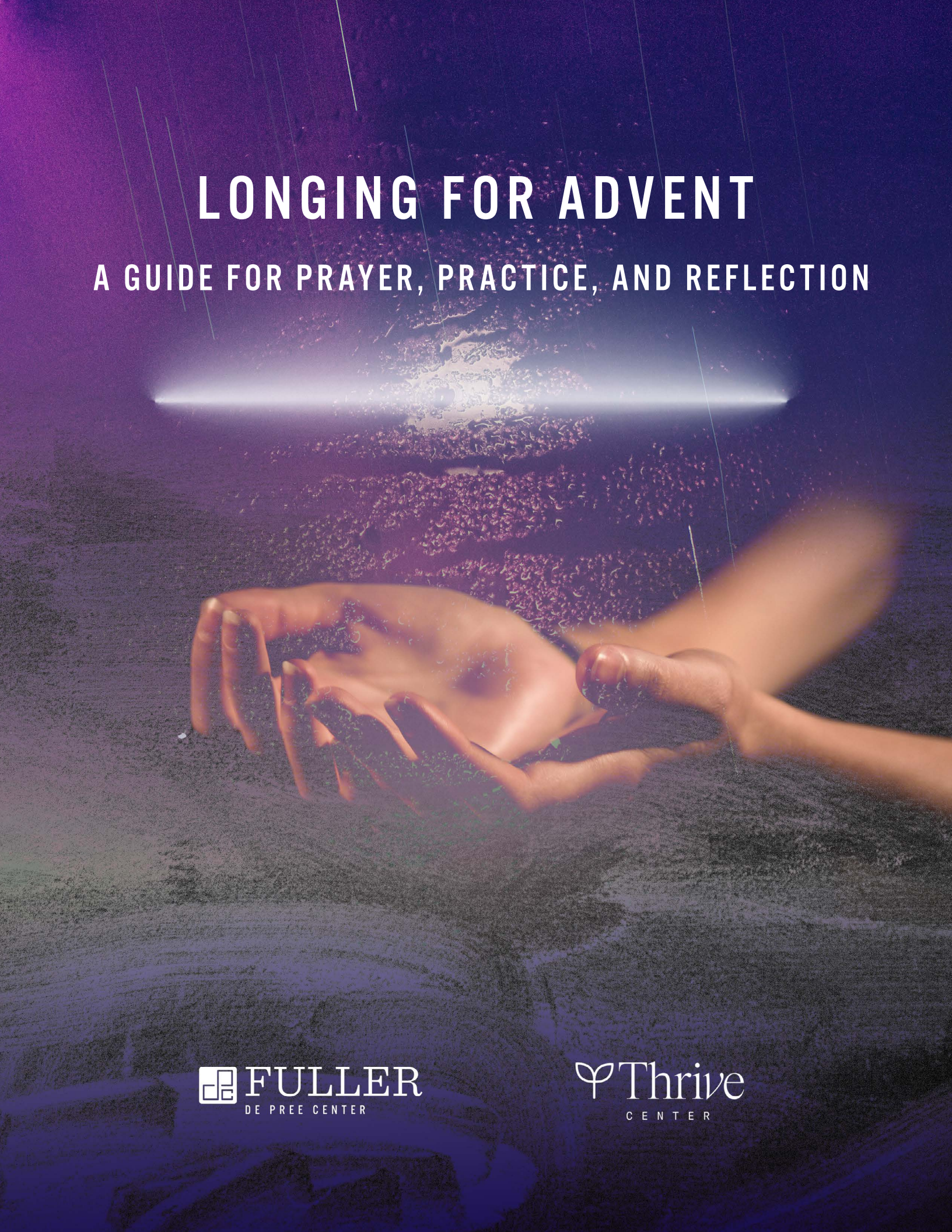


A hand is shown holding a glowing, textured orb. The background is dark and rainy, with rain streaks visible. The overall mood is contemplative and spiritual.

LONGING FOR ADVENT

A GUIDE FOR PRAYER, PRACTICE, AND REFLECTION



FULLER
DE PREE CENTER

 **Thrive**
CENTER

EDITOR

Chelsea Logan

PROJECT LEAD

W. Ryan Gutierrez

PROJECT SUPPORT

Jennifer Woodruff-Tait

Raven Carey-James

Trish Swords

Lauren Kim

Jilleen Westbrook

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Justin Heap

This journal was created in collaboration with the [Thrive Center for Human Development at Fuller Seminary](#).

© 2025 Fuller Theological Seminary

No part of this workbook may be shared or reproduced without the written consent of the Max De Pree Center for Leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Unless noted, all Scripture quotations are from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

QUESTIONS

For questions or comments, please contact the De Pree Center at connect@depree.org.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EDITOR'S NOTE	5
INTRODUCTION	8
WEEK 1 - HOPE	12
Essay, "Journey of Hope"	13
Lectio Divina	20
Devotions	
Monday, Isaiah 2:1–5	24
Tuesday, Psalm 122	28
Wednesday, Romans 13:11–14	31
Thursday, Matthew 24:36–44	34
Friday, Psalm 96	38
Practices	42
WEEK 2 - PEACE	43
Essay, "Walking Down the Path of Peace"	44
Lectio Divina	50
Devotions	
Monday, Isaiah 11:1–10	54
Tuesday, Psalm 72:1–3, 18–19	58
Wednesday, Romans 15:4–13	62
Thursday, Matthew 3:1–12	65
Friday, Revelation 21:1–11	68
Practices	72

WEEK 3 - JOY	73
Essay, “Longing for Joy”	74
Lectio Divina	82
Devotions	
Monday, Isaiah 35:1–10	86
Tuesday, Psalm 146:5–10	91
Wednesday, James 5:7–10	94
Thursday, Luke 1:46b–55	97
Friday, Matthew 11:2–6	100
Practices	103
WEEK 4 - LOVE	104
Essay, “Love that Comes Near ”	105
Lectio Divina	109
Devotions	
Monday, Isaiah 7:10–16	113
Tuesday, Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19	116
Wednesday, Romans 1:1–7	120
Thursday, Matthew 1:18–25	122
Friday, Luke 2:1–15	125
Practices	128

EDITOR'S NOTE

What do you long for?

Recently, I asked a dozen or so people this question. To start, I explained that longings are not the same as “wants,” which can change with our appetites and often follow cultural trends. Our longings live deeper. They occupy a vulnerable, sacred space within us. In his book, [*You Are What You Love*](#), theologian James K. A. Smith goes as far as to say that our longings sit at “the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow.” The responses I received reflected his understanding. Here are a few:

I long to be healed of chronic pain.

I long for a baby.

I long to be recognized for the work I do.

I long to reconnect with my estranged adult children.

I long for a spouse.

I long to see and experience justice.

These longings are deeply personal and profoundly human. And I would imagine that your response to this question would be equally as honest. Because we all long for *something*. Scripture attests to this, reminding us story after story that all humanity shares in the ache of longing—longings not unlike our own. We find cries of longing for justice, for healing, for salvation. Longings for children or for a home. Longings to be known and loved. Longings for God himself.

And yet, the Bible is clear that longing isn't a human experience alone. It could even be said that we long first and foremost not because we are human, but because we are created in the image of a God who longs. These Divine longings are

evident on every page: a longing to create the world and be intimately connected to it; a longing to cover the shame of humanity; a longing for humans to love and trust him; a longing for people to love justice, mercy, and even their enemies; a longing for relationship so powerful that God dies for it; a longing to wipe every tear from every eye.

Of all the seasons found in the Church calendar, Advent is best suited to hold the longings we feel. To start, the word “Advent” is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “coming” or “arrival”—a name that inherently assumes a waiting or longing for something to show up.

Advent also occupies a unique place in the Church calendar, serving as both the beginning of the Christian year and the end of our calendar year. This allows us to view our longings in a space where time overlaps—a space illuminated by the light of what God has done, will do, and is presently doing.

Looking to the *past*, we remember the first Advent, when God’s deepest longing to be with his people was embodied in the person of Jesus. In *Immanuel*, we find a high priest, a friend, and a Savior who not only carries the burden of our longings with us, but who has the power to bring peace, comfort, and even joy as we wait for their fruition.

We also look to the *future*, clinging to the hope of the second Advent: Christ *will* come again. And in his return, we are promised that all that is wrong will be made right. That our tears will be wiped away. And that the pain of our longings will cease as our deepest longing to be with our Creator is finally satisfied.

We also experience Advent in the *present*. This time between Christ’s first and second advents is often referred to as the “now and not yet.” And it’s in this space

that Advent invites us to experience our longings. To view them through the overlay of the past and the future, and therefore live here and now in hope of what Christ has done and will do. In the words of Steve Teng, Advent “invites us to long without despair and to rejoice without denial.” And this is not simply for ourselves, but an invitation to exhibit hope, peace, joy, and love to a world longing for Advent.

We are excited to have you join us as we participate in *Longing for Advent*—in desiring more than our longings themselves, but for the God who desires to meet us in them.

CHELSEA LOGAN

Content and Production Lead

Max De Pree Center for Leadership

Fuller Theological Seminary

INTRODUCTION

This guide is divided into four sections, one for each of the four weeks of Advent. Each section contains:

- A thoughtful essay with reflection questions,
- A *Lectio Divina* guide with daily Scripture readings,
- Daily devotionals, and
- Practices to help you thrive this Advent season.

ABOUT THE ESSAYS.

The essays, written by [Dr. Hilda Davis](#), [Dr. W. Ryan Gutierrez](#), [Steve Teng](#), and [Dr. Pam King](#), help us ponder the weekly Advent themes—hope, joy, peace, and love. At the end of each essay, we’ve provided a few reflection questions to help you consider the authors’ ideas and their application to your life and leadership. You can also find the essays at depre.org/de-pree-journal.

ABOUT LECTIO DIVINA.

We will walk through a modified version of *Lectio Divina*, an ancient practice that can help us slowly and prayerfully attend and respond to the Word of God. The process has four steps: Read, Reflect, Request, and Respond.

