



GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

OFFICE FOR SPIRITUAL LIFE

ADVENT READER 2023



A Note from the University Pastors:

This devotional is a gift to the George Fox community and our friends and families, prayerfully written and designed by our pastoral team to encourage our community to enjoy the presence of God in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

The weeks leading up to Christmas are called Advent—beginning four Sundays before Christmas Day. Advent is a season of the church calendar when Christians remember that God was faithful to His promise to send the long-awaited Messiah and will be faithful to his promise to return again. In these weeks of Advent, we read the prophetic passages and celebrate the nativity story, and we remember that waiting is a central theme in the Christian story of God’s faithfulness.

This devotional is divided into four parts:

Hope: Week One (12/3-9)
Peace: Week Two (12/10-16)
Joy: Week Three (12/17-23)
Love: Week Four (12/24-30)

Within each of these sections there are scripture readings, devotional meditations and even some art for you to enjoy at your own pace in that particular week.

However you choose to go through this devotional, we recommend that you allow yourself to quiet your heart and your mind, so that you might be especially attentive to how God might want to speak to you personally.

It is our sincerest hope that during this season of Advent you will experience the hope, peace, joy, and love of God who made his dwelling among us.

Grace and Peace to you this Advent season,

Jamie Johnson, Cyndi Murillo, Rus St. Cyr, Debrianna DeBolt

Week One

HOPE

by: Debrianna DeBolt

JEREMIAH 33:14-16

14 “THE DAYS ARE COMING,’ DECLARES THE LORD, ‘WHEN I WILL FULFILL THE GOOD PROMISE I MADE TO THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH.

15 “IN THOSE DAYS AND AT THAT TIME I WILL MAKE A RIGHTEOUS BRANCH SPROUT FROM DAVID’S LINE; HE WILL DO WHAT IS JUST AND RIGHT IN THE LAND.

16 IN THOSE DAYS JUDAH WILL BE SAVED AND JERUSALEM WILL LIVE IN SAFETY. THIS IS THE NAME BY WHICH IT[A] WILL BE CALLED: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUS SAVIOR.’



I can think of so many moments in the last few years where I felt like I was at the end of my hope. Moments where my soul felt tired of living in the tension of my reality and my expectations...constantly hoping that something would change.

I think of seasons of unemployment, wondering where God was and why he made me. I think of really challenging weeks and months in my young marriage, wondering how we were going to make it through. I think of the isolation and loneliness I felt during the global pandemic, when it felt like death and grief were closing in on me. I think of moments where I experienced such wounding betrayal that it cut to the core of my being. I think of the moments where I was at my end, hopeless, dealing with the tension of what was and what was supposed to be.

Have you ever felt hopeless? Have you lived in this tension of what is and what is to come?

Week One

HOPE, cont.

I can't imagine what the people of God must have felt when Jeremiah prophesied this coming hope. They were living in Babylonian captivity, wondering if they would inhabit their home ever again, and completely devastated by the reality of being a conquered people. I can only guess that they felt like their sense of safety was robbed and maybe also feeling a sense of violation. And on top of all of that, what about the things God had promised? I wonder if any of them asked where God was? I wonder if any of them felt hopeless?

In the reality of all the injustices they were living in, God brought hope. He promised that a righteous Branch would sprout from David's line. Someone who would establish safety and someone who would set all things right. In order to forge hope among the people of God, He reminded them of his righteousness, his heartbeat for justice.

Advent is all about embracing this tension of what is and what is to come. Advent is the time where we get to remember God's coming and how He will come again to set all things right. It is not a time for wishful thinking, empty optimism or pretending that the current reality is non-existent. Instead, it's being fully present to the pain, suffering, and injustice that surround us while also remembering that this is not the end.

So what does a life filled with hope look like? It looks like showing up to the present reality filled with a confidence that God is in fact who He says He is and He will do all that He said He would do. It looks like trusting that God is a good gardener who wastes nothing and repurposes everything. It looks like being filled with deep compassion for ourselves and those around us that might be at their end, and infusing a compelling trust that God is near to us all and He is not finished with us yet.

