



ADVENT DEVOTIONS 2025

The Christmas Blues

By Anna Eckley, Care Pastor

In 1953, Dean Martin released “The Christmas Blues,” which has since been recomposed and rereleased by many other artists. It’s a holiday song in the sense that it has many musical elements we find in other Christmas songs—festive trumpets, sleigh bells, a background choir. It also mentions Christmas, presents, and even Santa Claus. But in the midst of these typically joyful Christmas elements, Dean Martin sings, “When somebody wants you, somebody needs you, Christmas is a joy of joy. But friends, when you’re lonely, you’ll find that it’s only a thing for little girls and little boys.”

Now you may be thinking, *Wait, isn’t this an Advent devotional? Why are we talking about Christmas blues on the first day?*

It’s a valid question. However, the reality is that when Dean Martin sings these lyrics, he is connecting with more people than we may realize. Many people experience the holidays as the world turning around them while they feel stuck in slow motion. Or they experience a sense of grief and darkness, even though there are bright Christmas lights everywhere they turn.

It can be hard to navigate these emotions of sorrow, grief, and loneliness when the world is screaming at you to be happy! So, we explore the Christmas blues for a few days to start this devotional to give space for those who experience them. We hold space to acknowledge that the holidays can be a really hard season for many. We also encourage them that although Dean Martin’s song may feel like it hits home, he gets it wrong when he says Christmas is “only a thing for little girls and little boys.”

The story of Christmas isn’t just a fairy tale. It’s so much more than that. The meaning of Christmas isn’t just presents. It’s so much more than that, too. The Christmas story of our Savior being born is the story of hope, joy, love, and peace that isn’t just for boys and girls—it’s for everyone. It’s for you—whether you celebrate this season with reverence or it feels hard. The promises we explore this Advent season are for you.

Reflection:

- What emotions come with the Christmas season for you? How do you hold space for them?
- Is there someone in your life who may experience the Christmas blues this season and may need a little extra encouragement and joy? If so, take a moment to remind them that you are thinking of them.

Heaven Meets Earth

By Anna Eckley, Care Pastor

I am on a unique journey this season because we will be welcoming our second child right around Christmas. It has not been lost on me that as we get closer to the date, I am experiencing some of the same things as Mary in her final weeks of pregnancy. For example, Braxton Hicks contractions aren't just a 21st century experience, nor are feeling nauseous and a bit larger than normal. These are all things many pregnant women have in common toward the end of pregnancy. It is in these moments of reflection that I am humbled by the way in which God's Son came to save us—not only in the way that heaven met Earth when Jesus took his first breath, but how heaven continues to meet Earth every day in the most unexpected ways.

When we think about making a grand entrance, perhaps we think of the red carpet with paparazzi or other crazy things like skydiving or arriving in a hot air balloon. We love to make grand entrances a spectacle. But after being in a labor-and-delivery room, I can confidently say that a child being born is a different kind of spectacle that doesn't quite match the grand entrance we see on TV. It isn't a public event; it is intimate and sacred. It isn't glamorous and easy; it is hard and diligent work. It isn't perhaps how we would expect the Savior of the world to make his grand entrance. Yet, we have Jesus, who was formed in Mary's womb and made his grand entrance in a manger.

Although it wasn't a grand entrance in the sense of a red carpet, some parts of it were more than grand—they were divine. When the angels announced the birth to the shepherds, a star shone bright in the sky, and they responded with praise and worship. It was humble yet divine, heaven meeting Earth, and God's love becoming fully known. It was the celebration of Emmanuel, meaning "God with us," that heaven had kissed Earth, bridging the gap between the Christmas blues and the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Reflection:

- Have you had a "heaven meets Earth" moment in your life? If so, reflect on it.
- Where can you anticipate seeing heaven meet Earth this Christmas season? Pray for an open heart, open eyes, and an open mind not to miss it.

The Christmas Spirit or the Holy Spirit?

By Anna Eckley, Care Pastor

The Christmas season comes with so much hustle and bustle! Last year, I had my first Christmas as a mother, and although my child was only 8 months old at the time, I felt as though experiencing things through his eyes was more magical than I could have prepared for. This year, we have a full-on toddler and are “patiently” awaiting the arrival of our second child around Christmas, which means this season comes with many emotions.

We are experiencing the excitement of seeing Christmas through our toddler's eyes with a little bit more understanding than last year. We are experiencing the anticipation of welcoming a new child into our family. We are experiencing the hustle of trying to get everything extra prepared (not just gifts, but also everything that comes with adding a new family member). And of course, we're trying to consistently remind ourselves of the reason we celebrate this season. It's a lot to juggle! It feels as though it's so much more than just feeling happy ... but feeling truly deep emotions of being pulled in many directions.

There is societal pressure during the Christmas season to outwardly express that you feel happy. And if you don't, then you don't have the Christmas spirit in your heart. No one wants to be the Grinch—even though the stress of the holidays may make many of us resonate with his story and attitude a little bit more than we'd like to admit. But it also isn't the Christmas spirit that resides in our hearts that brings happiness—it's the Holy Spirit of God that brings true joy.

Instead of depending on the Christmas spirit for happiness in earthly things, what if we desired to be filled with the Holy Spirit that brings peace, joy, hope, and love? The Holy Spirit that weaves in and out of our conversations to reflect the joy and love of Christ through our words and actions? The Holy Spirit isn't dependent on our Christmas décor, presents under the tree, or holiday plans. It is within us and works through us—not just at Christmas, but at all times.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I invite the Holy Spirit into this season of Christmas. May your Spirit bring peace, hope, joy, and love. In moments where I feel confined to the limits of the Christmas spirit, may you remind me of the limitless joy through the Holy Spirit. May the Holy Spirit shine hope through the darkness, bring pause and peace to the rush, and share joy within the midst of struggle and your love through my words and actions. Amen.