The Scripture passages selected for the *Lectio Divina* and devotions in this Advent guide come from the Revised Common Lectionary. The lectionary is a three-year cycle of Scripture readings that can be used in gathered worship and personal study. The readings follow the Christian year, and most weeks contain a reading from the Old Testament, a Psalm, an Epistle, and a Gospel. We follow the lectionary because of its potential to unite believers around common readings. Most of the Scripture passages come from the Advent readings for Year A. When necessary,

supplementary passages have been selected from the Christmas season readings.

READ.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple. — Psalm 19:7

At the beginning of each practice, we will read that day's Scripture passage and identify a word or phrase that jumps out at us. We've provided a link for each passage if you would like to read it online.

REFLECT.

Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night. — Psalm 1:1-2

After reading or listening to the passage, we will reflect on it using a series of questions printed in the journal as a guide.

REQUEST.

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault,
and it will be given to you. — James 1:5

Next, we'll request understanding and wisdom from God. To be fair, we could make this request at any point in this practice, but we want to ask God how the truth in

this passage applies to our present circumstances.

RESPOND.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. — James 1:22-25

Finally, we will decide on one action or attitude to adopt in light of what we sense God is inviting us to do or be in today's passage.

ABOUT THE DEVOTIONS.

The De Pree Center has produced a daily devotional called *Life for Leaders* for years. Thousands of readers read the devotions daily. This year, *Life for Leaders* writers [Dr. Mark Roberts](#), [Dr. DeLano Sheffield](#), [Rev. Dr. Jennifer Woodruff Tait](#), [Dr. Matthew Dickerson](#), [Joy-Ann Wood](#), [Raven Carey-James](#), and [Rev. Inés Velásquez-McBryde](#) offer weekday devotions that follow the lectionary passages. These devotions are included in this Advent guide. You can also have the daily devotions delivered to your inbox each morning by signing up for *Life for Leaders* at depree.org/life-for-leaders/.

ABOUT THE PRACTICES.

[The Thrive Center for Human Development](#) at Fuller Seminary draws upon psychological frameworks to help people cultivate vibrant spiritual health. One of their areas of expertise is developing and sharing simple practices that can help us thrive across several dimensions of our lives. Each month, the Thrive Center produces a free downloadable calendar filled with ideas and practices. The

December calendar is designed for Advent. [Sign up to receive their emails in order to get the calendar delivered to your inbox!](#)

This year, we've incorporated some of the practices from their December calendar into this Advent guide so that we can pursue thriving during this Advent season.

HOPE

WEEK 1
OF
ADVENT

JOURNEY OF HOPE

ESSAY BY DR. HILDA DAVIS

Such hope [in God's promises] never disappoints us. — Romans 5:5, AMP

Advent is the amazing story of Joseph and Mary's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, begun out of obedience to God and to fulfill God's purpose for their lives. But, to any casual observer, their journey was taken to obey the laws of the land that required Joseph to register and be counted in his hometown. The journey was about a week in physical distance—but we can only guess what inner transformation was taking place between them as they navigated their new circumstance.

Mary was carrying an unexpected child, God's promised Savior. Joseph was an unexpected father who had the responsibility of caring for a new wife and baby. What does it take to make a journey across dangerous and rough territory with a pregnant woman and an uncertain future? What deep longings might they have had to give up?

What has it taken for *you* to make your own uncertain journey from one place to another or to leave one situation for the unknown?

HOPE: AN INNER JOURNEY

Well, for this couple at the center of our Advent story, we know that their longings were rooted in hope and stronger than the fear and uncertainty of the journey and the future. Hope was shining through the angel's words to Mary,

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You will become pregnant, give birth to a son . . . Your son will be king . . . , and his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:30–33, AMP)

Hope filled the words of the angel sent to Joseph and gave him resolve and determination,

“Joseph, descendant of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus (he saves), because he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:20–21, AMP)

The angel said to both of them, “Do not be afraid.” Those are words of hope and consolation. The angel gave them hope by instilling in them that they had a powerful purpose. God’s promise of a Savior being fulfilled through them not only fulfilled God’s purpose for their lives, but the plan for all of God’s people. Hope did not erase the ever-present danger on the journey, nor did it make the path easier. But hope, as delivered by the angel, gave them courage to look forward and keep going—to long for something more than security.

**BUT HOPE, AS
DELIVERED BY
THE ANGEL, GAVE
THEM COURAGE TO
LOOK FORWARD
AND KEEP GOING—
TO LONG FOR
SOMETHING MORE
THAN SECURITY.**

Scripture gives us no clue to what they were thinking or how they felt about this tremendous change in their lives. Luke recounts Joseph and Mary’s journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in these few words:

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (Luke 2:4–5, AMP)

In the countless scenes we see of Mary riding the donkey with Joseph staunchly walking beside her, Luke's few words to describe a life-changing journey seems to be a true understatement—though he could certainly be excused considering the world-changing event that would happen two verses later. But, I would like to pause here and give more than a passing glance at this scene. There is much speculation about whether Mary and Joseph's outer journey took them through the hostile Samaria or through the more Jewish-friendly route, which was the rough and dangerous terrain of Jericho. This detail is important, as we too face similar dilemmas when deciding what paths to take in life.

However, my attention is not on the outer journey and the road not taken, but on the *inner journey* it required for Mary and Joseph to enter into this unconventional arrangement with each other. They had to pull themselves together and go. They had to show up for the census. So, despite the confusion of their personal lives and despite the difficulty of traveling in hostile and dangerous territories, they set aside their longings for safety, set their faces south to Bethlehem, and, with hope, began the journey that led to the fulfillment of their purpose—bringing the Savior, the light, into the world.

A FUTURE WITH HOPE

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

— Jeremiah 29:11, AMP

Living with hope means there is something to look forward to—a plan. God asserts that his plans allow you to prosper, to give you hope and a future. But, God's plans seem to come with a huge “by the way” that requires an angel to say, “Do not be afraid!” If somebody cautioned me to not be afraid, I would suddenly get very afraid.

But, that is a message central to Advent: The angels say over and over, “Do not be afraid!” God knows how we long for security and that we need to hear “Do not be afraid” to give us hope. And Advent is a time of hope and preparation for the birth of our Savior and the Second Coming of our Savior. This is a promise of hope: We will not be alone in the present and our future is assured. But, as we see with Mary and Joseph, when we are part of God’s plan it is not only for ourselves to prosper, but also for God’s people, who likewise benefit when we are obedient to God’s plan and purpose for our lives. When we orient our longings toward God’s plan, we are able to move forward in hope without fear.

**THIS IS A PROMISE
OF HOPE: WE WILL
NOT BE ALONE IN THE
PRESENT AND OUR
FUTURE IS ASSURED.**

Despite being obedient like Mary and Joseph, we will also face hard journeys, hostile travel conditions, and uncertain futures; but we don’t have to let fear stop us.

I have moved multiple times throughout my adult life. My first big journey was taken in my twenties when I moved from Detroit, Michigan to Houston, Texas. I packed all my meager possessions in my little car and invited a friend along (my mother insisted I not travel alone) and set my face south. I had no idea my engine would fail, the “friend” I took with me would betray me, and I would arrive at night to a town where I knew no one.

But when I later told my story at the church I joined, I marveled that I was not afraid. I remember clearly how I felt that God had a purpose for me in my move to Houston. Though the uncertainty and challenges did not end once I arrived, I

did prosper—not because of my own efforts, but because my community gave me support and encouragement.

My inner journey, filled with a deep longing for a hope-filled future, was far more defining than the turmoil related to my outer journey. My hope in God’s presence never disappointed me. In fact, many times in my prayers to “just to keep going,” I reminded myself that God’s promises are not empty, but will be fulfilled. Because we are called to participate in fulfilling God’s promise for a future with hope.

**WE ARE CALLED
TO PARTICIPATE IN
FULFILLING GOD’S
PROMISE FOR A FUTURE
WITH HOPE.**

Mary and Joseph were on the journey of a lifetime. We are, too. God has a plan for us as he did for them. We will be afraid, but God offers his presence, people (in our lives and in Scripture) to provide support, and prayer to help us keep going. Keep going. Your hope and God’s promises will not disappoint you.

PRACTICES OF HOPE

How can you orient yourself toward hope and therefore *be* hope for others this Advent season? During this season of darkness, how can you be the light not only for your own journey, but for God’s people? Consider these three ways, which can become Advent practices while we also prepare our heart’s for Christ’s birth:

- Loneliness grows during times of darkness and during holidays. Think about who you can reach out to during this Advent season and let them

know they are not alone. Share a scripture with them or accompany them on their journey. Someone to share a hard journey with gives us hope.

- When world events and life's challenges converge and overwhelm, we just need a word of [encouragement and support](#) from someone. Consider what a word of encouragement would mean for you this Advent season and the hope it gives you. Then, take time to offer words (and acts) of encouragement and support to someone else.
- I believe that Mary and Joseph were afraid. We will be afraid also. Our journey may not be traveling across the country, but an inner journey of making a decision that may have life-changing consequences and require laying down our longings. [Prayer restores our hope](#) and our purpose. Pray for yourself and others during this Advent season for inspiration to keep going.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What "inner journeys" have you experienced that required you to trust in God's plan, even when the path was uncertain or difficult?
2. Mary and Joseph's journey involved surrendering their own expectations and even some longings. What personal longings or expectations might God be asking you to set aside in order to fulfill a greater purpose?
3. In what ways do you think God is calling you to participate in a future filled with hope?
4. Who in your life might be silently navigating a difficult journey? How can you reach out with compassion, encouragement, or prayer to walk alongside them during this Advent season?

ABOUT HILDA

Rev. Hilda R. Davis, PhD, LPC, is the founder of Creative Wellness. She has combined her vocational interests in spirituality and wellness to offer programs and ministries in congregations, government and private agencies, and educational institutions. Her work in local congregations led to the publication of her book for women, *[Live Healthy & Be Well: Create an Action Plan](#)*, which offers Bible stories, meditation, and activities that lead to a wellness action plan.

LECTIO DIVINA

WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

WEEKLY PASSAGES.

Monday: [Isaiah 2:1–5](#)

Tuesday: [Psalm 122](#)

Wednesday: [Romans 13:11–14](#)

Thursday: [Matthew 24:36–44](#)

Friday: [Psalm 96](#)

READ. Read the passage slowly and carefully. Identify a word or phrase that captures your attention or jumps out at you.

