pass.

And now, when I feel that shadows are descending, I begin... not to pray, but to praise. For joy comes with the morning. This Advent, we wait, eagerly, for the coming of Jesus. And in the meantime, we sing and shout, with all the earth, praises to God. And we get that crazy, amazing loop of love flowing in all directions.

Prayer: Almighty God, if there is ever a time for us to shout for joy to You, sing the glory of Your Name, and make Your praise glorious, the Advent season is definitely the time, as we focus on Your incomprehensible love for us, through the gift of your only son, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Mel Kubik



Monday, December 6

Philippians 4:4

“Rejoice in the Lord. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

Morning has always been my favorite time of day. One wakes up rested and ready for new things. The air is so fresh and the sunrise shows promise of another day whether its sunshine or rain. I just know the Lord is still in the Heavens and all is right with the world. The earth is renewing itself!

Of course the feeling doesn't last all day as the problems of the world close in on the news. I've always slept on any problems I have and mostly find the solution in the morning or at least it's not as bad as I thought.

I find peace and comfort in the little things of life: the birds flying around and singing in the early morning; the deer feeding and little critters running around in the field behind my house; all the greenery freshening up now that it's rained. All these things the Lord has created give a quiet contentment to my life.

It has been fulfilling now that I am retired to do some work for the quilting group and help the less fortunate people in our area. That brings me happiness and contentment.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please continue to let me see the joy and peace in the sunrise in the morning. And when the sun goes down let me find contentment in what I have accomplished. Amen.

Barbara House

Tuesday, December 7

Psalm 96:11-12

“Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them.”

Even though you are reading these words as our weather becomes colder and wetter, the seas stormier, and the fields bare, we rejoice in the hope of Jesus’ birth which we will soon celebrate. We rejoice in the hope that the sun will rise again and that God will show us the way to eternal joy. Jesus comes to share God’s joy with His creation and to show us how to share that joy with others. Our joy will be full when we allow Him to guide us as we share God’s love with others by our actions.

You are a fortunate one. You are already loved by God. Share your good fortune and God’s love with those less fortunate. If you have found the way to God’s love, then be like Jesus and show the way out of the wilderness by your loving actions. Then the heavens will rejoice, the earth will be glad, and the sea will resound with joy for you and your salvation.

“I tell you...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Luke 15:7

Prayer: Lord, I regret my sins and shortcomings. Help me as I stumble along the way to heaven’s rejoicing. Thank you.

John Manley

Wednesday, December 8

Psalm 2:11

“Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.”

With the pandemic in the second year, we are still apprehensive about resuming our normal life, and it feels like this is the new normal. Just when we thought we could go back to life like it was in spring, the new variant hit hard and we are back to being fearful. We turn to the Lord, and ask why, then hear on the news that this is the pandemic of the unvaccinated, and wonder why again. Trust in the Lord and in our medical teams seems to be the root cause of this year’s resurgence. On top of this, we hear about people shooting one another, along with destruction of property. Yet in all the bad news we hear, there is still kindness going on.

I read about acts of kindness each day: someone pays for groceries when a wallet is left at home, someone helps an older person when they see them struggling in their day to day life. Animals are being rescued from horrendous lives, and kind people are taking them in and giving them love.

These stories give me joy that the Lord is still watching over us, and guiding us to see the need for help, and I rejoice to know that he has not forsaken us, even though some of us have fallen away from his teachings and are committing acts of violence against each other.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please watch over all of us, and help us see the love you have for us so that we may help one another. Guide the people that have fallen from your word, and make them see the terrible hurt they are inflicting on each other so they may be brought back to loving one another. Amen.

Penny Kissner

Thursday, December 9

***The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans 12:15
“Rejoice with those who rejoice: mourn with those who
mourn”.***

This verse is part of Paul’s instructions as to how fellow believers should interact with one another to promote unity within their community. These instructions given thousands of years ago are still relevant today. As an example, when a child is born, we invite family and friends to rejoice with us and we give thanks for God’s awesome gift of creating new life. Similarly, when a loved one is lost, we gather as a community of faith and with God’s promised participation we look for the peace that is beyond human understanding.

So today, join me in recalling a major event which has occurred in your life. Try to remember the feeling of being loved and sensing the presence of God’s Holy Spirit. We are all children of an awesome God.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, help us to recognize and respond in love to the opportunities to join others in their rejoicing and mourning. Amen.