Week One

HOPE, cont.

Reflective Questions

- Are there parts of my life in which I've lost the vibrancy of hope? What do I need from God and what does it look like to invite God into those areas?
- Where do I feel the tension of what is and what is to come? In my life? In my community? In our world?
- What does it look like for me to be filled with hope in my present circumstances?

Contemplative Practice

Take some time to practice this simple centering prayer. Find a space of silence and rest. Feel free to walk or sit in stillness. As you pray, choose one of two phrases- "You, oh Lord, are righteous" or, "You, oh Lord, will set all things right."

As you create some space for prayer, start with some deep breathing for the first few moments. Become aware of the body you reside in and become present to your current reality. Begin to imagine the places in your life, your community, and our world that desperately need the hope of God's justice and righteousness. As you hold these things in the light, repeat your chosen phrase with each prayer. Notice the tension of what is and what is to come and invite God into that rising tension. When you feel ready to finish, take a few more intentional deep breaths and take a moment to rest in the hope of God's promises.

Week Two

PEACE

by: Jamie Johnson

AND I AM CERTAIN THAT GOD, WHO BEGAN THE GOOD WORK WITHIN YOU, WILL CONTINUE HIS WORK UNTIL IT IS FINALLY FINISHED ON THE DAY WHEN CHRIST JESUS RETURNS. (PHILIPPIANS 1:6)



A stroll through our beautiful campus provides me copious opportunities to envisage the beauty of God's creation. The sights, sounds and smells ground me in this moment, and I experience a peace of knowing that God is at work.

And then, suddenly, I am jolted back to reality by the incessant pounding, beeping, and sawing of others who are also at work - in this case, the men and women building our new chapel.

How wonderful it will be, when this sacred space is complete! It will provide ample opportunity for our community to gather together in worship, with our eyes drawn to the heavens and voices lifted in singing, prayer and fellowship.

As I write this, the building is taking shape and I can begin to imagine what it will be like when it is finally finished.

But the main way I experience it now is through the construction noise, which I can hear at all times, even when inside my office walls.

Noise is not just an external reality, but also an internal one. And noise, we think, is one of the great resistors of peace, acting as a repellent to anything that might center us on the very promises of God.

What is this noise?

Week Two

PEACE, cont.

It is sometimes found in the conflicts happening in our lives, our communities, and around the world; sometimes incessant thoughts or worries that repeat ad nauseam in our conscious minds; sometimes our dependence on our phones or computers; sometimes religious narratives meant to shame or guilt us into a fake obedience.

Whatever it is, and from whatever source it emanates, we can get stuck thinking that our spiritual growth will only happen when the noise is eliminated.

But then I read Philippians 1:6: “And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.”

Peace, the kind of peace produced in us by the Holy Spirit, is not the absence of noise but rather the recognition that in the noise Christ is at work. As Nelson Mandela stated, “Peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish regardless of race, color, creed, religion, gender, class, caste or any other social markers of difference.”

And that environment is what the Spirit is creating in us and through us. What does this peace look like, if not the absence of noise? Communities of faith pursuing unity despite the conflicts that exist in our world. Voices speaking different languages but finding a community that together speaks the language of love.

The work that God is doing in us and around us sometimes is noisy, because the work is significant and is in competition with the other “noises” drawing our attention away from God. There are barriers that need to be overcome, holes that need to be filled, and structures that can accommodate the diversity of God’s creation that need to be built.

Week Two

PEACE, cont.

Our chapel will, at some point, be finished, and stand as a beautiful indicator that the noise was, in fact, producing something of value to our community. And the noise of our lives, the work that is being done by God, will one day be finished, and *we will stand* as a beautiful marker of God's faithfulness to complete the work He started to those with whom we have journeyed.

Until then, though, we look for God in the noise, knowing that He is at work and will continue to work until we are with him, living in true peace, for eternity.