Waiting Expectantly

By Anna Eckley, Care Pastor

The to-do list may feel never ending as we enter the homestretch of the next few weeks leading up to Christmas. We make travel plans to figure out where we will stay or who will stay with us. We plan how our homes will look with Christmas decorations, from the tree to the nativity scene. We prepare the gifts we will give and the lists of what we wish to receive. Then we take the time to wrap the gifts and pack them up for the big reveal. We plan which Christmas Eve service we will attend and how many people will join us.

We spend hours preparing for the physical needs of Christmas but often push aside preparing our hearts and minds for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. We overlook how important it is to spiritually prepare for this season that has been set apart to celebrate the promise of our Savior coming to earth to be with us.

So how do we prepare our hearts and minds for Christmas? I think the wise men in the Gospel of Matthew are the perfect example by demonstrating what it means to wait expectantly. They didn't stop their work or their everyday lives just to wait for the coming of Jesus, but they expectantly watched for the signs of his arrival. We, too, don't have to stop the other preparations we take part in, but we can have a posture of expectancy to see Jesus show up in the small and big moments amidst our days. When we hang up the ornaments, we can see God's goodness and fulfillment of his promises as we remember the meaning behind each tree decoration. Or, as we wrap presents, we can offer gratitude to see Jesus showing up in our lives in a way that allows us to serve and provide for those we love. Or, when we drive around to look at Christmas lights, we can reflect on the power of God's light in darkness.

We can continue with all the things that make the Christmas season so special, while also having a posture of expectancy to see Jesus among the things we do. We don't want to miss what Jesus has in store for us this Christmas season, so we wait expectantly to see him show up in all the ways he can.

Reflection:

- Do a quick posture check—are you expectantly waiting for Jesus to show up in your life amidst the things you do? If not, how can you change your posture toward expectancy?
- Where have you seen God show up in your life in unexpected ways? Take a moment to reflect on old and new stories in your life and thank God.

The Little People Nativity Scene

By Anna Eckley, Care Pastor

One of my favorite parts of preparing for Christmas is putting up the Nativity scene I have been collecting and adding to for years. It is a stunning piece of art, and I've always put it at the center of our home. This year, though, has posed a few challenges, because although my Nativity is lovely in all the ways, it isn't necessarily toddler-friendly, and I have a 20-month-old who manages the house. If I put the Nativity scene up in our usual spot, it will last maybe a total of 30 seconds before one (or many) pieces of it are broken.

I've been brainstorming about where else I can put it in our house, but the truth is there really isn't anywhere that would keep it safe yet still offer a visible reminder of the reason for the season. So, I've compromised and decided to buy a new Nativity scene. It's a Fisher Price Little People Nativity that will now be the centerpiece of our Christmas décor. Front and center, it is one of the first things you see when you walk into the house at the middle of our living room. Is it aesthetic? Absolutely not. But it is durable. The Fisher Price Little People were made to be thrown across the room! And although it isn't what I'm used to, I think it will be better at serving the purpose of exploring the Nativity scene and story leading up to Christmas. It will allow us to lean into the birth of Jesus Christ because it won't just be an individual journey anymore—it's one we get to share as a family.

Every time my son and I play with his Nativity scene, we will talk about Jesus, Mary, and the manger (it even lights up and plays music). I've had my whole life to internally process the Christmas story, but now it's time to share it. In the Gospel of Luke, the shepherds could hardly contain their excitement from the birth of Jesus. Luke 2:17 reads, *"After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened ... all who heard the shepherds' story were astonished."* The Christmas story is nothing short of a miracle, so why don't we share it more?

Every year we have the chance to share the Christmas story, but we often tell the story of Santa Claus or the Grinch instead. Not that there is anything wrong with those stories, but I would challenge you to share the true Christmas story—the Jesus Christ coming to Earth as a baby version—with as many people as you can. Because it's worth sharing, and it could be someone's first time hearing it and responding in awe and wonder of who God is.

Reflection:

- Take time to read through the beginning of the Gospel of Luke to refresh your memory on the Christmas story, and then share it with someone!

The Perfect Christmas

By Anna Eckley, Care Pastor

Take a moment to close your eyes and imagine what the perfect Christmas morning would look like for you. Like when people ask, “What is the perfect date?” I’m asking, “What is your perfect Christmas?” Maybe, if you’re a grandparent, it looks like having all your kids and grandchildren in one place with matching pajamas. Or, if you’re a child, it may be opening the one gift you’ve been asking for in complete shock that you received it. Maybe there is snow on the ground, or perhaps there are palm trees and sunshine outside your window.

The perfect Christmas is different for every one of us because it is something so much deeper than just what it looks like, but also how it feels—who we are with, where we are. I don’t know about you, but I could do everything in my power to plan a perfect Christmas morning, and there would still be a 99.9% chance something would happen that wasn’t on my radar. For example, I could plan the perfect breakfast, but then come the morning of, my toddler could push the oven buttons and the meal could turn out absolutely toasted. (Not speaking from experience or anything.)

When a “good” Christmas is left to physical outcome, we miss a truly perfect Christmas. Because there is nothing more perfect than the promises of God being fulfilled when Jesus Christ was sent to Earth as a baby. The perfect promise of never-ending love, which is better than any gift we may find under the tree or breakfast casserole we can make, was fulfilled when Jesus Christ took his first breath in Bethlehem. The perfect promise of hope was fulfilled when Mary held her son close to her chest for the first time and what God had told her came true. The perfect promise of joy was fulfilled when the shepherds went to see Jesus and shared their story. The perfect promise of peace was fulfilled when a cry broke through a silent trough.