Curt Hovland

Friday, December 10

Psalms 30:5

“For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night but rejoicing comes in the morning.”

“He gets angry once in a while, but across a lifetime there is only love. The nights of crying your eyes out give way to days of laughter.” Psalm 30:5 from *The Message Bible*

Whenever I read a verse, I like to look at different translations of the verse. It helps me to understand it more deeply. Sometimes I read a different translation and think “Oh, that isn’t what I was getting at all” and I reflect on why that might be and how it changes my perspective. Every Sunday, I read along in my Bible during the lessons and underline one verse that jumps out at me. Sometimes it’s a verse we all know, but oftentimes it’s not. After service, I write that verse in a journal in both the *NRSV* translation and *The Message* translation. Periodically, I read through the journal to see what has spoken to me and reflect on why it stood out at that moment and what it is leading me to. It’s like a weekly Bible verse journey through my mind. It helps me see all the blips in my life radar – the highs, the lows, and, generally, the straight line of sameness of everyday life.

Life is a lot of repetition. You get up, get dressed, go to work or volunteer, come home, make sure you’ve eaten, rinse, and repeat. So, when the straight line of your life radar blips up or down, you notice. The sadness from the death of a friend, the joy from a new relationship. These are big blips, the “once in a while” blips the Psalmist mentions. We notice, we remember. However, there are a lot of little blips every day. Blips that are so small that the line appears to not change at all. The pricked finger, the hummingbird at the feeder, the ins and outs of daily life. If we truly look at them, we will see that they trend towards

joy, towards love across a lifetime. The challenge is to focus on the joy and not the pain. Pain is easy to see and feel, but the joy is there.

Last summer, I found my literal “Joy”. It’s a plaster cast of the word that I painted at VBS as a child. It has always reminded me to look for joy every day. To look beyond the pain, the sadness, the normalcy of everyday life and to notice the small blips of joy that God has infused into our world. To try to see the best in people, to forgive, to laugh, to smile. I invite you during this season of Advent to look for the everyday joy. The big blip of Christmas is coming, but the small blips of joy are already here.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of everyday joy. For the small blips of happiness that help us to move through the large and small blips of sadness. Help us to make your joy our focus today and every day. Amen.*

Karen Brennan



Saturday, December 11

1 Peter 1:8

“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an expressible and glorious joy.”

This verse reminds me of the wind. We can't see it but we know it is there. Sometimes it is just a gentle touch, ruffling our hair or our shirt sleeve. Other times it is powerful and strong, bending trees to the ground or toppling buildings. It is the same as when Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.”

The Spirit of God works in the same way. So, we are filled with His presence. He whispers gently or shouts out to us that He is there. We know with certainty that we are not alone but children of the Heavenly Father. We can be sure of the salvation of our souls. This promise of God fills us with joy that is unending.

Prayer: Our heavenly Father, we rejoice and are thankful for the promise and assurance that the Holy Spirit is always with us. Let us experience your glorious joy. As Jesus said to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe”. Amen.

Sally Boonstra



Sunday, December 12

Psalm 30:11

“You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.”

As humans, we all suffer bouts of sadness, disappointment, pain, grief, fear, and worry. In the time of Covid 19, we may experience these feelings more often and with greater intensity. When we experience these feelings, it seems that life slowly grinds to a halt. We might wonder if things will ever get better or “back to normal”. Has God forgotten us or stopped listening?

We have five amazing grandchildren. The four youngest live close and we have spent a lot of time with them since they were born. When Covid 19 reared its ugly head, we as a family decided we needed to limit exposure for each other. This meant no touching, not being in each other’s homes, wearing masks, and maintaining six feet distance from each other. As a grandma who loves having a lap full of grandchildren, kisses, tickles, and snuggles, this was torture. I grieved the loss of our closeness and my inability to demonstrate my love to these children through my touch. Our grandchildren missed it too. Lincoln, who was 8 and our rule follower, suggested he and I go around the side of the house where no one could see us to sneak a hug. After some discussion, we decided that sneaking a hug wouldn’t be fair to the others and breaking a promise. Soon after, our family decided Memorial Day we would relax the no touching rule; hugs and snuggles would be allowed. To have the children come running and launch into my arms with shouts of glee and happiness brought tears to my eyes and joy to my heart. Now we don’t take our closeness and ability to hold a hand, kiss a head, or snuggle at bedtime for granted.