During this week of Advent, I invite you to consider how God is at work in your life, and where, in the noise, you have seen God moving, working, building. There, in the noise, I think you'll find peace, among other things. I think you'll find God. And what He is building is beautiful.

Reflection Questions

What noise have you been experiencing lately, and how might God be at work in it?

What might the Lord be building in your life, or in the lives of those you love? Do you have faith that God is going to complete the work begun in you?

Contemplative Practice

Find a piece of paper or the notes app on your phone and catalog these things:

- The "noise" that fills your life
- The things you have seen God building in your life or in the lives of others
- Pray through all of these things, seeking God's assurance that He will be faithful to complete the work begun in you
- Thank God for what He is building in your life

Week Three

JOY

by: Rus St. Cyr

“BLESSED ARE YOU AMONG WOMEN, AND BLESSED IS THE FRUIT OF YOUR WOMB. AND WHY HAS THIS HAPPENED TO ME, THAT THE MOTHER OF MY LORD COMES TO ME? FOR AS SOON AS I HEARD THE SOUND OF YOUR GREETING, THE CHILD IN MY WOMB LEAPED FOR JOY. AND BLESSED IS SHE WHO BELIEVED THAT THERE WOULD BE A FULFILLMENT OF WHAT WAS SPOKEN TO HER BY THE LORD.”

(LUKE 1:42-45)



“SSSAAANNNTA! OMG! SANTA, HERE?! I know him! I know him!”

Name that quote.

That’s right. It’s Buddy the Elf (... who, side note, I believe is my 9-year-old son’s “patronus”).

Although a fictional character in a movie (that won’t seem to go away), Buddy from the movie “Elf” has become somewhat of an icon of American Christmas culture for 2 decades now. But it wasn’t until pulling together thoughts for this devotional that I surrendered to the possibility that: “...you know what, Buddy might also, in fact, be a decent representation of Advent Joy.”

For years, I have mostly considered Buddy to be the embodiment of oblivious, immature, surface-level, sugar-induced “Happiness”: a feeling that, connected to circumstances and forces surrounding us, comes...goes... and is obviously not what Advent is about.

But I think I might be wrong.

Week Three

JOY, cont.

Buddy's oblivious happiness is really only in the intro of his story as an orphaned baby that crawls into Santa's toy sack, is accidentally taken back to the North Pole where he (sorry, late spoiler alert) is raised by Elves. But most of his story takes place on his pain-filled pilgrimage to find his biological dad in NYC. Most of the enthusiasm we see in Buddy actually takes place while he is in the midst of a very harsh environment (especially for his North Pole-sheltered self), not to mention in the midst of his deep yearning to find his real dad!

Hmm.

That's actually JOY.

That's not the circumstantial, ebb and flow emotion of happiness I chalked it up to be. His circumstances are not ideal for the most part. But in the midst of his quagmire-filled quest, he consistently moves about in a particular modus operandi that I think is best summed up in this phrase I've recently stumbled upon (I think coined by C. Otto Scharmer): "Energy follows attention."

The idea is that: If my attention consistently remains focused on what is lacking, deficient, or what we're generally trying to avoid, there's not a lot of energy to follow.

However, if my attention consistently remains on what could be, what is to come, what reality I want to be a part of bringing, then, well, the energy that follows... well, that could be Joy! Like a fictional character who, for the most part, keeps his attention focused on his belief and hope: the possibility of finding what he longs for, even amidst that Elf-forsaken land of NYC.

Advent Joy, then, could be a deep energy that wells up from within us, even and especially, when everything outside of us is trying its best to make that energy seem oblivious or absurd. Joy appears to me to be simultaneously a gift and a choice. Or maybe even a gift that is cultivated by the choice of where to focus one's attention, and, consequentially...energy.

Week Three

JOY, cont.

So, I'm hoping now it's just so obvious how Buddy the Elf has so much in common with our sacred readings for this week of Advent!