REFLECT. Reflect on the passage using the questions provided.

- What emotions surface for you as you reflect on the passage?
Read through this list and identify the emotions that resonate with you.
This list isn't exhaustive, so other emotions might come to mind.

Peace

Fulfillment

Excitement

Joy

Anger

Frustration

Discouragement

Disappointment

Confusion

Gratitude

Delight

Shame

Fear

Helplessness

Acceptance

Safety

Trust

Curiosity

Sorrow

Remorse

Hope

Surprise

Uncertainty

Happiness

Anticipation

Grounded

Contentment

- How does the word or phrase you identified connect to your work in this season?
- In what ways does the word or phrase you identified connect with something you hope for in this season?
- During Advent, we focus on the hope that Jesus will come again to make all things new. In what ways is the hope we have in Jesus good news for you today?

REQUEST. Spend a few minutes in prayer. Give thanks to God for the wisdom found in the Scriptures. Request understanding and guidance from the Spirit. Then, ask God to fill you with hope so that your hope in Jesus is evident to those with whom you work.

RESPOND. Respond to God by deciding on one specific attitude or action you're going to adopt today in your work based on what you've discovered.

NOTES.

Monday:

Tuesday:

Wednesday:

Thursday:

Friday:

DEVOTION

MONDAY - WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

BIG, HAIRY, AUDACIOUS HOPE

BY DR. MARK D. ROBERTS

SCRIPTURE — ISAIAH 2:1–5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come

the mountain of the LORD'S house

shall be established as the highest of the mountains,

and shall be raised above the hills;

all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,

to the house of the God of Jacob;

that he may teach us his ways

and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,

and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations,

and shall arbitrate for many peoples;

they shall beat their swords into plowshares,

and their spears into pruning hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,

neither shall they learn war any more.

O house of Jacob,

come, let us walk

in the light of the LORD!

DEVOTION.

Many years ago, I attended a leadership seminar. I was following along nicely until the facilitator started talking about *bee-hags*. He used bee-hag as if everyone would know what it was. I looked around the room to see others nodding with approval. I didn't say anything, for fear of looking ignorant. Of course, I was ignorant. I had no idea what a *bee-hag* was.

Later, I asked a friend from the seminar, "What in the world is a *bee-hag*?" He laughed before explaining that BHAG is a term found in Jim Collins's book, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. BHAG stands for "Big Hairy Audacious Goal" (p. 93). Collins explains that truly successful, lasting companies don't just have little goals. Rather, they have BHAGs. He writes, "A BHAG energizes people – it reaches out and grabs them in the gut. It is tangible, energizing, highly focused. People 'get it' right away; it takes little or no explanation" (p. 94).

Inspired by Jim Collins, I'd like to propose that the second chapter of Isaiah gives us, not a BHAG, but a BHAH (which I'd pronounce as *bee-haw*). Yes, not a "big hairy audacious goal, but "big hairy audacious hope."

The big, hairy audacity of Isaiah's hope is seen, first of all, in its global scope. Often, the Jewish prophets spoke of future blessings for the nation of Israel. But Isaiah envisions "all the nations" being impacted by what's coming in the future (2:2). "All the nations" and "many peoples" will decide to "go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob" (2:3). Now that is a gigantic hopeful vision, don't you think?

Why do the peoples of the world want to do this? Because they are yearning for God's truth and guidance. They're going to the house of God so "that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths" (2:3). Really?! Remember, we're

talking about the “nations” here, the Gentiles, the people who generally are not eager to learn from the Lord or follow the Lord’s ways. But in Isaiah’s audacious, daring vision, even the Gentiles are hungry for God and God’s truth.

When the nations come before the Lord, who will be their judge and arbitrator, something even bigger, hairier, and more audacious will happen. All the peoples of the earth will “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (2:4). They will take their tools of war and turn them into tools for growing crops. In today’s world, Isaiah might say that all peoples will turn their tanks into tractors, their cannons into cultivators. Why will the nations do such a unique and surprising thing? Because “nation shall not lift up sword against nation” (2:4). When the nations follow God’s guidance, there will be no more wars. As it says in Psalm 46:9, the Lord “makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear.”

So then, wouldn’t you agree that Isaiah’s vision in this chapter is a BHAH? It’s filled with big, hairy, audacious hope!

What difference should this hope make? We find Isaiah’s answer in verse 5, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!” Notice what Isaiah did not say here. He did not say, “O house of Jacob, someday we will walk in the light of the LORD.” Rather, after laying out a stunning vision of the future, Isaiah says, “So let’s walk in light of this vision right now. Let’s live right now in light of what God will do in the future.”

This wonderfully represents the spirit of Advent. In this season of the year, we look back, remembering how the people of Israel hoped for God’s action in their future, which was fulfilled through the advent of Christ. At the same time, in Advent, we also get in touch with our own hopes. We yearn for the day when all peoples on

earth will turn to the Lord, when all of us will follow God's ways, and when wars will be no more.

Oh, how wonderful it would be if all people on this earth should willingly and gladly turn their weapons into farming tools! To be sure, that is a lot to hope for. In fact, it's a big, hairy, audacious hope. It's hope from God. It's Advent hope.

REFLECT.

- When you hear the word “Advent,” what comes to mind? What thoughts? Memories? Feelings? Wonderings? Hopes?
- As we begin the season of Advent, for what are you hoping these days?
- Are you hoping for anything—whether in your own life or in the world—that seems too big? Do you have any big, hairy, audacious hope?
- How might you “walk in the light of the Lord” during this season of Advent?

DEVOTION

TUESDAY - WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

HOPE AND THE LONGING FOR PEACE

DR. MATTHEW DICKERSON

SCRIPTURE READING — PSALM 122:6–9

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

“May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls

and security within your towers.”

For the sake of my relatives and friends

I will say, “Peace be within you.”

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,

I will seek your good.

DEVOTION.

Lately, I’ve been thinking a great deal about lament, and about longing, which is an important component of Biblical lament. I’ve also been thinking about hope and peace.

Lament, at its core, is bringing our sorrow and suffering to God. Lament can be a personal act or a congregational one. (A healthy Christian life has aspects of both.) We can bring to God sorrow over our own suffering, over the suffering of others, or over our sin and the harm it causes. Lament is fundamentally an act of faith and hope. We lament because we believe that God hears us (even though at times it seems we are speaking to the silence), and that God cares, is good, and has the power to act (even though God often does not act according to our expressed desires). Thus, Mark Vroegop, in his book *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the*

Grace of Lament, wisely notes, “To cry is human, but to lament is Christian.”

Now, for some readers, lament might seem an unusual topic for an Advent devotion. But it shouldn’t be. More than a third of the psalms are psalms of lament, and those who wisely spend time immersed in these lament psalms know that longing is an important part of them. We long for a day when suffering is over. We cry, “How long, O Lord? How long?”

And even as longing is a central aspect of lament, it is *also* a central theme of Advent. During Advent, we sing and pray words of longing: “Come, thou long expected Jesus.” The opening verse of that famous Charles Wesley hymn expresses a longing for release from fear and sin, and a plea for freedom and rest. We pray for these things because we need them, and because they are so often lacking in this world. And in doing so, our hearts cry out—even if our voices don’t explicitly state the words—*How long, O Lord? When will you return?* Perhaps this is why the last line of the opening verse reminds us that Jesus is the “joy of every *longing* heart.”

One of the things I most long for is peace. Peace is far more than an absence of violence. True peace comes from being in right relationship with God, and with each other. Indeed, that might be said to be the very definition of peace, with war and violence being at the opposite extreme. And right now the world is full of war, and of the suffering that results from it. When my wife and I pray for places in the world where people are suffering and dying from violence, the list is long. Ukraine. Gaza. Myanmar. Somalia. Many communities in our own country. We could go on.

In this context, I read Psalm 122, attributed to David. A “Song of Ascents,” it was written for pilgrims to Jerusalem. Beyond that, however, I don’t know much about when and under what circumstances the psalm was written. But we do know that David’s lifetime was dominated by war. In his youth, David and his people suffered

from oppression and continued military conflict with the Philistines. They were rarely free from war with surrounding nations. And the internal conflict within Israel might have been even worse, as David suffered persecution and violent oppression from Saul, and later armed conflict even within his own family.

Out of this experience comes this moving three-part prayer for the peace of Jerusalem that we read in verses 6–8, a passage that follows an opening that speaks of the delight of worship. David not only shares a prayer for peace, but he commands his hearers to join in that prayer. David understood the suffering that comes when there is no peace. As verse 8 illustrates, he knows (from his own life experiences) the suffering experienced by “relatives and friends” when peace is lacking. Whatever his present situation was, David surely had a deep longing for lasting peace. That he responds by calling his people to pray for peace shows that he understood the one true source of real peace.

And then, in the final verse, David takes one more step, saying “For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.” This active seeking of good is, I believe, a call to let our prayers for peace turn into practices that result in peace—and to do so as an act of worship for the sake of God.

Christians today should also long for peace. We should pray for peace. And then, in hope, even as we pray “your kingdom come, your will be done,” we should seek to live in a way that fosters peace for the glory of God’s name.

REFLECT.

- What do you long for? How do you express that longing in prayer? Do you view lament as an act of hope—or perhaps of hopelessness?
- In what ways does your life foster peace? Are there ways that your words, acts, or practices might hinder peace?

DEVOTION

WEDNESDAY - WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

HOPEFULLY PREPARED

BY RAVEN CAREY-JAMES

SCRIPTURE READING — ROMANS 13:11–14

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

DEVOTION.

Before working for the De Pree Center, I had never heard of Advent.

At church, at home, and at work, we only celebrated Christmas—often putting on plays and hosting office parties to commemorate Jesus’ birth and teach people about the significance of Christ’s *first coming*. However, since learning more about Advent, I’ve grown to appreciate this season as a time of celebration *and* hopeful anticipation.

Advent undoubtedly gives Christians space to reflect on Christ’s birth in Bethlehem as the starting point to the gift of salvation, but Advent also recognizes that Jesus will come again—this time to reclaim his disciples, bring justice to the world, and dwell with his people in a restored creation forever. Therefore, we must be ready, as the hopeful anticipation of Christ’s second coming should influence every aspect of our lives, including how we approach our work.