I realize this challenge seems minor in the scope of things when compared to serious illness, death of loved ones, loss of homes or jobs. However, I am reminded that sometimes it is the small things that can bring us joy in the midst of our wailing if we pay attention. A bite of your favorite food; a beautiful view; a phone call from a friend; a negative Covid test; a hug from a grandchild. Recognizing these small, joyful things can help us shed our sackcloth and embrace the joy God wants for all of us.

Prayer: Dear God. Thank you for the joy filled moments you bring to us. Help us to recognize them, embrace them, and rejoice in them. Amen.

Peggy Noles



Monday, December 13

Isaiah 61:10a

“I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God.”

In the October 2020 Living Lutheran Elise Seyfried wrote an article titled “A pilgrimage at home.” She wrote “We can and should think of our whole lives as a pilgrimage. We are each on a journey that will end by coming home to God. Our paths may look strikingly different, and that’s fine. What matters is living with awareness, with intention—not just going through the motions.” This I believe applies to Joy.

My favorite way to rejoice is through music as it reaches in and helps us express this and share with others. I have sung in choirs for as long as I can remember. My family tells stories about me as a little kid sitting with my Mom’s hymnal singing. It seemed like a big book and I couldn’t read yet. I have it now and it is smaller and worn. In the front Mom wrote her birthdate, baptismal date, and her confirmation date. Some of the pages had been torn and repaired. There were some scribbles too. Never was I scolded or discouraged or told to stop.

Music invites you in as you sing scripture and sing a prayer. This is a gift and a powerful connection with each other. How many times have you left worship with a song on your heart? Sometimes humming it for few days. We all have a difference on what those days look like but we can all experience the Joy. “On our way rejoicing as we forward move, Hearken to our praises, O thou God of love!”

Prayer: Dear Lord let us offer a prayer of thanksgiving for our gifts of music and for our music directors and teachers as they share their time and talent. Bless them and give them strength.

Lovingly and respectfully,
Donna Martz

Tuesday, December 14

Isaiah 35:10

“They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads, Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

We (God’s creation) have been held hostage in our own bubbles because of Covid for over a year now. I know I have never experienced anything like this in my lifetime.

This pandemic as we all know has been more than a challenge. Lost jobs, lost wages, lost homes, and we have been separated from loved ones. We watched while hundreds of thousands of people died from Covid. Now we have a variant of Covid. We have been told by medical professionals what it will take to rid ourselves of this disease – A vaccine, a blessing from God! We could be with family and friends again, continue our routines of church, appointments, school, etc. After all God gave us doctors, scientists, people of intelligence to create the vaccines that will protect us all. We just have to come together, care for one another, and do our part.

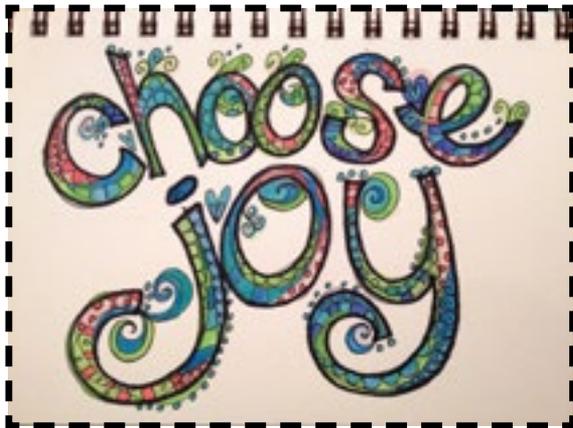
We, as followers of God, know what Jesus would expect us to love our neighbor and care for ALL, sharing what we have or what we can do. By helping in times of trouble, distress, or loss, by getting vaccinated to protect ourselves as well as our neighbors is loving thy neighbor.

I have seen so many people standing up and speaking out for those who are oppressed still today. Thousands of people take to the streets to speak out against social injustice; BLM, LGBTQ, women’s rights, voting rights. It is like our nation has gone back hundreds of years. Yet so many are not afraid to step forward and speak out. I feel like God’s hand is leading us, showing us we can do anything when we trust in him. He is with us and for us!

