THE ADVENT PROJECT
A collection of meditations by faculty & students at George Fox University.
2019
Thank you for reading the 2019 Advent Project Reader created by students and faculty at George Fox University! We are excited to share with you these devotionals during the Advent season, in which we await the celebration of Jesus’ birth on Christmas day.

I am struck by how little we have to wait on anything these days. Our economy is constantly in pursuit of providing goods and services as quickly as possible to the consumer, so that we have become conditioned to, and even expect, expediency.

Yet, Advent reminds us that we are invited to wait, and in our waiting ponder what it means to still embody hope, peace, joy and love. These devotionals are one way we are inviting you to wait, expectantly, for the arrival of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ - as we anticipate the celebration of his birth, and also wait for his return to establish his kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

Blessings,
The University Pastors
Thank You

This Advent Reader was created through the hard work of many people, but a few we want to particularly thank for the amount of work they did to help it come to fruition.

Thank you to Dr. Sunggu Yang, Dr. Sarita Gallagher, Dr. Melanie Mock, Brandon Waybright, and Bryce Coefield. Each of these George Fox community members recruited writers, edited entries, and wrote/designed introductions for each week.

Thank you to all the students who submitted devotions: Cameron Oliver, Isaac Petersen, Kokanee Ellingson, Kaleb Puckett, Lilly Pittman, Jessica Cox, Hannah Lee, Chloe Bradley, Jess Ress, Emma Hodges, Emma Lindberg, Caleb Weaver, Sarah Parsons, Anya Sirker, Brynn Schwary, Sarah Ellis, Nicole Hagen, Allison Spoelhoff, Cassie Johnson, Caitlin White, Abbie Hall, Jeanette Barton, Vlad Salas Moreno, and Romare Ashford.

Thank you to Spiritual Life intern David Pascual-Matias who wrote, directed, and edited a short film to accompany each week of advent writings. Look for his videos to appear on our social networks each Sunday of Advent.

And, finally, thank you to Spiritual Life intern Christina Brandao who did the tireless work of creating the reader. What you hold in your hands or see on your screen was made beautiful because of her eye for design and her diligence in putting it all together.

Thank you to each of these individuals for helping to learn how to wait this Advent season!
Hope
December 1-7
I won’t ever forget the day when my first baby was born. Coming out of the mother’s safe and comfortable womb, the baby was crying, looking so fearful of the strange world. Right at that moment, I covered the baby with the fine pink linen the nurse prepared. Guess what? As soon as the baby got covered with the linen, she stopped crying and smiled with her tiny happy face. Friends, that has been an unforgettable experience of love and care that comes to my mind whenever I read this Genesis story of Adam and Eve being covered by God’s own gifts of skin garments.

Like Adam and Eve, due to our sins, life circumstances, defeatist thoughts, and unhealthy voices from others, we may be now going through a season of doubts, fears, despair, disappointments, loneliness, and anger. My guess is that Adam and Eve in that frightening moment of isolation from God (they were hiding . . .), they would have gone through all these emotional and psychological negatives. They may have blamed each other for their sins. They may have had serious doubts about their future. And they may have felt extreme loneliness in darkness.

However, certainly, God comes down. God does not leave us alone in isolation. God does save. And God not only saves us, but also covers us with his handmade garments. Truly, God is the God of love, care, and hope against all odds we may have.

In this season of Advent and Hope, I believe God invites once again to remember the goodness and the hopefulness in God. Surely, God does save us. I put my trust no other than in the Savior, our Lord.

Amen.
Take a few minutes to listen to your favorite song or a song on your playlist that’s recently been on repeat.

My guess is that there’s a reason it’s your favorite or repeated song. Maybe it moves you lyrically or melodically or the harmony lifts you up in a kind of ecstasy. Music. It infiltrates our lives, spans a wide range of genres, and marks seasons. Music punctuates momentous occasions, both happy and sad in our lives. Think birthdays, weddings, and funerals.

Now think of a time when your life’s circumstances were overwhelming and felt out of your control. My guess is that singing wasn’t the first thing on your mind.

Now enter Mary. A young woman, she was pledged to be married to Joseph when the angel of the Lord appeared to her. Think of the first time you met with a college professor or employer and the nerves you felt. Now, imagine being greeted by an angel—a non-human being who claims to speak on God’s behalf—a God who has not spoken for a long time. Imagine the fear and nervousness Mary must have felt. The angel recognizes this and assures her: “do not be afraid” (Luke 1:31). Mary is to be “overshadowed” by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). She conceives and goes to visit Elizabeth.