The perfect Christmas already exists ... everything else we get to experience in this Christmas season that brings us happiness is icing on the cake.

Reflection:

- What does your perfect Christmas look like?
- In what ways has your perfect Christmas already been redeemed by Jesus Christ?

The Perfect Gift

By Anna Eckley, Care Pastor

One of my gifts is gift giving. Throughout the year, I keep a running list in my notes app of what people say they want or when I observe that someone would really benefit from something. It's about paying attention to the details. That is how my brain is wired. This practice comes in handy when Christmas rolls around, because by September or October, I have my spreadsheet of exactly what I'm getting the people in my life. Then I just wait for the deals! I love watching people open their gifts with a sense of shock, asking, "How did you know?"

I've learned that the greatest gift I can give isn't what is most expensive, creative, or in style. It's giving them a moment where they truly feel heard and seen for who they are by recognizing what makes them happy or what they need. For example, every year I get my husband a small gift related to the Iowa Hawkeyes and a pair of socks (plus some other goodies). And every year, he says, "You're so good at giving gifts!" Why? Because he feels seen and understood, even from a pair of socks!

What if God looked at us and saw what brought us happiness, such as being heard and feeling seen? And what if God saw what we needed was hope, peace, and love, so he gave us the perfect gift? John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son." Each Christmas, God gives us the perfect gift by seeing us, hearing us, and ultimately loving us.

A good gift comes from a place of love. Love looks like listening, seeing, supporting, encouraging, and being present (which are all *free* to give). The perfect gift from God—Jesus Christ—came from a place of deep love for God's children. Jesus Christ is the perfect gift that does not demand our perfection but is given in grace. Jesus Christ is the perfect gift that does not require our money but is given freely. Jesus Christ is the perfect gift that demonstrates God's love is limitless, unconditional, and boundless—and the gift is for you. Not just at Christmas time, but all the time. I pray that the celebration of this perfect gift is so sweet for you this Christmas season.

Reflection:

- What is the best gift you have ever received? Who did it come from? How did it make you feel? Why did it make you feel that way?
- How could Christmas and Advent look different this year if you celebrate that you have already received the most perfect gift?

A Setting for Hope

By Perry Ross, Worship Minister

Isaiah is a story of God's judgment and hope. While the first half of the book is wrapped around passages of warning of future judgment, Isaiah also points to a hope that God will be true to the promises of his covenant.

This message of hope is alluded to in Isaiah 6:13. After all the judgment and exile and calloused hearts that will result from Isaiah's prophecy, we read:

"But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

You might gloss over that phrase, which is often overshadowed by the glorious and intense scene of Isaiah's vision of the throne room and the winged beasts and hot coal. But in that last line of Chapter 6, we see the HOPE to which Isaiah points. After the dust settles and the smoke clears, amidst the rubble of destruction, there is a SEED OF HOPE. Though God intended for Israel to be that seed, time and time again, they abandoned the one true God, and because of their disobedience, they were subject to judgment and exile. But God did not abandon them or leave them without hope.

Isaiah 49:8 refers to this hope in the coming Messiah, the seed from Chapter 6, where the promised Messiah will come and restore and begin to put things back in order again. And this Messiah doesn't just *bring* a new covenant; he *is* a new covenant to the people. He is the *living* hope.

Over the next week, we will dive into this living hope by looking closely at the song by Phil Wickham that many of you are familiar with. Line by line, this song paints the picture from Isaiah of our brokenness, need for a Savior, and the hope we find in Jesus.

Reflection:

- Where in your life have you placed your hope in something other than Jesus?
- What brought you around to realizing that wasn't true hope?
- Listen to "Living Hope" by Phil Wickham and ask God to open your heart for the coming week.

The Story of “Living Hope”

By Perry Ross, Worship Minister

Over the years, there have been many songs that have captivated the hearts of churches worldwide. Songs that tell our story—a story of frailty and brokenness, of our need for a savior, our longing for freedom from this fallen world. Songs of hope.

In 2019, the church was introduced to such a song with Phil Wickham’s “Living Hope.” Written with fellow worship leader Brian Johnson (Bethel), the song found its origin in a simple melody sent in a voice memo from Brian. Phil immediately thought it sounded like a hymn and the two of them dove in. Originally titled “Heart Deep,” they began exchanging ideas back and forth over voice memos.

“As we were writing this song,” Phil says, “these lyrics about this unfathomable, uncrossable chasm between our unholiness and God’s holiness, and how Jesus bridged that gap, burst into our darkness.”

Verse by verse, as the song came to life, they realized, even though it had the theme of God’s love for us going heart deep, it was truly about “God flooding our lives with hope and life,” Phil says.

1 Peter 3:1 was a reference point for them: *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”*

Peter is speaking of a hope that lasts. One that isn’t conditional on how things in this world are going. And it’s not just a hope that is coming in the future. It’s here and now. Phil says, “It starts forming everything we are, so it becomes a living thing in us.”

A living hope!

If you’re like me, I never tire of singing this song because I find myself among these words and realize how grateful I am for all Jesus did for me. Over the next few days, we will take a closer look at the song “Living Hope.” We will dig into the lyrics and Scripture and prayerfully examine this beautiful modern hymn that unfolds the wonderful plan of salvation God laid for us in Jesus. So put it on repeat, and get ready to be filled with hope!

Reflection:

- Before tomorrow, take a moment to listen to “Living Hope” again. Write down any lyrics that stand out to you.
- What is it about those lyrics you wrote down that strikes you?
- Where do you find yourself in them and the story the song tells?

The Chasm

By Perry Ross, Worship Minister

It's not up for debate. "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" is the best of the trilogy (the newer two don't count). There's a scene at the end where Indiana encounters three tests to protect the Holy Grail, which he needs to save his fatally wounded father.