So despite the situation our country is in, and it does seem dire at times, we have our loving God, Abba, Father watching over us and leading the way. We have, and will continue to have, singing and everlasting joy as long as we turn to the one who is LOVE. Gladness and joy will overtake us and sorrow and sighing will flee away. We have joy and gladness now. I thank God for his love every day!

Prayer: Abba, I thank you for the joy I experience daily despite the inequity of your precious creation. We need you daily to guide us to show love to all so we can be what you have intend us to be. Amen.

Pam Hygelund



Wednesday, December 15

Psalm 118:24

“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

This is how the Pastor greeted us at my cousin’s graveside service. This set the tone for the celebration of a long life, well lived.

Each day we live is a gift from the Lord. We should begin it with rejoicing. This past almost two years has given us many reasons not to rejoice, the Pandemic, Wildfires and evacuation, ice storm and power outages as well as triple digit heat. Yet we came through it all and were given many days to rejoice.

If we start each morning ruing the day before us, we have set a tone of negativity. However if we rejoice in each day (no matter how bad we may anticipate coming events), we have opened the door to the great things the Lord may have in store for us.

We have to notice the good things. They may not at first be apparent, but they are there. We just need to be open to them.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for each new day. Help us to appreciate it and use it to the utmost of our ability. Amen.

Ardeth Woods

Thursday, December 16

Isaiah 55:12

“You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

We are loved by an awesome God who has forgiven our sins through the death and resurrection of His son, Jesus, who died on the cross that we would have eternal life with Him. What joy this good news brings to our weary hearts. What peace we find in His Word.

We awake each morning hoping for a new day to dwell in His love and grace. We share this great joy with God’s creation as even the mountains and hills and all the trees of the field join in praising Him.

When I walk through the fields of the nursery, I can see breathtaking Mt. Hood and the Molalla hills and I can imagine their song. Add in the sound of all the trees clapping and that is a very loud, joyful noise. Next time you go to the mountains or through the fields, listen and imagine the praises you’ll hear.

Prayer: Dear Lord of the mountains and Lord of the fields, you are an awesome God. May we join with your creation in praising you. Lead us to listen to your Word as it brings us your peace and joy. Encourage us as we respond to your gift of grace and thank you by leading lives full of kindness and compassion. Amen.

Cindy Miles



Friday, December 17

Psalm 43:4

“Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight.”

Each morning is a new beginning filled with hope and the promise that God is near. What a joyful feeling that should give each and every one of us. He has set the sun in the sky and on most days we are able to enjoy the warmth and strength that it offers. The morning finds most of us refreshed and ready to face the day with renewed optimism and faith in ourselves and those around us. We may be headed off for work or maybe we are retired. In any case, most of us are able to set our goals for the day and hopefully complete them by the time we are again ready to retire for the night.

Joy is a beautiful thing!!! We can find joy in our family, in our faith and in our outlook on life. God is always at hand and he is there for the long haul. Of course there are days that are filled with stress and tension and disappointment, but if we turn to God and share our doubts, fears and burdens with him, we can experience the joy of knowing that he is there to help us.

I find joy in nature and in seeing the seasons change and the trees, plants, animals, and all of God’s creation burst forth in spring, flourish in summer, wane in autumn, and retreat in winter. What a joyful experience to see God in action!!!

I find joy in the birth, growth, and development of babies into children, and finally to adulthood. I have lived long enough to have witnessed this many times. We are all still children in God’s eyes and I am sure that God finds joy in the creation of each of us. “Joy in the morning”!!!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for the joy you have given to each and every one of your children. Help us, dear Lord, to recognize the joy that you want us to receive. May we continue to find joy as we celebrate the birth of your Blessed son Jesus Christ during this Holy Advent Season. Amen.

Betty Lundsten



Saturday, December 18

Nehemiah 8:10b

“Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Every day is a new start a new beginning, if there is sadness in your life ask God to lift it.

Start each day with a prayer. Ask God to give you strength to get through the bad times.

Thank God for the beauty of the good times.

We all have good and bad if we just recognize it.

Some days the sun is bright and beautiful.