~ not only in common with God's people joyfully awaiting restoration amidst so much devastation (in Zephaniah 3:14-20),

~ not only in common with the sing-song joy of God's people still seeking the salvation they have yet to experience (in Isaiah 12:2-6),

~ not only in common with the perpetually-imprisoned apostle Paul, demanding the new Christian community to "Rejoice *always*" even when in shackles (in Philippians 4:4-7),

~ but also just as much in common with Elizabeth (in Luke 1:39-56) whose *very* pregnant joy, leaps in her (formerly *barren*) womb at just the mere sound of her cousin Mary's voice accompanying her brand-new conceived joy in her own womb.

Now, admittedly: I have never been pregnant. I *have* gotten the gift though of being able to accompany my beloved wife who has gone through it 3 times; I've observed my 3 sisters go through it multiple times; and 3 of my pastor colleagues & supervisors have gone through it, as well. One of my conclusions from their experience is this:

It doesn't look that comfortable (to understate).

One thing all these amazing God-gifted women in my life over the years have astounded me with is the same phenomenon that appears to be going on with Elizabeth in Luke 1.

Their energy follows their attention, and looks like Joy (when there really shouldn't be considering the growing discomfort of pregnancy).

Week Three

JOY, cont.

All these God-gifted women have been able to somehow channel their attention, not solely onto their own uncomfortable situation going on constantly in their own pregnant bodies, but onto that which God is doing all around them and especially in others as well!

That's one of the parts that astounds and inspires me the most: when pregnant women minister, inspire, lead and serve to meet others' needs simultaneously while their God-given bodies are growing another life inside!

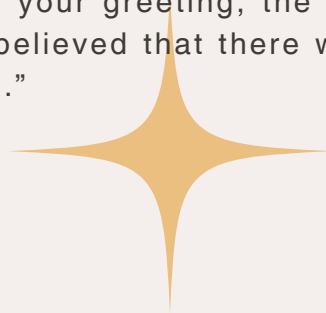
Focus our attention on bringing God's reality to our reality... and Advent Joy-energy follows! Joy in the face of uncomfortable waiting and longing. Joy in the face of pregnant, growing pains.

Joy is the energy-result of their gift and choice to focus their attention on God's promises, God's gifts, and the potential of God's reality being born and birthed into our human reality.

It's the kind of Joy-energy that emerges from a very pregnant woman suddenly yelling for Joy (... who knows, maybe even with the force of a Buddy the Elf character):

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

(Luke 1:42-45)



Week Three

JOY, cont.

Reflection Questions & Spiritual Practices:

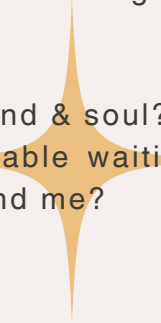
An “Energy Follows Attention” inspired Prayer-time:

Take 10 minutes to just be still, and, for the first 5 minutes just notice what your attention is drawn towards. Without judgment, just notice: Is my attention drawn most towards what is uncomfortable and how to fix it? On what is lacking? On what is missing? On how life is deficient in some what? On how I’m not enough?

For the last 5 minutes, Choose to focus your attention on finding God in all things: In the gift of your 5 senses, in your life experiences, memories, in the people (and even pets!) you love in your life, etc.

Take a Joy Inventory:

- What brings me the greatest joy?
- When did I feel the most alive this year?
- What project did I pursue that brought me so much joy?
- Who did I spend time with that made me feel better about life?
- Who did I enjoy spending time with, just to be in their presence? Or just because the heartening feeling of being in each other’s presence was mutual?
- How well did I face all the challenges that came my way this year?
- What plans did I ruminate over even if I didn’t pursue them, that brought me joy?
- Where did I get to go that helped me experience joy?
- What do I enjoy most about God’s gift of myself? My body, mind & soul?
- Where is Christ’s Joy (especially in the midst of uncomfortable waiting & longing) most evident in scripture and in God’s creation around me?