The final riddle is "only in the leap from the lion's head will he prove his worth" (say it like Sean Connery ... it's fun!). What he sees in front of him is an engraved lion's head on the wall and a huge chasm between where he stands and the ledge on the other side. It becomes apparent that there is no way he can leap across this chasm.

The song "Living Hope" by Phil Wickham opens with this scenario. But instead of a chasm in a cave, it carries a much heavier and eternal conundrum.

*How great the chasm that lay between us
How high the mountain I could not climb*

When we look at the perfection of God in contrast to the brokenness of humanity, it appears as an uncrossable chasm. We could look at it and be convinced that there is no way for us to cross it—although mankind has certainly tried. Paul reminds us of this in Romans 3:23: *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

This chapter in Romans explains the desperation of mankind, who is lost in its sin, and the tragedy of not being able to fix the situation. No matter how hard we try, we can't save ourselves. What does it take then? Indy said it himself: "It's a leap of faith." He said those words just before he stepped into the void, only to find his foot on solid ground.

*In desperation, I turned to heaven
And spoke your name into the night*

What brings us across the chasm? Faith. Surrendering trying to do it on our own and having faith that God has made a way for us to be free from sin through his Son, Jesus. And a remarkable thing happens when we believe and put our trust in him.

*Then through the darkness, your loving kindness
Tore through the shadow of my soul
The work is finished, the end is written
Jesus Christ, my living hope*

Reflection:

- When have you tried to cross the chasm between you and God on your own?
- How can you live differently, knowing that faith in Jesus alone is what it takes?

The Cross

By Perry Ross, Worship Minister

Who could imagine so great a mercy?

What heart could fathom such boundless grace?

The second verse of the song “Living Hope” by Phil Wickham starts by proposing these two questions. As part of the worship team at Hope, I’ve led that song more than 100 times, but it wasn’t until just now that I paused to think about this. We can get so eager for our hearts to sing, “Hallelujah, praise the one who set me free” (don’t worry, we will get there), that we skip over some lines that engage the mind for a moment.

Have you ever stopped to think about the way God perfectly planned to redeem mankind? It’s remarkable that grace would be at the center—not performance or penance.

Verse two continues with a summary:

The God of ages stepped down from glory

To wear my sin and bear my shame

Romans 5:6-8 says, “When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.”

God’s plan from the start was to send Jesus to die for our sins. It’s a simple plan when you say it like that, but so much went into how this was orchestrated. His virgin birth, baptism, ministry and miracles, triumphant entry, betrayal, arrest, trial, and death.

Verse two concludes:

The cross has spoken, I am forgiven

The King of kings calls me his own

Beautiful Savior, I’m yours forever

I love that they chose to write “the cross has spoken.” It’s in the cross where the power of salvation rests. That, combined with the resurrection, confirms we are forgiven. This plan is bigger than our imagination. Deeper than we can fathom. I feel a hallelujah coming on.

Reflection:

- Take a few moments and ponder the miraculous way God has set you free. What stands out as the most surprising part of it?
- Read Romans 5. Slowly. Notice how perfectly God designed the plan of salvation. Pray a prayer of thanks that God would think of you when he planned it.

The Lion

By Perry Ross, Worship Minister

Revelation means apocalypse, and while John's vision is full of imagery and symbolism that many have used to predict the end times, that was not its intent. Rather, it is a symbolic explanation of how the kingdom of heaven will come to earth.

In Chapters 4-5, there's a scene laid out with thrones, creatures, angels, elders, and a scroll containing judgment, redemption, and inheritance for mankind. Scrolls were brought into Roman courtrooms **sealed**, and only the executor could open them and **declare** the contents. In John's vision, he weeps because he sees this scroll, which contains the redemptive plan for mankind to rescue us from the judgment of sin, but there is no one worthy to open it.

But one of the twenty-four elders said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has won the victory. He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals" (Revelation 5:5).

Who is the **Lion** of the Tribe of Judah? In Genesis 49, Jacob is blessing his sons and he says Judah is a "young lion." And while Jacob says this about his son, it is a prophecy of the Messiah who will come from the lineage of the house of Judah.

When the elder points to the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, John looks and doesn't see a lion, but a lamb. A lamb that was slain. Jesus is the Lion, the king and ruler and most powerful victor, but he did it by becoming the lamb that was slain. That gives him the authority to open the scroll, declare our victory, and bring redemption for all.

All of that lays the foundation for the third verse of "Living Hope" by Phil Wickham:

*Then came the morning that **sealed** the promise*

Your buried body began to breathe

*Out of the silence, the **roaring Lion***

***Declared** the grave has no claim on me*

This is such a powerful truth that puts the final redemptive work of Jesus in play. Jesus rose again as the Lion, who was worthy to take the scroll, open it, and declare we have victory in him. This is so powerful that the authors of the song chose to sing it two times in a row. We have victory in Jesus. Tomorrow, we will look closer at what that means.

Prayer:

God, thank you for sending your son, Jesus, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, who was also the Lamb slain for our salvation. Thank you for the resurrection power that raised him from the grave and raised us with him to new life and victory in his name. God, reveal to me the depth of your salvation, and help me walk in the victory you have for me. Amen.

The Victory

By Perry Ross, Worship Minister

In 1939, Eugene Bartlett wrote the last of his 800-plus songs, the hymn “Victory in Jesus.” I’ve sung that song many times growing up as a pastor’s kid. In looking at this song to reference the theme of victory, I discovered that Bartlett wrote it in probably the lowest part of his life. He had just suffered a stroke that brought his teaching and traveling ministry to a halt. But in reflecting over his life, at the age of 53, he penned this hymn.