In Romans 13:11–14, the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Rome, urging them to “wake up.” His words remind us that Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection are only the beginning of the story of salvation, and that the same Savior who arrived in humility to die for our sins will return in glory and power to judge the world and right its wrongs. This truth offers hope to those who follow Christ, but also serves as a stern warning to those who fail to repent.

This passage equips us to remain steadfast in our faith and remain within God’s grace until the end by offering Christians a roadmap for how to conduct ourselves in our homes and workplaces. Paul instructs the church that to prepare for Jesus’ *second coming*, we must lay aside our “deeds of darkness” and live our lives as children of light; this means continually striving for holiness and tending to our spiritual formation until Jesus returns. Specifically, at work, this might mean avoiding negative behaviors, office gossip, or unethical practices, and instead striving for integrity, kindness, and professionalism.

Still, Paul’s message isn’t meant to hold us hostage. Rather, it gives us hope, encouraging us that by staying focused on Christ and aligning our daily actions with Jesus’ teachings, we can honor God with our lives. In doing so, we not only prepare ourselves for Jesus’ return, but also influence others to prepare themselves for the complete fulfillment of God’s kingdom. In this way, Advent becomes a time for us to prepare with hopeful anticipation, understanding that we prepare because we believe.

So, as we celebrate Advent in commemoration of Jesus’ birth, we also reflect on our actions and realign our priorities in anticipation of Jesus’ return. This season encourages us to seek forgiveness, extend compassion to others, and actively embody Jesus in our daily lives and work, enabling us to shine brighter as we wait for what’s to come.

Therefore, let us use this time wisely, leaning on Christ, adhering to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and building an intimate relationship with God through the Word and prayer, so that we may shine as beacons of hope and light.

REFLECT.

- What are some “deeds of darkness” in your life that you might need to set aside? How can you actively replace these with actions that reflect the “armor of light”?
- Can you identify areas in your life or work where you might be lacking hope? What steps can you take to address those feelings?

DEVOTION

THURSDAY - WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

KEEP AWAKE!

BY DR. MARK D. ROBERTS

SCRIPTURE READING — MATTHEW 24:36–44

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

DEVOTION.

When I was a boy, I slept very little on Christmas Eve. I wanted to sleep. I would have been happy to sleep. But my brain simply would not shut down. I was too excited about what was coming on Christmas morning, beginning with surprises from Santa. Sleep, however much I longed for it, just wouldn't be happening for me on that magical night. I could tell myself, “Just go to sleep!” but to no avail.

In Matthew 24, Jesus gave his disciples the opposite advice. Not, “Just go to sleep,” but “Keep awake!” I'll get to that imperative in a moment. But first, I need to provide some context.

When the disciples asked Jesus about what was coming in the future, he warned them about all kinds of terrible things. For example, the disciples would be tortured, killed, and hated by all nations because of their relationship with Jesus (24:9).

But the news Jesus delivered wasn't all bad. When everything in the world seemed to be going wrong, Jesus, as the Son of Man, would appear in glorious victory (24:30). His followers would be gathered together to share in his triumph (24:31).

Now, if you were one of the disciples listening to this revelation, I expect you might have one urgent question: "When will all of this happen? Soon? Later? When?" Jesus anticipates this question, though answering it in a way that could feel unsatisfactory. He says, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (24:36). What??? It's bad enough that we don't know when the events of the end times will occur. But could it be true that Jesus himself didn't know the timetable for such things??? That's unexpected and unsettling. (Your Bible may have a footnote that says some ancient biblical texts lack the phrase, "nor the Son." Scholars who study the New Testament manuscripts believe that, for some early Christians, the idea that Jesus didn't know when he was coming back was theologically untenable, so they deleted "nor the Son," which was most probably in the original text of Matthew's gospel.)

At any rate, whether *Jesus* knew the timing or not, *we* certainly don't know when he is coming in glory. Of course, I am well aware that, for centuries, some Christians have tried to figure out in advance when exactly Jesus was going to appear as the victorious Son of Man. Whether that's something we ought to do or not can be debated. But it's worth noting that Jesus did not say to his disciples, "So, I leave it to you to figure out when I'm coming." Rather, what he did say was this, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming"

(24:42).

Jesus urged his disciples to keep awake! Oh, how I wish I could claim that my sleeplessness on Christmas Eve was related to this command of Jesus. On the final night of Advent, it would have been appropriate to take seriously the command of Jesus related to his advent, his coming. Unfortunately, that would not have been true for me. My being awake all night wasn't related to either the advent of Jesus, his birth, or his future coming. Rather, I was unable to sleep because I kept wondering what Santa was bringing me for Christmas. Moreover, when Jesus said, "Keep awake," he wasn't telling his disciples to avoid physical sleep. Rather, keeping awake is a metaphor for spiritual awareness. Keeping awake is paying attention to what God is doing in the world. In particular, it is always being ready for the advent of Jesus.

What does this mean for us? How can we be ready for the second coming of Jesus? This is not about trying to figure out God's timing for the advent of Jesus. Rather, being awake is living each day differently because of the hope we have for the future. We see this in a passage from 1 Corinthians.

Chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians has much to say about the future coming of Christ and how we will be transformed from mortality to immortality (15:53). We will experience the victory of Jesus over sin and death (15:56–57). What difference does this make in our lives today? 1 Corinthians 15 concludes with this exhortation: "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." Our confident hope in the future victory of Christ, in which we will participate, enables us to excel in the work God has given us today. Why? Because we have confident hope that our "labor is not in vain."

Like the first disciples of Jesus, we don't know exactly when he is coming. His second advent is a mystery known only to God. But our secure hope in his coming encourages us to "keep awake." It empowers us to live today with assurance that what we do in this life matters. It matters today. And it will matter in the future, when Christ comes in victory. Let this truth inspire you in the season of Advent.

REFLECT.

- When you consider the future advent of Jesus, what do you think? What do you feel? Are you confident? Curious? Uncertain? Worried? Or???
- When you hear Jesus say, "Keep awake," how do you respond?
- Do you believe that your work in this life will matter in the future? If so, why? If not, why not?

DEVOTION

FRIDAY - WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

SING, SING, SING

BY JOY-ANN WOOD

SCRIPTURE READING — PSALM 96

O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord; bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.
For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in holy splendor;
tremble before him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, "The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity."
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;

let the sea roar and all that fills it;
let the field exult and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the Lord, for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness
and the peoples with his truth.

DEVOTION.

Do you recall ever watching an NBA game and seeing the players on the court, or the coach of the team, encouraging the crowd to cheer for their team which is on the verge of winning? They turn and look at the crowd while raising their hands up and down—almost as if they are leading a choir to get that crowd encouraged in cheering for the team to win. They rev them up to participate in cheering, just cheering, to motivate this team to win! It's all in the cheer!

In today's devotion, we can feel the vigor and pulse of excitement in the psalmist's voice as his tone joyfully encourages the listener (or reader) to participate in various forms of worship to the Lord. These forms of worship include singing, giving, and rejoicing. The psalmist David offers us great hope in the reassurance that our God does marvelous deeds. This isn't a stale offering of sacrifice; it is fresh. As the psalmist says, it's a new song being sung, new every morning, in reflection of the Lord's mighty wonders.

It encourages us as leaders. No matter how your day was yesterday, every day is an opportunity to sing a new song to the Lord.

In one translation we hear the words:

"Sing unto the Lord ..."

whereas in a theological interpretation we hear the words as:

“Sing to I AM, a new song ...”

“Sing to I AM, bless His name ...”

“Ascribe to I AM all you clans of nations ...”

This call to action of public proclamation from the psalmist not only appeals to humanity but also to nature. Everyone and everything is involved in the call of praising the Lord who is greatly to be praised, incomparable above all other gods, and worthy to be praised.

Humanity is encouraged to give to the Lord glory, give an offering, give declarations, saying, “The Lord reigns.” Nature joins in the celebration, responding to the psalmist’s appeal; the heavens rejoice, the sea roars, the fields are joyful, and so are the trees of the woods.

After sharing how we should praise, the psalmist gives us the reasons to praise by expressing the longing of hope with expectation for the Lord’s return through the emphasis in verse 13, which he repeats twice. He says, “...*for He is coming, for He is coming...*” It’s as if he thinks they need to hear it twice to sink in. Our Lord I AM is coming to judge the world with righteousness. We look forward to this coming of judgment. Yahweh’s judging is not one of fear; rather, the judging of the people calls for joy as the people anticipate righteousness in the future. This judgment stirs gladness in the heart, as the Lord restores order and harmony on the earth.

Similarly to how the psalmist encouraged others, we as leaders are called to encourage those we lead to embrace God from a bigger perspective. Proclaiming the good news of God’s salvation, we challenge them to sing, sing, and sing—even in the middle of hardship—identifying God’s majestic greatness and beauty, giving

everything to God in honor, and rejoicing with creation that one day the Lord will bring the restoration we all long for to the earth. Amen.

REFLECT.

- During this time of Advent, do you pause more or less to think of the Lord's return to earth and the work the Lord will conduct during that time?

HOPE

WEEK 1 PRACTICES

PRACTICE: HOPE IN FRIENDSHIPS

Learn about [creating meaningful relationships](#) in a digital age to instill hope and practice building intimacy and accountability

READ: HOW CAN SAVORING IMPROVE YOUR QUALITY OF LIFE?

Make plans to slow down and savor the season.

[This article from the Thrive Center](#) offers a few ideas to help.

ENGAGE: ACTIVITIES FOR BUSTING THE BLUES

If you're struggling to feel hopeful this Advent or dealing with the blues, [this](#)

[Thrive Center article](#) offers some ideas for you to try.

PRACTICE: THE POWER OF PAUSING IN GRATITUDE

Gratitude can remind us of the hope we have. Learn about the Thrive Center's [5 A's to slow down and offer thanks](#) this holiday season.