While visiting with Elizabeth, Mary opens her mouth and utters a kind of song. In my reading of Jesus’ birth narrative, I sometimes find myself wanting to skim over this song, but it reveals a lot about who God is and cannot be overlooked. Mary’s song is one of praise. She identifies God as the Holy One who sees her (v. 48-9), who is mighty and has acted on her behalf (v. 49). She recalls God’s “mercy,” which reflects hesed, the Hebrew concept of God’s loving kindness (v. 50). She remembers God’s power (v. 51-2) and providence (v. 53-4). Finally, she remembers God’s promise to Abraham (v. 55). Mary not only names and praises everything God has done for her, she draws an arrow from herself to all of Israel and to all
future generations (v. 48, 50).

Therefore, this is not just Mary’s song. We can look in it and see ourselves. Mary’s God is our God: a God who radically does the unexpected. God not only scatters the proud and brings down powerful people, God raises up the lowly (v. 51-2). This foreshadows the birth of Christ, when God entered the world as a baby—in a helpless human form. God flips expected, logical narratives on their head. God is also a God who is holy, mighty, and merciful. God is powerful, provides for, and makes promises to people. This God, our God, is worthy of praise. Let this season, with its moments of peace and overwhelm, be punctuated with praise as we sing along with Mary.

**Action:** Take a few minutes to write a response of praise to God. This could look like a poem or simply a prayer. Be creative! Include qualities and names of God that are meaningful to you. Name things you are thankful for and things God has done.
In a world filled with pain, suffering and longing for freedom from these, it’s hard to be filled with hope. Surely, our present sufferings are part of a long history of humanity’s sufferings. Our pain and suffering do not begin to measure up to God’s glory which is revealed through our difficult seasons. As God’s creation made in his likeness we have been given freedom from our sufferings through hope. Together in his Kingdom, as his children, the Lord wishes to set us free from these earthly sufferings. Through our loneliness, anxieties, and fears of the future the Holy Spirit longs to redeem us from these deep pains. There is freedom from these pains that only Christ can relieve. Unfortunately as humans we have not been given a timeline of our life. But, by learning to entrust our lives, anxieties and plans to Christ this brings new freedom to us; new hope that can be instilled into our everyday lives. Hope incorporates trust and patience in God’s perfect timing. Through hope we have been entrusted with the freedom of God’s glory.
When tackling the idea of what hope is, I first had to figure out the difference between trust and hope. Both are optimistic, but we put our trust in things that are reliable and or in which we have confidence. Hope however lacks that confidence and has more of an element of the unknown. Romans 8:24-25 speaks about this idea when it says:

“But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”

That lack of confidence scares me. I am someone whose natural desire is to be in control of almost all situations of my life, but I physically cannot do that. My life often feels like it’s being tossed back and forth by the waves of this world. In those moments where I feel desperate for something to save me, I choose to have hope in a God who loves me unconditionally. Psalms 147:11 says:

“The Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love”.

But that doesn’t mean it’s always going to make sense. Everyday there is pain and suffering occurring in the world, and I ask why? As stated above, if we knew all the answers, we wouldn’t need hope in a God who works all things together for his good.

I do not understand God fully, and I do not know why a lot of things happen in the world. But I have personally seen how good He is and how He has lavished his love on his creation. There is no greater representation of that love than Jesus taking on the sins of the world and dying on our behalf. I may not have the answers, but I have hope in a God who died in order that I may live.

Reflection Question: How does hope in God change how you live your life? Does it bother you that hope does not guarantee something will happen?
Hope is not something that always comes naturally for me; anxiety is often the culprit that makes this so difficult. It is hard to trust God and have hope in the plans God has for me when anxiety is constantly making me question that plan. Whether it is something simple or a major decision, it is easy for me to get caught up in the “what if’s” that anxiety has so effectively trained my brain to run through. What if this is not right? What if something goes wrong? What if I am outside the will of God and God is just not telling me? Or worse, am I inadvertently ignoring God? In these anxious moments, I have a hard time understanding what it means to have Hope in the Lord.

There are two definitions of Hope that have helped me figure out what it means to cling to the hope of Jesus. The first being “a feeling of trust,” choosing to trust in the Lord despite my circumstances both internal and external. Trusting that God is good, God is present, and God’s plans for me are, “to prosper” (Jer. 29:11). The second being “a feeling of expectation.” Instead of choosing to worry, choosing instead to wait expectantly for God to fulfill God’s promises (Heb. 6:19). God does not leave us in our anxieties and desperation. God sees us, meets us where we are, and reminds us that this is not the end of the story. Anxiety is not of God, but hope is. Hope for me looks like leaning into God, trusting that God is present, and then allowing God to fill me with the peace of Jesus as I wait for him to fulfill his promises.