Some of you may be familiar with the chorus:

O victory in Jesus, my Savior, forever

He sought me and bought me with his redeeming blood

He loved me ere I knew him, and all my love is due him

He plunged me to victory beneath the cleansing flood

As a kid, I always laughed about the idea of “he plunged me.” It sounded like a silly phrase, and my brother and I would mime cleaning out a toilet. But after all these years, that song is the first thing I thought of when I started to write about victory.

In the song “Living Hope,” written nearly 80 years after “Victory in Jesus,” the word “victory” is used only once at the end of a verse. As a worship leader, I’d say that line is where I see the congregation erupt in worship, hands raised and a unified voice singing out that declaration. There couldn’t be a more powerful moment in the song, when the author reflects on all the thoughts and phrases that led up to it.

The chasm between us. Our desperate need for a Savior. God’s loving kindness, breaking through. The cross where Jesus died for our sins. The buried Jesus began to breathe. The resurrected Lion of Judah and Lamb of God. The powerless grave. Yes! Jesus has won the victory!

Whether we sing a classic hymn or a modern one, songwriters can agree on one thing: The victory we have in Jesus is something worth singing about. And most importantly, the victory we celebrate is not something we have won, but a victory that was won for us through Jesus’ death and resurrection on the cross.

When we think about that, to quote another song, there is just one response. There is just one move. We sing our (*wait for it—to be continued tomorrow!*) ...

Reflection:

- If you grew up in church, what’s a song that has stuck with you after all these years? If you’re new to faith/church, what’s one song that resonates with you?
- What does victory in Jesus signify for you? How do you walk in that victory?

My Hallelujah

By Perry Ross, Worship Minister

... Hallelujah!

Throughout the song “Living Hope,” this chorus summarizes the verses in a simple yet worthy response to the story the lyrics tell:

Hallelujah, praise the one who set me free

Hallelujah, death has lost its grip on me

You have broken every chain

There's salvation in your name

Jesus Christ, my living hope

Hallelujah is a universal word. You can use it pretty much anywhere, in any situation, and people will get what you mean. It's a response to something good that's happened.

“Hallelujah, look at that parking space that opened up right by the door!”

“Hallelujah, McDonald's brought the Snack Wrap back!”

“Hallelujah, the [insert sports team here] scored another [insert sport term here]!”

As much as we use this word in our day-to-day lives, there is a deeper meaning. It carries weight when we look beyond what it means to what it implies. Hallelujah means praise (hallelu) the Lord (Jah). It's an expression to proclaim praise, rejoicing and celebrating in response to something God has done. It is also an imperative word in both Greek and Hebrew, which implies a direct command or instruction.

Hallelujah is a call to action. It is not just a statement of fact. This word calls us to respond to the wonderful love of Jesus and his work on the cross, not just by declaring what he did, but by living our lives in response to it. By living a life full of worship. By choosing each day to live with hope, joy, and in the victory that Jesus has won for us. It's a *living hope*.

The next time you sing the chorus to “Living Hope,” remember you are not just declaring what God has done in the verses. You are choosing to respond to those truths by surrendering your life to him and living in the power of a resurrected Savior. One who has set you free, released the sting of death, broken every chain, and brought salvation through Jesus.

Reflection:

- What does it look like for you to live out the true meaning of hallelujah?
- Take a moment and read through the words to the song “Living Hope.” Reflect on it line by line and pause, offering a heartfelt hallelujah in response.

Finding Peace in the Waiting

By Lyndsay Korte, Family Minister

Have you ever been waiting expectantly for the birth of a new baby? Maybe your own child or a grandchild, a niece or nephew, the child of a friend. The prophet Isaiah gave these words found in Isaiah 9:6-7 to the people of Judah as a source of hope. Yet God's people waited expectantly for nearly 700 years for the birth of this child.

Of course, there was something special about this long-awaited child. This child was God made flesh—the incarnation of God's own self, who was given to live among us, teach us, and redeem us. God's people waited for this child to be born. And I wonder if in their waiting they experienced God's joy, excitement, anticipation, and peace.

If I'm being honest, I don't always feel at peace when I'm in a season of waiting. Yet this very Scripture reminded God's people (and me) that this child would be worth the wait. He would be a ruler called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He would be a ruler big enough to reign over all creation and yet intimate enough to care for us each personally.

That's a ruler—in fact, a God—worth putting our trust in. That's a God in whom we can find peace—in seasons of waiting, in seasons of wanting, in seasons of joy, in all seasons. So, my prayer for all of us during this Advent season is that today, as we live in the tension of the “now and not yet” of God's kingdom on earth, we would join together with all God's people in waiting with joy-filled, peace-abundant expectation to celebrate the birth of this long-awaited baby Jesus and anticipate the unending peace his kingdom will one day bring.

Prayer:

God, thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus. Help me find peace in the seasons of waiting I find myself in. Teach me to lean into you even more today. Amen.

Peace and Power

By Lyndsay Korte, Family Minister

One of my favorite places to be is near the ocean. Have you been there? Close your eyes and picture the expansiveness of the water. Hear the crashing waves. God's power is palpable in that imagery. We see that same power on display in Psalm 29. David describes how the God of glory thunders and how his voice breaks the cedars and shakes the wilderness. How strong must God's voice be to break the cedar tree, whose trunk was eight feet across and branches stretched over 120 feet in the air?

Yet in all his power, what does God give his people? Verse 11 says, "May the Lord give strength to his people. May the Lord bless his people with peace." This God who reigns over all creation, who sits enthroned as ruler forever, strengthens his people and gives them peace. God shows us how true power begets peace.

True power doesn't lord it over others. True power builds others up. True power elevates those around it. True power doesn't instill fear—it blesses others with peace. This is the power of God. And this is the power of God in us!