The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a piece of paper or fabric, with a horizontal light streak or glow across the middle. The word "PEACE" is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

PEACE

WEEK 2
OF
ADVENT

WALKING DOWN THE PATH OF PEACE

ESSAY BY DR. W. RYAN GUTIERREZ

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace. — Luke 1:78–79

At the beginning of this year, I started a devotional series to read through the entire Bible with members of my extended family. This particular devotional plan moves historically through the Bible, which means we spend roughly nine months in the Old Testament before reading a single New Testament text. Somewhere around 2 Samuel, my cousin texted our group chat saying he was done because he couldn't take being in the Old Testament any longer; too much violence and war and not enough peace.

I think my cousin's view can ring true for how many of us experience the Old Testament. But on a deeper level, I believe he was experiencing, in a small way, the longing for peace that fills the pages of the Old Testament. The path from creation's fall to its redemption in Jesus is not smooth, and the journey of God's people across generations is marked by violence, failure, and suffering. This history and legacy create the backdrop for the unfolding of God's aim to guide people down paths of peace in the New Testament.

But it is a mistake to think that the New Testament ignores issues of violence, or to assume that living on this side of Christ's first advent means we no longer have to wrestle with the stories of pain, suffering, and violence that seem all too common in the Old Testament. If we take an honest look at the world around us, we might

see a world that continues to suffer under the violence of its inhabitants. We might think of the lands and peoples of Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, or Sudan. Stories of ICE raids throughout local communities fill our social media feeds. And in the world of work, people have moved from quiet quitting—employees quietly leaving their jobs for better opportunities elsewhere—to [quiet cracking](#)—employees suffering in isolation due to a declining job market and a pessimistic future. All is not right in the world, and we are still in desperate need of God's peace.

Advent invites us to take a hard look at the reality of our lives and our world; it calls us to name the manifold ways that we participate in or have been entrapped by patterns of violence and suffering so that we can receive anew the salvation and peace that God desires to bring now and will bring in fullness when Christ returns.

ADVENT...CALLS US TO NAME
THE MANIFOLD WAYS THAT WE
PARTICIPATE IN OR HAVE BEEN
ENTRAPPED BY PATTERNS OF
VIOLENCE AND SUFFERING SO
THAT WE CAN RECEIVE ANEW
THE SALVATION AND PEACE THAT
GOD DESIRES TO BRING NOW
AND WILL BRING IN FULLNESS
WHEN CHRIST RETURNS.

SALVATION, PEACE, AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

Although oriented toward the first and second comings of Christ, perhaps no figure looms larger in Advent than John the Baptist. The reason for this is simple: it is this Elijah-like prophet that signals the end of the old age and the dawn of the new, proclaiming the end (that is, the goal) of the law and prophets and the coming of God's kingdom (Luke 16:16). All four gospel accounts bear witness to

John's pivotal role in the unfolding of God's salvific agenda, but Luke alone orients John's work toward peace.

Luke describes John's birth with numerous echoes to the Old Testament: his parents conceive in old age like Abraham and Sarah, his father Zechariah is visited by an angel while in the temple, and John is described as one who will walk in the spirit of Elijah and will prepare the people for the coming Lord like Isaiah foretold. And in response to the birth of John the Baptist, his father Zechariah bursts into a prophetic pronouncement that ends with a promise: God's light of salvation will "guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79).

Luke's description of John's birth reveals a thread that weaves throughout the history of God's people and the biblical narrative, a thread that ties together the longings of Abraham, Sarah, Elijah, and Isaiah to God's own divine longing—God longs to save all of creation from patterns of violence and death so we can walk in the way of peace.

Luke picks up this thread in John's public ministry (Luke 3:3–17). Echoing the words of Isaiah, John points out that the people are walking on crooked and rough paths that need to be straightened out and smoothed over. He exhorts the crowds to share extra clothes and food with those who have none, tax collectors to collect only the required amount, and soldiers to stop practices of intimidation and extortion. Walking down the way of peace will manifest itself in the day-to-day relationships of work and community life. In other words, the road

**WALKING DOWN THE
WAY OF PEACE WILL
MANIFEST ITSELF
IN THE DAY-TO-DAY
RELATIONSHIPS
OF WORK AND
COMMUNITY LIFE.**

to peace is paved with practices of generosity and hospitality made possible by the economy of God's kingdom, and not on the backs of the poor and vulnerable.

THE STORY OF SAUL: HOW CROOKED PATHS ARE MADE STRAIGHT

But what does it look like for God to straighten out the rough places of our lives? Luke provides a clear example in the character of Saul.

Through numerous descriptors, Luke presents Saul as walking in the footsteps of certain Pharisees and legal experts who rejected John's baptism and were criticized by Jesus for continuing the violent practices of their ancestors (Luke 7:30; 11:47–51). Saul is introduced as a Pharisee who approves of the killing of Stephen (Acts 8:1; 22:20), and is repeatedly identified as a persecutor of Jesus and of the Way (9:4–5; 22:4, 7–8; 26:11, 14–15). Saul is walking down a path of violence and bloodshed, one of the crooked paths that must be straightened to receive the Lord and the peace that he brings.

However, it's essential to recognize Saul's violent actions as a manifestation of his longing for peace. Saul's actions are his attempts to secure future peace for his nation by violently eradicating perceived threats to the Jewish way of life. His longing for peace pushes him to take matters into his own hands and build a future peace on the backs of others. Thinking he is on the path of peace, Saul unknowingly walks down a crooked path covered by death's shadow.

But the Lord will not let his children walk in darkness forever and encounters Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3–19; 22:6–16; 26:12–18). Jesus appears to Saul as a bright light to drive away the darkness of Saul's actions. Saul is led to a house on Straight Street, where the Lord directs a disciple named Ananias to come, heal his sight, and baptize Saul in water so that he might receive the Spirit.

As a result of this encounter, Saul begins to preach like John the Baptist, calling everyone “to repent and turn to God by doing deeds worthy of repentance” (Acts 26:20; see Luke 3:8). Instead of inflicting suffering on those deemed a threat to Israel’s future security, Saul learns that faithful endurance of suffering is the path to ensure Israel’s service to God. Significantly, his conversion ends with the final summary of the Spirit-filled community’s life in Acts: “So the church in all of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace” (Acts 9:31). Saul’s life reveals how God gives light to those who sit in darkness and, through the advent of the risen Jesus, guides them down a path toward peace.

ADVENT’S INVITATION

Luke’s narrative provides a window into how God’s eternal longing for peace meets and reshapes our often crooked pursuits of peace. The words of John the Baptist and the story of Saul invite us to name how our lives are still shrouded in darkness so that we can receive the light of salvation. *Is the peace we enjoy built on the backs of the poor and vulnerable? Do we act as if we need to bring about peace through the power of our hands, or do we trust in God’s resurrection power? How do we respond to the people and powers that threaten our peace? Will the previous success of our company, management style, or church ministry be what is needed for the future?*

DO WE ACT AS IF WE
NEED TO BRING ABOUT
PEACE THROUGH THE
POWER OF OUR HANDS,
OR DO WE TRUST IN GOD’S
RESURRECTION POWER?

Advent invites us to ask these and other questions so that God’s light can shine in the dark places of our personal and communal lives. To the extent that we have

become accustomed to darkness, the light will hurt and burn. Indeed, we might first experience the light as a kind of judgment, falling to the ground and being blinded like Saul. But God's desire to take on flesh in the world that he created and come again to judge the living and the dead reveals God's deep longing for us to trust in divine grace. Advent reminds us that God desires to heal our blindness and free us from patterns of violence and harm. During this week of Advent, may we trust our lives into the hands of a God full of tender mercy, who desires to smooth over our rough edges and guide us down the path of peace.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Where do you most obviously feel the ache that "all is not right in the world?" How does that frame the way you see God?
2. Do you see any areas in your work, personal, or community life where peace is built "on the backs of the poor and vulnerable"?
3. What does "walking in the way of peace" look like in your workplace, family, or community?

ABOUT RYAN

W. Ryan Gutierrez works as the De Pree Center's senior director, overseeing the day-to-day administrative operations for the center. He previously worked as the director of operations for the Office of Vocation Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary (2017-2021). Ryan earned a PhD in New Testament at Fuller under Dr. Joel B. Green. He is married to wife Jillian, and together they have three children: Lorelei, James, and Henry.

LECTIO DIVINA

WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

WEEKLY PASSAGES.

Monday: [Isaiah 11:1–10](#)

Tuesday: [Psalm 72:1–3, 18–19](#)

Wednesday: [Romans 15:4–13](#)

Thursday: [Matthew 3:1–12](#)

Friday: [Revelation 21:1–6](#)

READ. Read the passage slowly and carefully. Identify a word or phrase that captures your attention or jumps out at you.

REFLECT. Reflect on the passage using the questions provided.

- What emotions surface for you as you reflect on the passage?
Read through this list and identify the emotions that resonate with you.
This list isn't exhaustive, so other emotions might come to mind.

Peace	Gratitude	Sorrow
Fulfillment	Delight	Remorse
Excitement	Shame	Hope
Joy	Fear	Surprise
Anger	Helplessness	Uncertainty
Frustration	Acceptance	Happiness
Discouragement	Safety	Anticipation
Disappointment	Trust	Grounded
Confusion	Curiosity	Contentment

- How does the word or phrase you identified connect to your work in this season?
- In what ways does the word or phrase you identified connect with something you desire peace for in this season?
- During Advent, we are reminded that True Peace arrived in Jesus. In what ways is the peace we have in Jesus good news for you today?

REQUEST. Spend a few minutes in prayer. Give thanks to God for the wisdom found in the Scriptures. Request understanding and guidance from the Spirit. Then, ask God to grant you Christ's peace so that your peace is evident to those with whom you work.

RESPOND. Respond to God by deciding on one specific attitude or action you're going to adopt today in your work based on what you've discovered.

NOTES.

Monday:

Tuesday:

Wednesday:

Thursday:

Friday:

DEVOTION

MONDAY - WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

THE KINGDOM THAT IS NOT YET

BY DR. DELANO SHEFFIELD

SCRIPTURE — ISAIAH 11:1–10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see
or decide by what his ears hear,
but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed 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.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples;
the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

DEVOTION.