I have been learning how to choose hope in this season. To stop, take a deep breath, and choose to focus on the ways God has proven to be good in my life. It is not an immediate solution, I cannot flip a switch and be hopeful. Choosing hope is a habit that is built through repetition, and with every moment I choose to have hope in God, for God never fails to bring peace.
The season of advent is one full of hope. Christmas, more than any other time of the year, is a time where it is expected of us to be joyful. And why shouldn’t we be? The incarnation is the apex of our theology! The moment Jesus was born in that small stable in Bethlehem, everything changed. It was no longer waiting and hoping for God to step in; our hope became like us and walked among us.

Yet, for one reason or another, this season that is meant to be full of hope seems to miss the mark. There might be a definite reason why this is, or it may be something that is confusing even to us. Regardless, my goal is to speak to those of who you, during this season of hope, feel hopeless.

The very idea of hope implies hopelessness. Without hopelessness, hope would have no place. The idea of salvation would be meaningless without the concept of sin. The reality of healing would be unnecessary without pain. The birth of Jesus would have been insignificant without the need for a Savior. Hope is born in hopelessness.

I have been reading through the book of Genesis this semester. Genesis is a book of beginnings; the creation of the universe, the formation of man from the very breath of God, the establishment of God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet, Genesis is a book of destruction; the expulsion from the Garden, the scattering of all peoples at the Tower of Babel, the deceit displayed over and over again by God’s chosen people. In all of these stories, it would be out of touch with reality to focus on the beauty and hope that God brings without properly placing them in the context of the hopelessness from which they reside. Consider how God’s everlasting covenant with Noah is rooted in the hopeless aftermath that followed the flooding of the Earth (Gen. 9), or how the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah is a miracle precisely because of their shared hopelessness (Gen. 16-18:15, 21:1-7). Even more, consider Joseph—second
to none other than Pharaoh in Egypt (Gen. 41:39-40), married with two children (Gen. 41:50-52), and ambassador to the nations, responsible for the preservation of the ancient world (Gen. 41:57). Yet all of his glory and hope was forged in hopelessness. It was born in a pit his own brothers threw him in (Gen. 37:23-24), it grew through the forfeiture of his freedom (Gen. 37:28), matured as he served an unjust prison sentence (Gen. 39), and it blossomed as everyone forgot about him (Gen. 40:23). Only because of the hopelessness that he endured did Joseph encounter hope in a land that was not his own. And at the end of his life, this is what Joseph had to say,

“Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You [Joseph’s brothers] intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Gen. 50:19-20)

Advent is a time of hope, but it is only a time of hope because of the hopelessness that we experience. May this time of year be a reminder of the times of hopelessness that God has delivered you from, and an encouragement that the hopelessness you face is the beginning of hope to come. Even in hopelessness, may we be convinced that what has been intended for harm, God intends for good to accomplish his purpose, which is now being done in and through us. Amen.
When thinking about hope, it’s common (and useful) to fall back on the prevalent ideas that are put forth by the word of the Lord: God has a future for us (Jer. 29:11), we already have impactful deeds that we are destined to fulfill (Eph. 2:10), hoping in the Lord is the key to making it through trials (Isa. 40:31), and so on. To this extent, it seems counterproductive to focus on a passage that seemingly convicts most of its readers away from hoping in the way they are living with the Lord.

I know it convicted me when I first heard it. I was sitting on the floor of my lounge with people in my staff community. My team leader was sharing this verse and warning all of us college students about the danger of keeping our “dirty laundry” in the closet. At the time, I had just been diagnosed with an eating disorder, always pursuing an idol of control and self-hatred. I had a lot that I was keeping in the dark. During the morning, I would willingly participate in-depth, gutting bible studies with my kitchen staff, and then go to work and not have a single bite of food all day, slowly starving in silence. It was hard for me to see any hope; I didn’t know a life without my darkness, but I also couldn’t picture my life continuing with it. All I knew was it was dark. I was alone, and the fact that I was alone made it easier to stay in the dark.

This verse cut deep to my core. Who was I to pretend that I am a daughter of the Light? I can’t even sit with people during meal times; I’m too afraid of letting them in. The beautiful thing about our Creator is that his use of conviction is a sign of hope. The choice to step into the light is the act of trusting that hope, the hope that God desires to draw you near and wash you clean with the blood of his son. The darkness is not a place of permanence; his light in our darkness is. That is the hope that we fall back on: We are sons and daughters of the light, the Lord will never leave us in the belly of our darkness. The path of light is yours for the taking, will you surrender and set your foot on it?
Practicing Peace

BY DR. MELANIE SPRINGER MOCK | ISAIAH 11:1-10

Being a pacifist came easy for me. From a young age, growing up in a Mennonite community, I learned—if only by osmosis—that Jesus called me to the way of peace. My little activist heart was aflame with a desire to protest wars and violence; as a young social justice warrior, I walked for famine relief, wore t-shirts emblazoned with peace signs, and looked forward to the day I might be arrested for civil disobedience, protesting nuclear weapons. ( Seriously. This was an oft-imagined scenario in my spiritually formative years!)