Have you ever experienced this kind of peace in power? That's what I feel when I sit by the ocean. I'm highly aware of the glory and splendor and power of God through his creation. And yet in the awe at the sight of the water and the sound of the waves, God whispers to me. He says that he, the Creator of all these beautiful things, loves me. That he who made the universe, cares for me. That he is an intimate God who longs for connection with me.

May you know that this same God, whose voice breaks the cedars and shakes the wilderness, loves you. He cares for you. He longs for connection with you. And may that bring you peace.

Reflection:

- Why do we so often think peace and power are opposite ideas?
- In what ways does God show us how true power begets peace?

Concerned About What?

By Lyndsay Korte, Family Minister

What do you worry about? Do you worry about the people you love? Or the state of the world? Or where your next meal might come from? We don't have to think long to answer this question. It seems like worry is part of our fallen human condition.

It's easy to read this passage from Matthew and focus on how we need not worry because God provides. He provides food for the birds and dresses the flowers beautifully, so certainly he will care for us in meaningful ways as well because of his deep care for us. These things are true, but I think there's another way to approach this passage as well.

"Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? ... These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need" (Matthew 6:25, 32-33).

What if this passage is less about our needs being met and more about what we're seeking in life? What if this is telling us not to be concerned about worldly things and instead to focus our hearts and energy on bringing God's kingdom to earth?

I've never read one verse in the Bible about Jesus being concerned about what he would eat or wear, but I've read a lot of verses about Jesus being concerned about how people are treated, if people are sharing God's love with the world around them, and if people are putting God first.

What if Jesus is encouraging you to worry less about material possessions or things you have no control over and instead inviting you to concern yourself more with reflecting God's love into the world? What new kind of peace might you experience in that freedom?

One of the ways Hope is reflecting God's love into the world is through our new food pantry. Go to hopewdm.org/pantry to learn more.

Prayer:

God, what do I concern myself with that isn't of you? Where could I spend more of my energy focused on things that share your love with the world around me? Amen.

Chosen

By Lyndsay Korte, Family Minister

Have you ever been chosen for something? For a team or job? It feels nice to be chosen—to know someone sees something in you that's worth choosing. This is what God does for us. He looks at us and sees something worth choosing. He chooses us and calls us holy and beloved. And with this chosenness comes a call.

God calls us to treat one another with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. He calls us to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts and relationships with one another. If I'm being honest, sometimes that last part seems impossible. How are we to have peace in our relationships with others in the midst of so much division and animosity in our culture?

The author speaks to this in the verse immediately preceding this call to peace. *"Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony."* And immediately after this call to peace he says, *"Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives."* Lead with love, live in peace, and let the richness of Christ fill your life.

It sounds idyllic, but it's not a far-fetched dream. What might it look like for us to lead with love in our disagreements about important topics? What would it be like for us to see one another as holy and beloved children of God, even in the midst of tension? How might our posture toward one another shift if we allowed Christ to dwell in us richly when we approach one another in community? What peace might we experience individually and collectively if we took seriously that God has chosen us to partner with him in this good work?

Prayer:

God, thank you for choosing me and calling me to embody your love to those around me. Help me to take that call seriously and to allow your Spirit to flow through me every day. Amen.

Unity in the Cross

By Lyndsay Korte, Family Minister

If we're being honest, we all have a "they"—a group of people we strongly disagree with for one reason or another. It could be a side of the family or a political leaning or a religious group. So, who's your "they"? Who makes you say things like, "They did this ... They shouldn't have ... They don't deserve ..."

The author here in Ephesians is discussing the tension between two people groups—Jews and Gentiles—where there was deep discord due to religious, cultural, and political beliefs. The Holy Spirit had been working through the apostle Paul to show both groups that faith in Jesus actually united them (see Galatians 3:26-28). But sometimes I think we still get so caught up in God's reconciling work between our individual selves and God, that we forget it's also reconciling work among all of humanity.

This passage in Ephesians reminds us that God came in the flesh to break down the hostility between "us" and "them," to make peace, and to reconcile all people to God in one body through the cross. Through Jesus Christ, we become God's unified people who are built together by the power of the Holy Spirit to become a dwelling place for God. We—"us" and "them" together—are a dwelling place for God! Jesus declares peace to "us" and "them." This is the power of the cross.

We are all brought near to God through the cross of Jesus. We are given the freedom to live in peace with God and one another. We are reminded that the unity we have in Jesus is greater than anything that may divide us—family dynamics, political affiliations, church denominations, and anything else the world tries to use to fuel hate. At the foot of the cross, we see that the ground is level for all people, and we find peace.

Reflection:

- What's one tangible way you can extend God's love to "them" today?

Victory

By Lyndsay Korte, Family Minister

When have you felt the most desperate in life? The most persecuted? The most anguish? This is the time Jesus knows his disciples are about to enter. He knows his time on earth is quickly coming to an end and his disciples have not yet fully understood the mission. So, in these last moments with them, he tries to prepare them.

Jesus tells them they will deny him, abandon him, and he will be leaving this world. Yet after all this hard news, he says they can have peace and take courage. It almost sounds insensitive. How can they have peace and courage in the face of such adversity?

Jesus' counterintuitive message aims to remind the disciples, and all of us, that there's nothing Jesus won't conquer. Trouble, persecution, hostility, brokenness, not even death can overwhelm Jesus. He has conquered the world! And through his death and resurrection, he extends this victory to us.

These last words of Jesus invite us to reflect on our own lives with this view in mind—that this side of heaven is not the end. We can expect to experience suffering in life and it's painful. We don't have to deny that. But we have a God who sent his own Son to live among us, to experience our suffering with us. And because of his loving kindness, God reminds us through Jesus that in the midst of that suffering, we can have peace and confidence and hope because Jesus wins. He defeats sin and death and brokenness and shame.