How long? A relatively brief interrogative sentence that is loaded with meaning. Children ask it in anticipation of whatever comes tomorrow: Christmas, birthdays, a trip, dinner, dessert. Families ask it in good moments of a closing date and on bad days when a family member's health is ailing. Society asks, "How long?" waiting for justice or peace. Everyone has some sense of anticipation of the advent of something we are waiting for.

How do you long and wait well? How do you wait with a Kipling-esque "not be[ing made] tired by waiting"? Or perhaps more importantly, if we remember to love God and our neighbor, how do we encourage others who have been waiting for what we have—the privilege of not having to wait?

Advent impresses upon our hearts the reminder that we are living in an unrealized kingdom. But because the kingdom exists, the king asks its citizens questions. How will you wait for the kingdom that is not yet? Will you make something of the world that points toward its coming? Will you remember others around you who experience the great weight of its absence? Will you grow tired and make your own kingdom instead? Nobody signs up for longing; it is impressed on everyone. We must choose how to deal with it.

Some people ignore what they long for. Isaiah chose to speak into the longing. He was bestowed with the gift of clarity to contribute to a lineage of the ones who came before, ones who all spoke of the one to come (John 5:35). He longed by looking at the promises. When the trees won't bud, there is nothing on a stump to look for a shoot. When authority judges humanity with callous hands, look again for one coming who has an administration that judges impartially. When humanity and beast alike are estranged, look again for a day when nature videos won't talk about prey anymore. Words like predator and enemy will lose their luster. Peace will be normal because Peace will live in the city with us. What Isaiah longs for will not come for another seven hundred years; but he chose to look to see something on the other side of the destruction.

Isaiah spoke of a new day and a new peace by looking into the brokenness of what was left. Humanity has always looked for fig leaves. The hauntings of the fall lead us to search for ways not to stare into the grief of brokenness. But Isaiah said that the broken stump is where redemption will come. We find an unrealized kingdom in the sawdust of the stump. We long not by looking away from the stump but by looking into it. Howard Thurman, in *Meditations of the Heart*, called it the growing edge:

LOOK WELL TO THE GROWING EDGE. All around us, worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us, life is dying and life is being born. The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge! It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and men have lost their reason, the source

of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. The birth of the child—life’s most dramatic answer to death—this is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge!

Longing is how Jesus lived. He longed to return to the fullness of glory, the trinitarian dance of love. So he talked about it often. He longed for Jerusalem to return; he wept and cried over it (Matthew 23:37–39). And then he walked into the city to change it. He longed to see the kingdom fully realized, although even he was unsure when it would come (Matt. 24:36). Then he performed miracles and taught because his kingdom was not of this world. He longed for wholeness, then looked at ten lepers, at tax collectors, dead bodies, and storms, and they all got better. He longed for a great banquet, and then he looked at the twelve and gave them a new shoot to remember at his last supper. He longed for his disciples to be where he was (John 17:24), then he looked at the cross until it was finished, and new gentile shoots sprang up.

Isaiah longed for peace as he looked forward and found Jesus. When we long for peace, we also glimpse the unrealized kingdom coming.

REFLECT.

- When you think about where Israel was as a people, how do you think Isaiah felt about what he saw and what he would have to tell people in this passage from Isaiah 11?

DEVOTION

TUESDAY - WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

A PRAYER FOR THE KING

BY DR. MARK D. ROBERTS

SCRIPTURE — PSALM 72:1–3, 18–19

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness. . . .
Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.
Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may his glory fill the whole earth.
Amen and Amen.

DEVOTION.

In the New Testament letter known as 1 Timothy, the Apostle Paul encourages us to pray for government authorities: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Timothy 2:1–2). Though we should be praying for “everyone,” we ought to be sure to pray for those in authority over us.

How should we pray for them? And for what? Should we simply express our particular political preferences? Surely it's appropriate to tell the Lord whatever is

on our hearts. But does Scripture give us additional guidance for how to pray for “kings and all who are in high positions”?

Yes, in fact, we find a moving and wise example of prayer for government officials in Psalm 72. Well, actually, that prayer is for one particular official, namely the king of Israel (and his son, the next king, 72:1). For what does the psalm writer pray? The main themes of this prayer appear in the first three verses:

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness (72:1–3).

Justice and righteousness figure prominently in this prayer, as does peace, though it's hidden in this translation. Verse 3 reads more literally, “Let the mountains bring *peace* [*shalom*] to the people” (CEB). The Hebrew word *shalom*, often translated as “peace,” can also be translated as “prosperity.” *Shalom* is not only the absence of conflict, but also the experience of life as it was meant to be. Theologian Cornelius Plantinga captures the sense of biblical *shalom* in this [definition](#):

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and

Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

As we reflect on the exemplary prayer from Psalm 72, we are struck by its consistent concern for the poor and vulnerable. In praying for the king, the psalmist asks specifically, “Let the king bring justice to people who are poor” (72:4). A few verses later, after praying that the king be exalted over the rulers of other nations, the writer supplies a striking reason for this blessing: “For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.” (72:12–13). According to Psalm 72, the king is worthy of blessing and honor because of the way he treats the poor and needy.

The last verses of Psalm 72 offer a surprising twist. After 17 verses focusing on the human king, all of a sudden God takes center stage:

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.
Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may his glory fill the whole earth.
Amen and Amen (72:18–19).

As we read this closing benediction, we wonder: Wait a minute! Didn’t we just hear about the great things done by the human king? Now we celebrate the fact that the Lord “alone does wondrous things”? How do we make sense of this unexpected change in emphasis?

First, we should note that no matter how great our human works might seem, by comparison, God “alone does wondrous things.” So, we might praise the goodness

of a human ruler while recognizing that God's goodness is infinitely superior. When we get this concept confused, we have a mess on our hands.

Second, it's also important to remember that God often does wondrous things through people who are instruments of God's justice, righteousness, and peace. So, from one perspective, the human king of Psalm 72 "delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper" (72:12). But from a wider perspective, we understand that the king is acting as an agent of God. The closing verses remind us of God's glorious sovereignty, which can be seen in the faithful and just actions of God's people.

In the season of Advent, we are especially aware of our need and longing for *shalom*, for biblical peace, for "the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight." We are reminded of the millions of people in our world who are poor and needy, and who need to experience divine justice. And, yes, inspired by Psalm 72, we pray for our leaders, for national, state, and local leaders, that they would embrace and reflect the values and commitments of the king in Psalm 72. Of course, these values and commitments are not just those of the human king, but also those of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In Advent, we long for the day when the true King will bring "endless peace," establishing and upholding his kingdom "with justice and righteousness" (Isaiah 9:7). Come, Lord Jesus!

REFLECT.

- Do you ever pray for our government leaders? If so, how do you pray?
- Might the exemplary prayer of Psalm 72 help you to pray differently for our leaders?
- How do you respond to Plantinga's definition of *shalom*?

DEVOTION

WEDNESDAY - WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

WAITING FOR THE GOD OF PEACE

BY DR. JENNIFER WOODRUFF-TAIT

SCRIPTURE — ROMANS 15:4–13

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the ancestors and that the gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will confess you among the gentiles

and sing praises to your name”;

and again he says,

“Rejoice, O gentiles, with his people”;

and again, “Praise the Lord, all you gentiles,

and let all the peoples praise him”;

and again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the gentiles;

in him the gentiles shall hope.”

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

DEVOTION.

For this Advent devotional from *Life for Leaders*, we are assigned to a week and to a weekly theme, and this week's theme, as you've probably already noted, is *peace*.

When I saw I had been assigned (for the second year in a row! Thanks, Holy Spirit. I think.) to a week centered around peace, I wondered what I would say. I'm not a natural optimist, nor am I a particularly peaceful person. The themes in Advent which I respond to the most are those of hope and longing; not the shiny tree and the golden presents and the parties overflowing with community (and extroverts), but the silence of a wayside chapel, dark except for a candle or two in front of the stained glass, where I can sit and contemplate the One Who Is to Come, who is also—unquestionably, it seems, as I look around at the world—the One Who Does Not Seem to be Here Yet.

And in all honesty, I thought, this passage is actually more about hope and longing than it is about peace. Paul tells his readers that they can gain greater hope by reading scriptures from the past—which he cites at length. Much of the passage consists of quotes from the Hebrew Bible, which would have been Paul's scriptures, including 2 Samuel, Psalms, and Isaiah. He further explains that those Scriptures promise hope even for the Gentiles; some of his readers in the church at Rome were Gentiles, and Paul deals at length in Romans, including in verses 7–8 of this passage, with how they too have become part of that Old Testament promise.

Peace doesn't show up until the last sentence, where Paul blesses his readers. He asks God, who is the God that inspired the hope they have been cultivating, to fill them with joy and peace and, for good measure, *more* hope as well as the power of the Holy Spirit.

I think one of the most important things about peace—and joy, too, for that

matter—is revealed by that sentence. You can't really create it yourself. You can only ask for it. You can long for it. You can cultivate the ground in which hope for it can grow. (You can do that any time, of course, but the church particularly asks us to remember to do it in Advent—and, God knows, the world needs it.) But when peace comes, it comes as a gift from God. It comes to the weary and the war-torn, to the hopeful and the expectant, to those who celebrate and those who mourn and those who sit in silence, watching one candle, reminding the weary worshipper that the One You Think is Not Here Yet is the One Who Has Been Here All Along.

REFLECT.

- Where do you need peace?
- Where does the world need peace?

DEVOTION

THURSDAY - WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

LONGING FOR PEACE

BY REV. INÉS VELASQUEZ-MCBRYDE

SCRIPTURE — MATTHEW 3:1–12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’ ”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and 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; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

DEVOTION.

In our assigned reading for this day, I am struck by the contrast of protest in light of a week focused on peace. As I read about the familiar witness of Jesus's cousin, John the Baptist, who cries out in the desert to prepare the way for the Lord, his harsh words hardly bring me peace. So I pause and read slowly again...

Ah yes! Protest precedes peace! Repentance precedes reconciliation! People from Jerusalem, Judea, and around the Jordan were coming to the desert, even Pharisees and Sadducees. The pathway to peace begins with protest as John declares their need to repent. His call for repentance is not only for personal sins, but the sins of empire and burdensome religious leaders oppressing the people in need of peace.