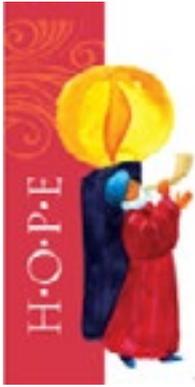
Some days the rain falls down.

We need both and we need to be thankful for both.

Help us to remember that.

Prayer: Thank you Lord for the joy of each dawn. Give us the strength to get through each day. Give us the strength to help others; fill our hearts with love and forgiveness. In his name, Amen.

Joyce Laitinen



Sunday, December 19

Luke 1:46-49

“And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.”

Imagine where Mary was, in her life, during this proclamation that her “soul glorifies the Lord” and her “spirit rejoices in God”, her Savior. She was a young woman, pregnant before her wedding vows. Probably shunned by her friends and community. She has traveled to visit her relative Elizabeth, possibly to seek counsel from an older, also pregnant, friend. Elizabeth greets her and asks “Why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord visits me?”

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, says “And Mary said, I’m bursting with God-news. I’m dancing the song of my Savior God. God took one good look at me and look what happened – I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!”

When was the last time you were bursting with “God-news”? When has your soul last “glorified the Lord”? Can you imagine yourself “dancing the song of your Savior God?” What does that dance look like? Does your spirit rejoice in God, your Savior?

Mary had many opportunities to doubt God’s plan for her and Joseph. But she chose to rejoice in being chosen regardless of her “humble state as a servant”.

How often do we question and doubt and worry over God’s choices for us, rather than glorify the Lord and rejoice in being chosen by God for whatever the “great thing he has done” might be? Too often we turn to God when we are angry, frustrated,

hurt, or want Him to do something for us. In this season of Advent let us remind ourselves that we are called to give God the glory in all things.

In a Bible study from the Gather magazine, Luke 1:46-49 is summed up in this way:

“From Mary we learn to begin with praise, see the power in weakness, see our own lives within the larger picture of God’s work in the world and to see all things in the light of God’s promise.”

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Teach my soul to glorify you in all things. Teach my spirit to rejoice in you at all times. Teach me to sing Mary’s song of praise. Teach me to be “bursting with God-news. Amen.

JoAnn Rothi



Monday, December 20

Romans 15:13

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

This verse gave me fits! The whole concept of hope seemed like such a secular thing. “I hope it doesn’t rain while I am on my walk.” “I hope my grandson does well in his soccer game.” Hope seemed a step down from faith. For me, hope lacked the confidence of faith. Faith seemed more spiritual. The whole comparison of hope to faith got stuck in my brain and I dithered.

Well, what do you do when you have questions and need to research? I googled it! And oh my! Enlightenment!

The definition of hope in the Bible is “the confident expectation of what God has promised and His strength is in His faithfulness.” There is nothing wishy-washy about that!

And then, in a fashion that seems downright serendipitous, the Holy Spirit brought these promises to my attention.

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” Romans 12:12

“And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” Romans 5:5

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11

And, one of my favorites: “Those who put their 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.” Isaiah 40:31

May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace during this season of Advent as we await the arrival of the promised one, our Lord and Savior, in the form of the Baby Jesus, lying in that manger on Christmas morning.

Prayer: Dear Lord and Father, thank you for your faithfulness. May we find our joy every day knowing you are with us. Amen.

Pat Parker



Tuesday, December 21

Luke 1:44

“As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped with joy.”

Anyone who has ever loved or cared for another person knows what a great feeling it is to hear the sound of their voice. It's even better when the voice means they are present – in person! Of course, it's still wonderful even if it's on the phone, FaceTime, or on Zoom. Certainly with Covid complications, our in-person contact has been sorely limited. But the unique and beautiful sound of a particular beloved person's voice can truly lift your spirits. Many years ago, my youngest sister was in the hospital critically ill and very agitated. And then Mom arrived. Even in my sister's nearly comatose state, the minute our mother took Charis' hand and spoke to her, she became calm and peaceful.

In this verse from Luke, Elizabeth is thrilled to hear Mary's greeting as she arrives to stay with her—she's someone who will accept Mary's situation and offer love and support to her. Of course, Mary is carrying the Christ Child and Elizabeth's baby leaps for joy knowing this. The miracle of a baby sensing the love in the room, even in the womb, reminds us that God's grace is everywhere and wherever we are in this world.