And now Jesus extends that victory to us. Where the world sees only darkness, we know we have hope in his light. Where the world sees only hate, we can rest in his love, which overcomes all the powers of this world. And where the world sees only suffering, we can experience his deep and meaningful peace.

Reflection:

- How can you put your hope in this victory of Jesus today?
- What would change in your life if you truly lived as though this victory were yours?
- If you are going through a difficult time and seeking additional support, Hope's Care Team is always ready to help. Learn about the services they offer by visiting hopewdm.org/find-support.

No Burden Too Big

By Lyndsay Korte, Family Minister

What burdens do you carry today? The burden of the brokenness in our world? The burden of illness of a loved one? The burden of worry in your own heart and mind? Jesus says, “Come to me.” He is calling you to himself. He invites us to let go of these burdens we’ve put on ourselves and lay them at the foot of the cross—where they belong.

Jesus isn’t overwhelmed by our burdens. There’s nothing too big or too small for him. There’s no problem or thought or feeling that could overwhelm or underwhelm him. Philippians 4:6-7 tells us not to worry about anything, but instead to pray about everything. And then we will experience God’s peace, which surpasses all understanding.

This peace—this rest—is a powerful gift. And it is your right as a child of God to ask him for it. When we come to Jesus with our burdens, he takes them on as his own. And instead, we receive his love, grace, and mercy. This is why his yoke is easy and his burden is light. We are given what belongs to Jesus because we are his children.

Parents love to give their children good gifts. Think of the joy of giving a child or a grandchild a gift you know they’ll love at Christmas. This is how God feels about giving us the gift of rest and peace. He knows it’s something our hearts long for and he offers it willingly.

So, you can enter into this exchange of your burden for his peace with hope and confident expectation. There is a God who loves you, who rescues you, and whose Spirit lives within you. And this God calls to you and invites you to experience his rest—his peace—each and every day.

Reflection:

- Scan the QR code to listen to “The Blessing” and allow this to be a prayer of peace over your life today.



How to Find Joy That Lasts

By Ben Mason, Care Pastor

Be strong and do not fear, because the Lord your God is coming to save you! The biblical story starts with joy, peace, and plenty. The setting is a garden—lush, beautiful, fruitful, and safe. There is no hunger and nothing to fear.

As you read the Bible, it is helpful to keep that garden image in mind. Eden is our intended home and a symbol of everything God desired for us from the beginning. The wilderness is the image contrasting the garden. Look at the words Isaiah uses in our reading: wilderness, desert, wasteland. This is where God's people keep finding themselves, and it is a symbol of the human condition.

What is the harshest environment you can think of? The Sahara Desert? Antarctica? The Dead Sea? The Mariana Trench, where the pressure is about 1,100 times greater than the atmosphere at sea level? What about Venus, where the temperature averages almost 900 degrees Fahrenheit? Scientists theorize that diamonds fall like rain on Neptune, which sounds like fun until you realize that the wind on that planet is 1,200 miles per hour, so those diamonds would fly like bullets.

Now take these images and see what Isaiah is doing. The wasteland bursts with joy. The cruelest places in creation are so transformed by the joy of the Lord that life explodes in them. It isn't just that the people in the wasteland will be glad, but the actual deserts will rejoice. The joy God gives will seep into the very fabric of existence, and everything will change because of Jesus!

Don't treat joy like it is something you need to well up from inside of you. The deserts and the wastelands don't will themselves into joy; it is the inevitability that comes from God's renewing presence. Isaiah 55 talks about the hills breaking out in song, and the trees of the fields clapping their hands. A friend of mine was once reflecting on Jesus walking on the water and speculated that it worked that way because of the way water responded to the feet of its creator. Creation can't help but be joyful in God's presence, and so it will be for you. Rejoice! Your Savior has come!

Prayer:

God of joy, thank you for the joy I find in my life. Thank you for the moments when laughter is uncontainable. Thank you for the smiles that sneak onto my face before I am aware of them. Thank you that joy is a fruit of your Spirit, and I pray that the whole earth would be full of your joy. It is breaking through all the time in small ways that I often miss, but please give me eyes to see joy anew today. Amen.

The Sound of Heaven

By Ben Mason, Care Pastor

As I think about the joy of Christmas, I can't help but think of the "Hallelujah" chorus. This piece of music was written for the season of Easter, but at some point, it became more associated with Christmas. There really isn't a song that better communicates exuberant joy. Need proof? Movies ranging from "Manchester by the Sea" to "Shrek" to "Dumb and Dumber" use it. It communicated just the right feeling for scenes in TV shows like "The Wonder Years," "House," "Smallville," and "Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares." Commercials from the likes of Oscar Mayer and Dish Network used it because the "Hallelujah" chorus is what joy sounds like, and these companies want you to feel joy when you think of their brands.

So, most people are surprised to find out that this undeniably joyful song comes right out of the pages of Revelation, the book in the Bible most associated with fear, judgment, and dread. Maybe that means that we miss the point of Revelation. It gets its name from the opening sentence, "*The revelation of Jesus ...*" The purpose of this book, which we can find so scary, was actually given to show us who Jesus is and what he is like. Jesus! Our reason for the season! Our source of hope and joy! He is coming to make everything right, so as we meditate on the meaning of joy this Advent, we will park in Revelation for a few days.

"Hallelujah" in our reading today is translated as "Praise the Lord" in the New Living Translation, which makes sense because that is what the word means, but I wish they had left it untranslated. Look at the reading closely. John is telling us what heaven will sound like. It sounds like a loud hallelujah! In coming to us at Christmas, and in coming again, Jesus fulfills the true longing of every human heart. The kingdom of this world—broken, unjust, and corrupt—has become the kingdom of our Lord, and he shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah!