If Jesus is the Prince of Peace, John is the prince of protest. John is protesting that things aren't as they should be. He is an equal opportunity offender who cares not who has religious immunity by their roles in Jewish society nor where they fit in the lineage of Abraham. What I appreciate about John's enthusiasm is that he self-implicates in the protest. He confesses that he himself is not worthy of untying the sandals of the one who is coming after him, for that One is greater than him. My water baptism is not enough, John says. The One who comes after me will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire.

How do we live in light of this invitation? How do we live longing for peace in light of the Prince of Peace who has come and has promised to come again? Lest we think that John is yelling at us at this moment (he is not), may you remember that John's name actually means "God is gracious." In God's grace and in light of all that we want to protest, may we find a pathway to peace in our longing for peace this Advent season. Make peace with yourself through Christ. Work for peace in our ruptured communities also in the valley of the shadow of empire with the strength of Christ. Know that the gospel is the love of God in the face of Christ. When I catch

a glimpse of his face looking at my face, I know I usher in a peace that surpasses all understanding. May you experience the fruit of peace in keeping with repentance. The Christ child welcomes you with open arms.

REFLECT.

- Where has peace been robbed from you in this season? Where do you need the Prince of Peace to make a pathway of peace within yourself or your relationships?

DEVOTION

FRIDAY - WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

ALL THINGS NEW

BY DR. MARK D. ROBERTS

SCRIPTURE — REVELATION 21:1–6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them as their God;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also, he said,

“Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

DEVOTION.

I’ve been a Christian for 62 years. During these six decades, I’ve read through the Bible several times, sometimes because it was required in school or for my ordination exams, sometimes out of a desire to know God more deeply and truly.

I've also been honored to teach the Bible in a variety of settings, including classes in college, seminary, and dozens of churches. Plus, as you may know, I've written well over 3,000 devotions, each one based on a passage of Scripture.

I'm telling you these things not to brag about my biblical knowledge, but to give you some context for what I'm about to say. Here it goes: Every time I read Revelation 21:1–6, I am blown away. My mind is stretched and stunned. My heart is moved. I think I have cried more when reading this passage than any other passage in the whole Bible. (Yes, it happened again today.)

So, I should explain why I react so strongly to Revelation 21:1–6.

First, I am consistently amazed by the vision of the future found in this passage. I grew up with the idea that in the future God was going to blow up the physical universe and take our souls to heaven. I don't know where I learned this, but I certainly believed it. Revelation 21 tells a very different story, however. Here, it's true that "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (21:1). But God did not wipe out the universe. Rather, God sent "the new Jerusalem" from heaven to earth. God's future—our future—is on earth, not in some faraway heaven.

This does not mean, however, that "God is watching us from a distance," as the popular song once put it. Rather, "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their god; and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them" (21:3). The God who reigns over heaven and earth will come to be with us. We will be God's peoples, God's children, God's beloved. We will know God intimately and eternally. How amazing!

But the amazement doesn't stop there. When God comes to dwell with us on earth, "he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and

crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (21:4). This is the passage that, ironically, regularly moves me to tears. But my tears aren’t the sort that express mourning and crying and pain. Rather, they are tears of compassion, tears of longing, tears of hopefulness, tears of anticipatory gratitude. Every time I read this verse, I picture people I know who are mourning. I think of the millions of people in our world who are suffering from poverty and injustice. Today, I’m picturing a dear friend who is in the last hours of his life, who will soon leave behind his wife, family, and friends. Though I know my friend will soon experience unspeakable joy, his loved ones will mourn and cry. Oh, how I yearn for the day when God will wipe away their tears.

I find this language to be especially poignant and moving. God could just send a wind that dries up our tears. Or our tears could magically disappear without any obvious divine effort. But what Revelation envisions is God acting in tenderness like a loving mother, drawing near to wipe away our tears. Such intimacy and compassion in this image! Yes, our tears will be gone. But, along the way, God will be with us, showing empathy and kindness.

Verse 5 is, for me, one of the most astounding verses in all of Scripture. In this verse, “the one who was seated on the throne” says, “See, I am making all things new.” God is not wiping out all things. God is not replacing all things with other things. Rather, God is taking the existing things, the old things, the broken things, the unjust things, all the things of this present age, and making them new. The same God who once made the world to be “very good” will remake the world, restoring all that is broken and lost.

You and I are among the “all things” that will be renewed. Once more, this truth astonishes and delights me. I am so aware of ways in which I am in need of renewal. Yes, my 68-year-old body reminds me regularly that I am no longer “new.”

But that's not all. I am so aware of ways in which my heart, mind, and spirit need renewal. I know the sins that plague me, the prejudices that bind me, the fears that limit me. I also know that God is working on these things, even today. But I long for the day when God's reclamation project with me will be finished.

In Advent, we focus on the "second coming" of Christ. It's good and right to look forward to the day when Christ returns in glory. But we should keep in mind that this isn't the end of all things. Rather, it's the beginning of new things. The next "advent" of Jesus will inaugurate the age to come, when God dwells with us, when God wipes away all tears, and when God makes all things new. Oh, what a time that will be! Come, Lord Jesus!

REFLECT.

- When you think of the age to come, what do you envision?
- In what ways do you long for the world to be made new?
- In what ways do you long for yourself to be made new?

PEACE

WEEK 2 PRACTICES

EXPERIENCE: CALMING BREATHING PRACTICES

Focusing on and regulating your breath can help us stay calm when the storms of the holidays come. [Try this exercise](#) from the Thrive Center to help you find peace this Advent season.

READ: SLOW DOWN

During the frenzy of the holidays we can lose sight of what truly matters. Learn how to lean into slow living in [this article](#) from the Thrive Center.

LISTEN: “SWEET LITTLE JESUS BOY”

Fill up with the beauty of music by [listening to this peaceful song](#) from the Los Robles Master Chorale.

ENGAGE: MOVIE NIGHT

Wind down your work week and get a peaceful start to the weekend by having a movie night! Use this [list of the top 100 holiday films](#) to get started.

JOY

A horizontal beam of light, resembling a searchlight or a stage spotlight, shines across the middle of the page, creating a bright, glowing effect against the dark purple background.

WEEK 3
OF
ADVENT

LONGING FOR JOY

ESSAY BY STEVE TENG

JOY MAKES MUSIC

But the angel said to them, “Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you
good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” — Luke 2:10–11, CSB

The first advent left in its wake a trail of songs. From Mary’s magnificat to the herald of angelic hosts, from the shepherds to Simeon’s praise, songs poured forth from the hearts of those who witnessed the birth of Christ and considered all its implications. Joy made music.

It was less the poetic instinct of those particularly inclined, and more a natural human response to the reality of what these people had seen. Confirmation of what had long been only a whisper. In spite of the centuries of silence, God’s people had not been forgotten. The Lord was not distant or indifferent. In his perfect timing, God the Son showed up as Mary’s son and was glad to be there.

In *Joy Starts Here*, Dr. Jim Wilder defines joy as a relational experience where someone is glad to be with us. Seen in this light, the Gospel is the ultimate announcement of joy. God’s salvation includes the affirmation of his unchanging, insistent delight to be with his people. The Divine possibility for unending joy for all was at hand. This was a reality so full and inexpressible, people took to song.

Think of the last time joy birthed in you an act of faith or devotion that could only be attributed to the inspiration of the Divine. More than likely, it felt closer to being swept up in a symphony or participating in a dance that was already underway than a well-executed, tactical plan.

What in your life feels like it’d be better served by Divine activity flowing from

joy—a sense of God’s gladness—than by the decision flowchart we’re turning over in our minds and hearts for survival?

In my own life, I’m *longing* for this kind of songwriting joy in fraught relationships, patterns of unbelief that have me feeling stuck, misunderstanding in my faith community, and complex work challenges where what’s best feels unclear.

Can you relate?

JOY IS CONSEQUENTIAL

“... because the joy of the Lord is your strength.” — Nehemiah 8:10, CSB

It’s consequential for us to long for joy because we need the same kind of creative outburst that results in song.

If joy served only to enrich our inner lives, it would be worth longing for. Knowing God’s gladness in light of setbacks and sufferings invites us into creative ways of taking hold of peace. It offers us resilient joy that yields a confidence in God’s love and an eagerness to share the burden of our fears, doubts, and worries in prayer (1 Peter 5:7).

But when we sense God’s deep *gladness*, Advent joy overflows and gives birth to the kind of courageous and creative energy that inspires us to activity that bears witness to God’s abundance. When this kind of joy inspires in us the decision to initiate a merciful and reconciling conversation in the breakroom or risk the

IT’S CONSEQUENTIAL
FOR US TO LONG
FOR JOY BECAUSE
WE NEED THE SAME
KIND OF CREATIVE
OUTBURST THAT
RESULTS IN SONG.

awkwardness of inviting a lonely neighbor for a walk, it produces a kind of beauty that bears witness to Advent and Gospel realities. At great cost, God the Son drew near and for the joy set before him, Christ endured great pain for the treasures, feasts, and songs to come in his Second Advent.

This kind of joy, which sees beyond human constraints to inspire the music of sacrificial service and restoration, is consequential and worth longing for. This kind of joy is infectious—even if it’s a subtle toe tap, it’s hard not to join in when you’re swept up in a chorus of song. In this way, joy is less a luxury for the extroverted optimists among us, and more oxygen for our souls and balm for tired bodies and fractured communities. The communities we’re a part of and the spheres of influence we steward are longing for us to have this kind of joy.

How might this kind of intention—this mustard seed faith—shift, ever so slightly at first, the tenor of our tables, pews, schools, and board rooms?

WHEN JOY FEELS ELUSIVE

How can we sing the Lord’s song on foreign soil? – Psalm 137:4, CSB

Whether our neighbors know it or not, there is a God who longs for them to know that he is glad to be with them, also.

But the Second Coming of Christ, along with its promises to render a reality void of brokenness and rich with goodness to match this gladness, can feel far off. Loneliness remains epidemic in our country and is a stated public health crisis. In a [report by the CDC](#) that’s now widely known, social isolation is linked to increased risk for heart disease, dementia, and premature death. A [recent FAU study](#) found that “deaths of despair” have doubled in the last twenty years.