When I turned 18, I filled out paperwork citing my conscientious objection to war, just in case women ever got drafted for military service; and was stunned when, as a first-year student at George Fox College, I discovered Christians who actually supported the military, believing that some wars were just and needed to be fought for justice to reign.

I was incredulous, and found myself wanting to judge those peers who had a different experience growing up, and who heard different messages about what it means to be a peace-maker, as well as what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Hadn’t they read the Sermon on the Mount, and learned that peacemakers were the blessed ones? (Matthew 5:9) Weren’t others taught the same verses I learned, about resisting not evil, but overcoming evil with good? (Matthew 5:39)

Turns out, being a peacemaker is much more complicated than wearing slogan-covered t-shirts and being vocal about the pacifist ideologies you embrace. Real people, with their complex lives and competing thoughts about peace, were getting in the way of my peacemaking, were making me feel decidedly less peaceful. I didn’t want to seek reconciliation with those who were different than me; instead, I expected everyone else to see the world—and the Bible, and God—the same way I did.

The incarnation we celebrate during Advent is a reminder that Jesus came to earth to walk among humans, in all their complexities, their
brokenness, their conflicts. Jesus was a reconciler, compelling followers to put aside competing worldviews and love one another, despite our differences. Isaiah 11:1-10 affirms the reconciliation work of our Messiah, calling us as well to be peacemakers, even with our enemies. In Isaiah, the prophet describes a world where “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Isaiah 11:6-7).

I still ardently believe that we are called to a life of peace; even though I don’t wear peace-signs on my sweatshirts, I am still a pacifist. But I recognize now that true peacemaking is more than a slogan, more than a movement, more than about assuring that all wars shall cease. Real peacemaking is far more challenging, as it asks that we make peace with those who populate our day-to-day lives, and who may be vastly different than we are, and who are still loved deeply by Jesus. In this way and in many others, Jesus is “a signal to all people” (Isaiah 11:10) for what it means to live in peace.
I made my first solo pilgrimage to the Chetco River last summer. The shore was empty—it was May, still too early in the season for camping. The waters had begun their seasonal recession, revealing a small, rocky island in the middle of the river, its dull gray surface just barely above water-level. I trekked out to it—shoes off, pant-legs rolled high—and sat. The river’s strong current flowed down around me, out to the bend in the distance where my sight was obstructed by tall trees: pine, oak, and myrtle.

The river was loud, a comforting roar that drowned out all other trivial noises. I was miniscule on my island of rocks—the only human in a grand landscape. I sat for a long time, just watching the water flow by. Its current surrounded me, encompassed me, but I felt embraced rather than swallowed. I was in awe of how infinite it seemed: forever a fresh flow of water, vast amounts of it, meandering down to the sea. Everything inside me was still.

God shows Himself to us through creation constantly. He is the enduring light of the sun, the fresh showers that water the parched earth, the gentle breeze whispering through the branches of the oaks. He is an infinite well-spring, a thundering river, the safest flood we could ever be swept up in. He has never tried to hide His mightiness or His goodness; their evidence is all around. To sit in the presence of His creation is to sit in His presence.
The strongest wave of peace I have ever experienced washed over me as I was driving to the doctor’s office for my yearly check-up about a year ago. It was a few months after my grandmother passed away. Her death toppled my family’s dynamic like a pyramid routine mishap in cheerleading and suddenly I found myself sitting on the floor of a gymnasium with a concussion and no idea what to do next. Everything felt wrong.

I spent my days driving my car places as a distraction. That particular day, on my way to my doctor’s appointment, I remember feeling especially stressed about my future. It appeared as if my family would never fall back into place and like a disease spreading, my doubt began to attack everything else I had already secured in my beliefs. I began to question whether I was good enough for the career I wanted, I couldn’t picture myself living on my own, I was worried that I didn’t care enough or I cared too much, and I suddenly wondered if there was even a God.

While I was spiraling, events transpired creating the perfect environment for what I would call: firm affirmation. It was January, and the roads had mounds of snow piled along the sides. Floating through the air from my car speakers like a Hymn was Army of One by Coldplay. Then from the sky came small, slushy flakes of snow as the sun sprayed rays from behind a little tuft of cloud. That was when I noticed a brightly-defined rainbow in an arc across the sky.