Reflection:

- Listen to the "Hallelujah" chorus as loudly as you care to. How does it feel? Have you ever sung it? What do the words communicate to you?
- What does it mean that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ?
- How is God calling you to participate in the coming of his kingdom this season?

Best Day Ever

By Ben Mason, Care Pastor

Whenever I prepare to preach, the most important parts are prayer and time spent with God in Scripture. I humbly do my best to only say what I believe God is guiding me to say.

I am honored to officiate and preach at a lot of weddings—it is one of my favorite things. I once got to do the wedding for a couple I knew very well, so I was extra excited. As I prayed and prepared, the main point of the sermon that I humbly felt God laying on my heart was this: While many couples talk about their wedding day as the “best day ever” or the “best day of their lives,” I encourage you to think of it more as the “best day yet” because God has even more amazing things in your future. Weddings are amazing, but marriages are even better! The wedding will last a day; the marriage will last a lifetime!

I felt good about the wedding. When I got to the venue, which was all decked out and beautiful, I immediately saw the theme they had chosen. It was on a huge banner, all the centerpieces, and the napkins: BEST DAY EVER! I had to laugh at God's playful sense of humor and the creative ways he finds to humble me.

I prayed more and still felt led to preach the sermon God had given me, but I started by saying, “Well, this is going to be a bit awkward.” It went well, and everyone seemed to receive what God was saying through me. On their first anniversary, the couple sent me a text that simply said, “Today is the best day yet!”

By God's design, every marriage is a sermon lived out. When a couple commits to each other for better or worse, and when they lay down their selfishness—even their dreams and ultimately their lives—to serve each other so the other would be blessed, they are a living symbol of God's relationship with us and the way Christ commits to us to the point of death. The biblical story starts with a marriage (Adam and Eve) and ends with a marriage (Christ and the church) to show us what God is like. When heaven and earth are joined and we get to live with Jesus forever, THAT is going to be the best day ever!

Reflection:

- Think about the best wedding you've ever been to (maybe it was yours!). What made that day special and stand out in your mind?
- Why do you think the Bible talks about us as the bride of Christ? Does that change the way you see yourself, or the way you live out your life?
- Why is it called the wedding feast of the lamb? How has the bride prepared herself, and what is your role in that?

All Things New

By Ben Mason, Care Pastor

This passage for today is one of my favorites in the whole Bible. Think of all the happy endings of all the best movies and stories ever made; they are all attempting to capture what John is seeing and trying to describe. This is immersion in pure joy. Like jumping off an outcrop into a clear, cool lake on a blistering summer day. Like the embrace of your beloved after tragedy strikes, and you were convinced you'd never see them again. Like the moment you got down on your knee and she said yes. Like being there when the Cubs won game seven of the World Series. Like Christmas Eve services at Hope. Like ice cream.

Revelation is trying to describe what is too good for words. It's heaven. I heard and have often repeated that the words in Revelation nearly shatter under the weight of all they are trying to carry.

A thought experiment might help: Imagine you are talking with someone who was born blind, meaning they have never seen light or color. How would you describe a rainbow to them?

My favorite kids' Bible, "The Jesus Storybook Bible," takes this passage and summarizes it this way: God is making all the sad things untrue. This is what the birth of Jesus our Savior means to us. All the sad things become untrue because Jesus was born. There is no longer any death, sorrow, crying, or pain, and every tear is wiped from our eyes. Joy is made complete.

Reflection:

- What gives you the most joy? How can you lean into that joy today?
- What is hard about the holidays? Some of us have a harder time being joyful than others. Spend some time with God and think about all the sad things that will be made untrue in Jesus. Let your heart anticipate and trust it. Ask God to give you joy that nothing in the world can give or take away.

Trustworthy and True

By Ben Mason, Care Pastor

Merry Christmas! However you spend this day, I hope it brings you great joy to know that God's love is for you and he will never let go of you. I will always remember what Christmas was like when I was a kid, and my wife is amazingly childlike in her wonder and love of Christmas. That kind of joy is catching and fun, and that is why the holiday can be so easily and powerfully twisted for consumeristic purposes.

Truly, the most amazing thing about Christmas joy is that it isn't based in an escape from the harsh realities of the world, which is what consumerism is selling. Instead, it is God's transformative embrace of the world that he loved from the beginning to the end. God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son.

When sin, death, and the devil leveraged every vile wickedness within reach, God stretched out his arms and embraced the world that was actively hating him. With every evil force marshalled in attack, God sends a champion to save us—an infant. The most marvelous part of this unfathomable story is that it is true.

Over the past few days, there was a repeated theme in the readings, and it is one that runs through the whole book of Revelation. The angel says to John, "Everything you have heard and seen is trustworthy and true."

Don't delude yourself into thinking that any feel-good story will do, or that the story's value is found simply in the way it inspires readers to change. No, this story is void of all meaning unless it is true. Trust it with all you have and let it change you. The water of life will quench all your thirst, and the tree of life will nourish you and heal every wound of mind, body, spirit, and relationship. You will see God face to face, and every darkness will be cast away to be replaced by light, love, hope, and joy.

Prayer:

Come, Lord Jesus! We celebrate your birth today and rejoice at the splendor—the word of God made flesh and laid in a manger. As an infant, you made yourself utterly vulnerable and weak, and in doing so, you put every power in its place. Every knee bows at the sound of your name. In awe, we see you keep every promise you've ever made. In gratitude, we receive every good thing you give. In hope, we put our hands to the labor of your kingdom. In peace, we rest in the words you spoke: It is finished. Let your kingdom come in us and through us on this beautiful Christmas day. Amen.

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