Christmas is the culmination of all we have hoped for and listened for: a Savior who comes to offer a voice of compassion and hope and a promise of eternal life. As we speak and sing of Christ's arrival, may we know the sweet sound of his endless blessings for all of us. Blessed be his name in all the earth.

Prayer: Dear Loving Father, thank you for the gift of never-ending grace given to us in the person of Christ. May we feel and hear His presence in our lives as we celebrate the joy of Christmas. Amen.

Suzi Kaveckis



Wednesday, December 22

1 Peter 1:8

“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an expressible and glorious joy.”

Some years ago, I read the book “The Shack.” It is a sad, tragic story in one way, but the underlying theme is that with God, all things work for good. I loved the book, but its meaning was driven home to me even more when I saw the movie.

The character of God was portrayed by a black woman, the Holy Spirit by a Native American woman, and Jesus by a man of Middle Eastern descent. Each portrayal was true to the nature of God, Holy Spirit, and Jesus and all radiated love for the main character in his hour of distress.

I remember the Holy Spirit walking him through a wonderful field of wild flowers, depicting God’s glorious nature. Jesus talked with him by the lake and walked on the water to show him nothing was impossible with God. All throughout, God was encouraging him to see things through a different lens and believe that good things can come from bad. In the end, he found his joy.

In times like we have recently experienced, it can sometimes seem like there is no joy, but when you feel that way, look around. Joy is there! We’ve seen it in hotels opening up to people with no power in their homes and kitchens set up to feed victims of fire, flood, hurricanes, etc. Rainbows after the storm bring it. There are people rescuing animals from disasters and everyday situations of need. People clean garbage from streams, rivers, and oceans. And neighbors are helping neighbors wherever the need may be. Each experience is the unseen hand of God at work to bring joy both to the one receiving and the giver. Don’t

give up on joy. It is all around us...we just need to be open to receive it and in turn, share it.

I love these words from the song "I Know" by Big Daddy Weave:

And though my eyes have never seen You
I've seen enough to say
I know that You are good
I know that You are kind
I know that You are so much more
Than what I leave behind
I know that I am loved
I know that I am safe
Cause even in the fire to live is Christ, to die is gain
I know that You are good

I have not physically seen God like the man in the story, but as in the song, I've seen enough. I have seen Him in the love expressed by his children towards each other and His creation. Each experience brings me again to the wonder and glorious joy of His love.

Prayer: Dear God, after a challenging year, help us all to approach this Advent with open eyes to see not only the miracle and joy in the birth of your son, but the joy that surrounds us every day in simple and complex ways. Help us to spread that joy to those who need it. In Jesus name, Amen.

Donna Pottratz

Thursday, December 23

Luke 2:10

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.’ ”

In your mind’s eye, go to the fields where the Shepherds lay sleeping 2,000 years ago. The sheep were relaxed, glad for a break from the heat and exercise of the day; the shepherds had lain their beds on the grass, and were ruminating about their days as they drifted into exhausted sleep under a peaceful, deep sky sprinkled with stars. Suddenly the night sky framed the eruption of radiant light and the visage of a heavenly being appeared, startling them awake. The message delivered them was one of joy and a promise fulfilled. The joy that only the birth of their long-awaited Savior could bring.

Now, let’s talk about the dark, and more importantly, the LIGHT.

One summer, during a family reunion, my spelunking Auntie took multiple family members on a belly-crawling, tight-spaced experience through a cave. I chose not to go because the dark isn’t my friend. I certainly wasn’t going to crawl through a narrow, darker-than-night cave of maze-like tunnels not knowing when or if I would again see the light of day.

The outcome was that, after hours of exploring in the cold, damp confines of the black cave, my adventuring family members crawled from the mouth of the cave with fresh, blinking eyes that were seeing the light of day with renewed appreciation. The darkness that had exhilarated them, overwhelmed, and frightened them was pierced by the beauty of the daylight they had returned to.

I’m thinking that the soupy darkness of that cave can be likened to the unknowns of our lives, and current worldly

circumstances. The exit from the cave into the sun-drenched daylight is representative of the Heavenly illumination of all that is good around us. More than that, the joy brought on by the adrenaline rush and excitement of experiencing something new is like the contagion of joy the shepherds would have felt as they were suddenly surprised and greeted with the news of our Saviors' birth.