All of a sudden I wasn’t worried. It was as if God took a magic eraser and wiped my brain clean of worry and I felt the imaginary weighted-vest I bore, with its stone-filled pockets, be lifted from my shoulders. At that moment I couldn’t worry, all I felt was an overwhelming wave of peace. In fact, for some strange reason, I had the urge to get a large peace sign tattooed on my body; I wanted to keep that moment with me forever. I was, and still am thankful for the Earth I call home and the beauty God created. I am especially thankful to God for showing me what I needed
to find that day, and what I will always strive to find from this moment forth: peace.

In reflection of: “Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds.” - Psalm 18. When did God give you exactly what you needed?
I took the train to Seattle last weekend to go to my cousin's wedding. I figured out how to get myself from campus to the station in Portland. I found a friend who could drive me only if we left at 7:30 AM. My train left at noon, meaning I had three extra hours to myself. It was worth it for the ride.

I waited in the station until my train boarded, then, after boarding, found a seat, and settled in for the three-and-a-half-hour trip.

I always feel the pull to do something while I rest. If I finish my homework earlier than I predicted, I find something productive with which to fill that time. Forget going to bed early, I must outline my next essay, touch up some presentation, or read just one more chapter of my assigned reading so I have less to do tomorrow.

There is pressure to always be doing something, and waiting for the easy peace of Christmas or Spring or Summer break is not a sustainable practice.

That day, I took a real break. As the train chugged along, I read a book, stared out of the window, and watched Netflix. The train felt like a timeless place; we departed and arrived at a set time, but the interim was mine. It offered me a couple hours away from my life. I got to fill that time however I wanted to, and the stress that usually accompanies rest did not find me.

Peace is the freedom to rest. It is taking intentional time amidst deadlines and responsibilities to enjoy ourselves. Sometimes this time is gifted to us, and sometimes we must make it for ourselves. Peace is taking a moment to rest, to see the beauty in our world, and to praise God for the joy that this rest affords.

How can we create moments of peace in our lives, and how can we use them to glorify God? How can we make it a habit to find moments of peace?
Recently, I've achieved a goal I've wanted the entirety of my life - spending consistent time with Jesus. Some mornings, I have the discipline to wake up early, make a cup of coffee, and sit in my living room in silence. I read a passage or two from Luke, reread it in Spanish, pray for 10 minutes, and sit in silence listening for God another 5-10 minutes.

Most days I'm less organized, reading my Bible in between classes, silencing my thoughts in the shower, praying myself to sleep at night. Despite my messiness, I am grateful.

However, through this process I discovered a misconception about devotion I didn't realize I had - that I would immediately be better. True, I have found myself in better moods and more connected with God, but I am just as sinful. I kept asking myself, 'why am I still messing up? I'm doing what I'm supposed to. I'm spending time with God every day. I should be better by now!'

God directly broke down my pride. I heard Him say to me, 'who are you to think you are above sin?' My pride was shattered. I realized I expected myself to be perfect after a few weeks of consistent prayer and scripture reading, forgetting that I am not Jesus and I can never be sinless.

This is when I found peace in the oddest of places - repentance.

I've been listening to the song “Hidden” by United Pursuit - it so beautifully encapsulates the simplicity of love with God. These lyrics specifically stood out to me: “Your kindness leads me to repentance. I can’t explain it - this sweet assurance - but I’ve never known this kind of Friend.”

Sweet assurance. The kindness of the Lord, Him sending His Son so we can be forgiven, is a peace I haven’t thought to rest in.

The passage of Matthew 3 seems harsh. “Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our
ancestor; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

This was my misconception, that because I was a Christian actively seeking God, I would immediately bear fruit and sin no more. In recognizing my sin, I am practicing humility before a perfect God. In repentance, I am letting go of this longing to be perfect.

Growing up in fundamentalist churches, I associated conviction and repentance with shame. But as I spend more time with God, I am realizing that repentance is an important, active step towards peace. I am baptized with “water for repentance,” coming clean before a perfect Savior who continues to mold me and shape me into a beacon of peace.

How can your repentance lead to peace? How can you break misconceptions about repentance and sin?
I sat on the couch in the living room with my dog, talking to my grandma about her role as a librarian at their retirement community. My grandpa is bashing Trump in a conversation with my uncle across the room, while my mom reheats Starbucks breakfast sandwiches that my sister had brought home from work, and my dad complains about how long the hashbrowns were taking. James Bay plays softly in the background. My cousins come late, straight from hosting a separate breakfast, collapsing on the couches after giving everyone tired hugs. A family friend quietly moves puzzle pieces around as he ruminates on his most recent dating disaster.

Normally our brunches would be loud and lively, complete with homemade dishes and fresh fruit. But everyone was much too tired for that. And I mean everyone. From stress at work and projects that turned into money-pits to heartbreak, death, or the aftermath of just plain-old busyness, everyone was going through something serious, something heavy. So we ate Starbucks pastries, hash browns, and vegetarian sausage, skipping the dining room table and heading straight for the couches.