Week Four

LOVE

by: Cyndi Murillo

“THAT IS WHY, WHEN CHRIST CAME INTO THE WORLD, HE SAID TO GOD,
“YOU DID NOT WANT ANIMAL SACRIFICES OR SIN OFFERINGS.
BUT YOU HAVE GIVEN ME A BODY TO OFFER.

6 YOU WERE NOT PLEASED WITH BURNT OFFERINGS
OR OTHER OFFERINGS FOR SIN.

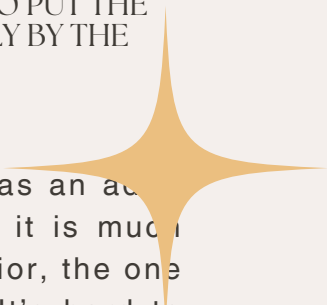
7 THEN I SAID, ‘LOOK, I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD—
AS IS WRITTEN ABOUT ME IN THE SCRIPTURES.’”

8 FIRST, CHRIST SAID, “YOU DID NOT WANT ANIMAL SACRIFICES OR SIN OFFERINGS OR
BURNT OFFERINGS OR OTHER OFFERINGS FOR SIN, NOR WERE YOU PLEASED WITH THEM”
(THOUGH THEY ARE REQUIRED BY THE LAW OF MOSES). 9 THEN HE SAID, “LOOK, I HAVE
COME TO DO YOUR WILL.” HE CANCELS THE FIRST COVENANT IN ORDER TO PUT THE
SECOND INTO EFFECT. 10 FOR GOD’S WILL WAS FOR US TO BE MADE HOLY BY THE
SACRIFICE OF THE BODY OF JESUS CHRIST, ONCE FOR ALL TIME.

When I think about Jesus, it’s much easier for me to envision Him as an adult and reflect on His miracles and His death on the cross. However, it is much more difficult for me to imagine Jesus as a baby. The idea of my Savior, the one I pray to, as a vulnerable, tender little infant is difficult to grasp. It’s hard to visualize Him being dependent on others to love Him and take care of Him. Perhaps it’s because I am pregnant during this Advent season and preparing for my own baby that this idea of Jesus as an infant is on my mind.

I also think about His mother Mary, and that adds a whole other layer of depth to the story for me. I think about her, who prepared physically, emotionally, and spiritually for Jesus’ arrival, and I think about how much joy and relief she must have felt at the moment of His birth.

While she knew that Jesus was sent to fulfill God’s divine plan for the salvation of the world, in that fleeting moment of His arrival, the whole world must have stood still as she cradled Him in her arms, overwhelmed by an indescribable love for her baby boy—the child for whom she had sacrificed, labored, and fervently prayed. I can imagine love was so thick in the air.



Week Four

LOVE, cont.

In many ways, this Advent season, we may find ourselves mirroring Mary's experience. Perhaps physically and even emotionally weary, preparing spiritually for our awaited promise of a King who will make all things new, holding onto the promise of a Savior who will set things right. And, just like Mary cradling baby Jesus, we, too, are held in the loving arms of our divine Parent, God, who loves us unconditionally. God gazes upon us with pride, kindness, and care.

This Advent season, may you find hope in the promise of a Savior who will renew all things, and as you wait, may you not grow weary. Instead, may you bask in the profound love that God has for you, His beloved child.

Reflection Questions:

- What is one time this week you felt loved and cared for by God?
- What is one thing you are hoping and praying for as you wait for your promised savior?



Week Four

LOVE, cont.

Spiritual Practice:

Listen to the song "[Arms of Love](#)" while reflecting on the image below. Invite God to speak to you through the words of this song and this art piece.

Below are some guiding questions you can reflect on as you contemplate:

- How do you feel looking at this image?
- What does this image say about Jesus?
- If you were in the image, where would you place yourself?



Art: "Nativity" by He Qi



THE OFFICE FOR SPIRITUAL
LIFE WISHES YOU A...

MERRY
CHRISTMAS!