Christ is our light. I can't say that I would change my mind and enter the dark of any cave willingly, but I can admit that the thought of that inky darkness awakens a new awareness of how desperate I am to have Christ's illuminating presence with me every second of my life. Are you afraid of the dark? Fear not for the 'dawn is just in sight'. Christ has overcome all evil and is the salvation of our world. He is our joy in the morning, every morning and night, without fail.

Prayer: Lord, please illuminate the nights of my life, bring wondering to the dark times and joy in my mornings. I know that it is in the darkest times of my life that your light can shine the brightest. You are the giver of new beginnings, my salvation and my comforter. I thank you, Lord, for your love. Amen.

"Joy comes in the morning. The darkest hour means dawn is just in sight." (from "Joy Comes in the Morning" by Joy Gardner)

Amy Aamodt



Friday, December 24

Matthew 2:9-10

“After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.”

When I think about my life I can always see joy in the gifts of family, friends, and community. During the dark times, these same gifts bring hope and loving people who are traveling with us. We know that without darkness there would be no light. We also know that whether that darkness comes from a pandemic or from a difficult time in our lives, there will be light and joy when it is over. Joy does come in the morning!

When Herod sent the Wisemen, or Magi, to find the Baby, his intentions were evil. He knew that people believed that this Baby was the Son of God. He was frightened that this was a threat to him as King and planned to kill the Baby. But Herod's plan could not be accomplished because God had a different plan. His Son would be the light of the world and would be the light to get us through our darkness.

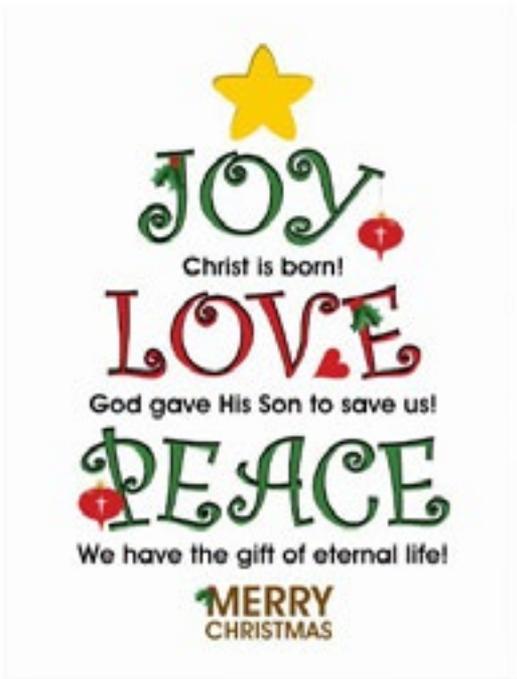
The Wisemen followed the star to find the Baby Jesus. When they found Him they joyfully gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They did not return to tell Herod where the Baby was because God had warned them in a dream and told them to return home another way.

When we gather with family, friends and community this Christmas to celebrate the birth of the Baby Jesus, I hope we will be as overjoyed as the Wisemen were.

I wonder what gifts WE might give to our Lord and Savior this Christmas season? Whatever we give, may we do it with a joyful heart.

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for the many gifts and blessings you give to each of us. Help us to use these gifts with wisdom and joy! Amen.

Di Bernklau



Saturday, December 25

*May the happiness and joy
of that first Christmas
be with you forever!*

*May his blessings
fill your heart and life
this Christmas and New Year!*

*May the peace
of Christmas be yours;
May it fill your life
throughout the New Year!*



The Meaning of the Advent Wreath Candles



The first candle symbolizes hope and is called the "Prophet's Candle." The prophets of the Old Testament, especially Isaiah, waited in hope for the Messiah's arrival.

The second candle represents faith and is called "Bethlehem's Candle." Micah had foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, which is also the birthplace of King David.



The third candle symbolizes joy and is called the "Shepherd's Candle." To the shepherd's great joy, the angels announced that Jesus came for humble, unimportant people like them, too. In liturgy, the color rose signifies joy.

The fourth candle represents peace and is called the "Angel's Candle." The angels announced that Jesus came to bring peace—He came to bring people close to God and to each other again.



The (optional) fifth candle represents light and purity and is called "Christ's candle." It is placed in the middle and is lit on Christmas Day.