Weariness hung in the air, ever-present, dominating. You’d think that this brunch would have been miserable. But because we were all in it together, it was peaceful to be draped over the couches, not having to be anything more than absolutely exhausted. We were there, just as we were. No one felt the need to pretend everything was okay.

I think a lot of the time we think about peace in the individual sense. Peace is pictured as escaping alone to the coast or sitting with a journal in a coffee shop. While peace definitely is cultivated in solitude, there is so much found in sharing it as well. Peace is cultivated in comfortable silence, hugs, cups of coffee, group naps, bonfires, late night talks in a parked car. It can be anywhere that it’s invited. In bringing our burdens into community we invite others and Jesus to speak into them. Having
people speak into our hardships, or even just sharing in our misery, takes some of the power away from the bad things, and invites peace in.

When I think about peace, I think about those moments when life pauses for a moment and allows you to take everything in. When you stop and zoom out, and everything feels bigger and smaller all at once, and a feeling of true contentment sets in. And it’s present even when everything else feels heavy. The hardships that make us feel like life is out of our control can serve as reminders of the freedom that comes with knowing everything is in God’s control. This doesn’t negate or minimize the difficulties of this life and how we experience them, but can help us stay afloat through them. Peace comes in acknowledging our own and each others’ struggles and allowing ourselves to sit in it together. My community has shown me how peace flourishes in situations where you’d expect it to be scarce.

Where are some hard areas of your life that you could invite other people into? How can you be reminded to take moments to practice gratitude and look for grace in the midst of day-to-day stress?
O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear.

God, be with us in the interim, where things are not all as they should be. Where there is joy in hope, but grief in the pain of now. We belong with You: it is our original state and our ultimate one. Come near to us while we wait for the glorious fulfillment of complete unity with You and each other.

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits with Thine advent here. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight.

Source of light and life, make us glad again at the thought of Your coming: the restoration You will bring and have brought, the peace we look forward to and rest in even now, and the fullness of life we live toward and live in. Replace the fear of death with the love of life.

O come, Thou Key of David, come and open wide our heavenly home. Make safe the way that leads on high and close the path to misery.

Promised Savior, hasten us on our journey homeward, and hasten the coming of heaven to earth. Deliver us from evil as we seek to follow the road of righteousness. As we travel, be our guide.

O come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind. Bid Thou our sad divisions cease and be Thyself our King of Peace.

Fulfillment of all desire, be our satisfaction. As You and the Father are one, may we on earth be one with one another and one with the Godhead. Gather our hearts and our minds and our songs to one end: the glory of Creator. Quiet our arguments and bitterness and pride and bring us into peaceful submission to our Master.

We in waiting reach for the same patience You show to us. We wait in trust. Be our sustenance as we expect Your arrival. Be the joy of our anticipation.

Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.
Ode to Joy
By Brandon Waybright

It’s a common confusion that in Christianity you should ‘live as you ought to, and God will accept you.’ But God’s acceptance and blessing is a free gift, given not because you have earned it, but simply because God wills it. This gift then calls you to live in joyful response and gratitude rather than out of obligation.

But joyful living is not simply happiness. And the pursuit of Joy is not a proscription for self-care or looking on the bright side and ignoring the trauma in your life, your community, and your world. Joy, at the end of the day, has many faces.

Sometimes it looks like persistence through trial—as suggested by the imagery found in Isaiah 35 of blossoms emerging in the desert. Sometimes it is the surprise of the unexpected—when the way that seems hard is suddenly made easy, when the enslaved are set free, when sorrow passes. Other times, it is the support of relationship or as Psalm 146 suggests, the helpful hand that pursues justice for the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. At other times, it is simply being so filled with the Spirit that you cannot help but burst into song or dance.

At the end of the day, I like to think of Joy as a sign of Christ having a right place in one’s life. That despite how terrible one’s surroundings, how dire the politics of one’s land, how dismal one’s prospects, or how blessed a person has been, they find peace, endurance, and even happiness in knowing their connection to a God who persists through all things—that regardless of how the world is moving, regardless of the choices you have made in your own life, God’s acceptance and blessing is assured—not because you’ve earned it, but because God wills it to be so.

I know that for some, it can be hard to simply look at an artwork and know what to do with it. Bear with us for this portion of advent. In the following pages, several artists have studied the following texts Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:5-10, James 5:7-10, and Matthew 11:2-11. Their images
are a selected response to how they understand joy in those passages. I encourage you to look at the images first and take note of how they direct your mind. What colors and forms are present? What do they make you think of? Read the images like poetry that is meant to prompt you to though rather than illustrate a story. Then read the passages thinking similarly. Finally, return to the images—look for connections between the two and jot your own ideas down. If an image is meaningful to you, consider tearing out of the page and putting it up somewhere to prompt or remind you during the week or take a photo with your phone and set it as a wallpaper.
Joy

By Nicole Hagen
“according to the promise.”

By Sarah Ellis
December 19

Joy

By Sarah Parsons
Joy

31 December 20

By Anya Sirker
Be patient,

James 5:7-10

beloved.

By Brynn Schwary
Love
December 22-27
The bible seems to have quite a bit to say about love, and as followers of Christ, love would seem to be at the core and foundation of our faith. As Christians we are meant to be known by our love for one another (John 13:35). When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus declares “The first is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and the second is to love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:38-39). Love of God, and love of others is central to the gospel, and I fail miserably at loving God and loving others on a nearly daily basis. There are many reasons for these failures but I propose that a significant reason is because I don’t know how to love myself.

Now to be clear, I don’t mean love myself in the sort of narcissistic, “I’m the best” sort of way. No I mean love myself, in the ability to see, acknowledge and love the image of God that I hold. Anais Nin is famously quoted saying “We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.” If we don’t see ourselves as worthy of love, it’s hard to love others.

I have grown up, and lived most of my life believing that I’m not enough. Not smart enough, not fast enough, not skinny enough, not man enough, not “godly” enough, not woke enough, not disciplined enough...I could go on and on filling in the blanks before enough. The world tells us on a daily basis we’re not enough in some way shape or form. Over time I think we internalize that message and then end up projecting it onto others. Going back to the quote, if we don’t see ourselves as enough, it can be hard to see God or others as enough.

However, this isn’t the end of the story friends. As the psalmist writes at the beginning of Psalm 139, “Oh Lord you have searched me and know me (#UltimateBeKnownPromise)!” Later in Psalm 139, it says “you knit me together in my mother’s womb, I praise you because I have been fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works my soul knows it very well”. The God of the universe saw us we were yet unformed and
knit us together in our mother's womb, imprinting upon us God’s unique image.

You are enough. Because of the image of God, I am enough, you are enough, we are enough. The good news is that God sees us, and knows us, and not only loves us but likes us. What would it look like for “our souls to know very well” that we are enough, and we are loved? I imagine it would result in an overflowing of love for God and others. This world yearns for a love like that.

Prayer: God, who sees us, knows us, and loves us. Help us to see ourselves, and those around us, the way you see us. May we sit in peace, with the knowledge we are fearfully and wonderfully made in your image. Give us courage to love; love you, love others, and love your image in ourselves. Amen.
Meaningless, Meaningless, everything is meaningless,
So says the teacher Qohelet.
This statement from the beginning of Ecclesiastes tends to make human-kind uncomfortable.
Why? It's simple really. We are notorious for thinking of ourselves as the center of the universe. Remember that before Galileo, it was understood as fact that earth was at the center of the solar system.
The reality? We are but tenants of a tiny blue dot, caught in a beam of sunlight.

So here we are,
Living as gusts of vapor
The wind blows to the south
And goes around to the north;
Around and around goes the wind.
And moments are all we have.

Meaningless, Meaningless, says the teacher Qohelet.

This reality of our smallness has the power to terrify or liberate us.
Every moment, every gesture and smile, every passing on the sidewalk
Is sacred vapor.
If these moments are all we have, then why do we waste them
Toiling on unkindness, apathy, hostility, and all that is under the sun?
So what are we to do with our one ephemeral gust of wind?
We love every moment. Because these moments are all we have.
And this is love. That in our smallness, God gave us these moments and brings meaning into the meaningless.
So I ask you, what will you do with your ephemeral gust of wind?
Lord, your Son, is Immanuel: “God with us.” Let us remember in this Advent season that you came to Earth out of your pure love for us. When we are hurting and feel alone, help us to remember your presence. When we are feeling doubtful that you could ever understand, help us to remember that you walked among us. When we find it difficult to love and live harmoniously, help us to remember that you are present in every heart. Help us to feel that presence in our own hearts and act accordingly. As we prepare for your coming, help us to love with a love like yours: Never ending, persistent, and unconditional.

Your love, God, is powerful enough to conquer hate. In the divided world we live in today, loving with a love like yours will bring us together. You told us that what we do for the least of our brothers, we do for you. Help us to love in every way that we can to every person we come across. Give us the grace to unite in our differences, instead of divide. May our love be a reflection of you. So that when others see us, their hearts are pointed to you.
“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 a 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.” Luke 2:15-18

So they went with haste...

Perhaps there is no more poignant way to describe the ending of the Advent season than this phrase, found in the NRSV version of the Gospel of Luke’s birth narrative. The winter season always seems to sneak up on me, with the premature darkness announcing an early end to each day once we turn our clocks back in November. The 40 days of advent, of patiently waiting in expectation for the birth of Christ is simultaneously short and always interminably long.

It’s in the midst of these days of waiting that I find great hope in the response of the shepherds. As soon as they knew where to go, they went with haste. There were no preparations to undergo, no tasks to complete, no excuses to delay their trip. They heard the good news and they went with haste.

I fully believe there is goodness in waiting, but it is a discipline to learn how to wait. In this cultural moment where delayed gratification is seen as a weakness and expediency is lauded as a virtue, we are asked in the season of advent to wait.

And then, when it is time, when the Holy Spirit speaks to you in ways you know to be God’s direction for your life, we are to move with haste towards the living God - to see him for who he is, and then move into the world proclaiming the good news to all, just as the shepherds did.

The waiting we practice in advent is but a moment when you consider
that we are always waiting for the return of Jesus. Thus, though we go with haste we are also continuing to wait, for we know that this is not yet the world God will inhabit forever.

Thus, this Christmas morning, may you know that your patient waiting has been rewarded through the birth of Christ. And you are now invited to go with haste into all the world, proclaiming this gift of life offered to us only through the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord until he does finally return to establish his reign here on earth as it is in heaven, forever.

Go with haste!
Love is radical. Love radicalizes. As we enter this time of observation and celebration, we must remember what makes the season so important to us; not only the birth of our Savior, but the life of love and sacrifice that He led for our sakes, and a life that He wanted us to follow.

Why is love radical? Because Christ himself was radical, and radicalized generations of people to do one simple thing: to love. Not only as a show of affection, but as an act of justice, of mercy, of humility. Love can exist in theory, but if it is to exist in the heart, it must also exist in the works of our hands and our words. The earliest Christians knew well what it meant and what it felt to be unloved, and in community many of them knew what it meant to be oppressed, to be the victims of injustice. Christ himself consistently showed love to the impoverished, the sick, outcasts, sex workers, ethnic minorities — anyone and everyone that society sought to demean and deem unlovable. If Christ made it his prerogative to exist in spaces with them and to love them as individual images of God deserving of respect and dignity, surely He would expect the same of us.

James tells us that our faith and love are nothing without outward expression (James 1:22-25, 27; James 2:14-18), and Paul says also how important it is to be sincere in love and to live our love out in everything that we do (Romans 12:9-21).

As we remember Christ, we must know and understand that the Love He embodied is inseparable from action, and it is inseparable from the workings of justice. For as Micah tells Israel: “what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)
As we look through scriptures, our Lord has become more and more personal with His creation. In the Old Testament His people followed the Law; in the New Testament God walked with His people through His son, Jesus Christ. Once Jesus ascended to Heaven, He sent His Spirit to live in His People. As Christ resides in us throughout our day we can live in full confidence that we are able to take steps to love others more like Jesus. We can be assured that he is continuously sanctifying us through His Spirit’s presence within us.

Let us pray, “Yahweh, in this season of the remembrance of Christ’s birth, give me grace and compassion for those around me. Fill me with your Spirit and guide me to be more like You in my daily conversations and interactions. Fill me with love for those who are different than I am and give me empathy for their stories and struggles. Deliver grace and peace to my community and continue to prompt us to strive for unity with one another. We thank you for your constant love and abiding presence. Continue to give us opportunities to rely on You. May your will be done.”
Christianity has never been a simple fit for me. The same religion that gives others hope and happiness took away rights and disenfranchised people that look like me. Being a Christian I’m seen as an outsider and guest. My worship style isn’t a novelty, though it might be different. Being someone who has been oppressed has made my relationship with faith difficult. But scripture teaches that God watches over people like me. I know I’m made in God’s image, but I still sometimes feel unwanted in Christian circles. Love has taught me to doubt fear and listen to people different from me. Love keeps me grounded and hopeful for change. Followers of Jesus who will listen to me, really hear me, give me hope; in them I see God’s love.
I truly believe that God has called us to love one another as he has loved us. We see time and time again how humanity has forgotten this command from the Lord, we’ve forgotten what it means to show love and grace to one another. It is our responsibility to remind those around us that we can still show that type of love.

Growing up I was always taught that love was given to all regardless of circumstance, that’s because in my life that type of love wasn’t always given to me. Knowing that I am different from the majority has taught me that I might not always get love from my neighbor right away, but what I can do is give that love to others; hoping to change the way things are now.

We cannot change the climate of this world if we first don’t change life within ourselves. To show love to all is what we are called to do, now and forever.