**IN AN ACT OF DIVINE
WASTE, A “MULTITUDE
OF HEAVENLY HOSTS”
WERE SENT TO SING
NOT OVER ROYALTY
OR INFLUENCERS, BUT
FORGOTTEN NIGHT-SHIFT
LABORERS, UNCLEAN
WITH THE SCENT OF
LIVESTOCK AND LIKELY
CLAMORING FOR WARMTH
UNDER A COLD NIGHT SKY.**

From devastating headlines to our own personal traumas, none of us is a stranger to suffering. In my own community, we pray especially for those enduring their first holidays without the loved ones whose lives were lost during the Texas Hill Country floods. Personally, my family has been in a season of prolonged, major transitions stacked with disappointments, uncertainty, grief, and strained and lost relationships. On many days, joy—God’s gladness to be near—can feel distant and implausible.

How long O Lord?

Joy can feel like a stranger, and for some of us, Advent’s carols feel like an ill-timed song. The curse of sin offers plenty of reasons to doubt that our Creator is glad to be in our presence. The suffering we see and the suffering we carry tempt us to believe that we are barely tolerated, if not outright disdained by God. To

embrace a longing or a desire for something that seems unlikely is a step toward vulnerability that feels natural to resist.

Yet, the story of the shepherds invites us to long and hope for joy nonetheless. In an act of Divine Waste, a “multitude of heavenly hosts” were sent to sing not over royalty or influencers, but forgotten night-shift laborers, unclean with the scent of livestock and likely clamoring for warmth under a cold night sky.

This story reminds us that Advent joy is perhaps especially for us when earthly joys feel distant. That it is worth longing for.

Psalm 126 carries a similar reminder:

Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!
He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him. (Psalm 126, CSB)

It's those who mourn who shall be comforted.

How do we persist in longing for joy in this life? Advent itself is a part of the answer. Remembering the first coming of Christ and holding in view the promises of the second coming produces a worshipful longing in us and trains us to hold both realities: the tears of sowing and the joy of reaping together. This means we long without despair and rejoice without denial.

Joy in Advent is not naive. It doesn't ignore the ache; it sings despite it. Because Advent knows the end of the story: the glad presence of God will one day fill every place and person.

SINGING ON FOREIGN SOIL

As Taiwanese immigrants, my parents especially longed for home. This was

**JOY IN ADVENT IS NOT
NAIVE. IT DOESN'T
IGNORE THE ACHE;
IT SINGS DESPITE IT.**

evidenced in how we decorated our house, the food we ate, and in our rituals. Weekly, we drove across the metroplex to eat food and buy groceries that were reminders of home and provided comforts to endure all the ways we felt out of place.

As citizens of a foreign kingdom and reality, the local congregations we belong to offer us reminders and recommended rituals to affirm that we are not yet home, and to endure in rehearsing our citizenship while we are sojourning. Consider the practices below as ways to nurture a life of joy in all areas of life, but especially on “foreign soil”—the places of enduring brokenness that are still under the influence of an evil one, hell bent on propagating the lie that God has abandoned us and there is no reason to hope.

These aren’t quick fixes or seasonal resolutions. They are slow, ordinary acts of faith—ways of tuning our lives to the music of the first Advent so that it keeps playing in us and through us.

1. Sometimes it starts with a smile.

A recent [psychological study](#) found that a forced smile could be mood-boosting. Choosing to act in joy before we feel it can be more than a life hack toward shallow optimism; it can be a quiet act of faith. A smile that says, “I’m glad you’re here,” can be the first note of joy someone hears all day. In a cubicle row, on a factory floor, in a classroom hallway, a smile can make foreign soil feel just a little more like home.

2. Take stock of God’s gladness.

Each day there are faces that light up when they see us—sometimes we just haven’t noticed. And each day there are gifts,

large and small, conspiring for us to know we are beloved: a text from a friend, a crisp morning breeze, a shared joke over lunch, the scent of bread baking in the kitchen. Advent invites us to treat these as evidence of God's joy in us. Close your day by naming them, out loud if you can. Let your heart be trained to notice that you are not merely endured, you are *enjoyed*.

3. Practice and receive hospitality.

Joy flourishes in places where people feel welcome. Sometimes that means setting a table for others; sometimes it means letting someone else set it for you. Both require humility. Advent hospitality could be as simple as inviting a neighbor for a walk, making an extra pot of coffee for the team working late, or accepting an invitation you might otherwise decline because you “don't want to be a bother.” In giving and receiving hospitality, we make visible the God who makes his home with us.

4. Serve with others.

There is a unique kind of joy that comes from shared work, especially work that blesses someone else. It's the warmth in a church kitchen after cooking a meal for a grieving family. It's the camaraderie of building a wheelchair ramp on a Saturday morning, or packaging food at the local pantry. Serving together turns individual joy into communal, harmonious strength.

The music of the first Advent wasn't a commercial jingle—it was the beginning of a song that will never end. It began in Bethlehem, and it keeps being written in every act of creative service, every table set in welcome, every conversation where dignity is restored.

Minor or major chords, we need more of that music because the refrain is still the same: Good news. Great joy. For all people.

It's still true. *Joy makes music.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When have you most clearly experienced the joy of knowing that God is glad to be with you? How did that awareness affect your actions or decisions at the time?
2. Steve Teng writes that “joy can feel like a stranger.” When has joy felt distant or implausible in your life, and what sustained you in that season?
3. Have you ever experienced joy leading you into creative or courageous action (like reconciliation, generosity, or service)? What was the outcome? If not, where would you sense you most need it?
4. Which of the suggested practices—smiling, taking stock of God’s gladness, practicing hospitality, or serving—feels most challenging or most needed in your current season? Why?

ABOUT STEVE

Steve Teng is a member of Church of the Cross in Austin, Texas. He serves with [*Kingdom Capital Network*](#), where he supports small business owners proximate to under-resourced communities in advancing redemptive entrepreneurship, and serves as the executive director for the [*Austin Center for Faith & Work*](#), where he leads initiatives that inspire and equip professionals to integrate their faith and vocation for the flourishing of their communities.

LECTIO DIVINA

WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

WEEKLY PASSAGES.

Monday: [Isaiah 35:1–10](#)

Tuesday: [Psalm 146:5–10](#)

Wednesday: [James 5:7–10](#)

Thursday: [Luke 1:46b–55](#)

Friday: [Matthew 11:2–11](#)

READ. Read the passage slowly and carefully. Identify a word or phrase that captures your attention or jumps out at you.

REFLECT. Reflect on the passage using the questions provided.

- What emotions surface for you as you reflect on the passage? Read through this list and identify the emotions that resonate with you. This list isn't exhaustive, so other emotions might come to mind.

Peace

Fulfillment

Excitement

Joy

Anger

Frustration

Discouragement

Disappointment

Confusion

Gratitude

Delight

Shame

Fear

Helplessness

Acceptance

Safety

Trust

Curiosity

Sorrow

Remorse

Hope

Surprise

Uncertainty

Happiness

Anticipation

Grounded

Contentment

- How does the word or phrase you identified connect to your work in this season?
- In what ways does the word or phrase you identified connect with something you feel deep joy about in this season?
- During Advent, we focus on the joy that comes with knowing God took on flesh and identified with us in our humanity. In what ways is the joy we have in Jesus good news for you today?

REQUEST. Spend a few minutes in prayer. Give thanks to God for the wisdom found in the Scriptures. Request understanding and guidance from the Spirit. Then, ask God to fill you with joy so that your love for Jesus is evident to those with whom you work.

RESPOND. Respond to God by deciding on one specific attitude or action you're going to adopt today in your work based on what you've discovered.

NOTES.

Monday:

Tuesday:

Wednesday:

Thursday:

Friday:

DEVOTION

MONDAY - WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

GLADNESS STRETCHED TO CAPACITY

BY JOY-ANN WOOD

SCRIPTURE — ISAIAH 35:1–10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and shouting.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands
and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

“Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp;
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

DEVOTION.

I'm certain most of us, if not all of us, are captivated when we watch magic shows. We know magic is not real, but the illusions are what intrigue us. When I was growing up as a child, there was a man on TV we watched called David Copperfield, and boy, did his magic tricks keep us glued to the television. As we read today's text something has occurred; it's not magic, but if you didn't know who God is, you might think magic had occurred. It's a beautiful something: the prophet Isaiah is announcing how nature and people both experience relief bringing gladness in an amazing way.

The effects on creation/nature show miracles occurring within the wilderness, the wasteland and the desert. Whoever heard of water in a wilderness? Whoever heard of streams in a desert? Yet this fascinating experience has occurred, for the miracle is the waters turning wilderness into wetlands.

These miracles aren't limited to just nature; they continue with the strengthening of human weak hands and the firming of feeble knees. We need our hands and knees to accomplish many daily tasks. Something as simple as writing this devotion requires that I use my hands. I often think of the many tasks we do with our knees and one task taken for granted is walking on stairs. For example, how many of us consider how much we use our knees for walking on stairs? Mind you, I won't even mention the squats at the gym. Therefore, you can envision the joy of the individual who has been lame and now has experienced this miracle of their knees being strengthened to enable many activities once prohibited.

In all of these miracles, hearts have come to experience joy, unspeakable joy, as God adds His spin. As it says, God will "come with vengeance," God will come to the place, and God comes to save.

As I read verse 4, my mind ran straight to superhero movies such as *The Avengers*, *Superman*, and *Spiderman*, who the media has allowed us to imagine as heroes coming at the right time to save a person(s) in distress and vengeance. How much more powerful and sustaining would it be for our Almighty God to come and save? Not fiction but real, true, and strong!

As leaders sometimes we experience times of weakness and we long for the Lord to strengthen us; we long for physical, emotional, and spiritual strength. We may become weak due to the many tasks on our to-do list, such as taking care of young children, assisting elderly parents, finding time to exercise, cleaning and taking

care of the house, and managing ministry duties at church.

We may also long for God to come and vindicate us when we are challenged by fellow co-workers in our office or job. When we are trying our best yet fairness seems dismal, just when we feel like giving up hope, God comes to save us.

In verses 5–6 of Isaiah 35, the joy overflows as persons whose eyes were blinded have the opportunity for their eyes to be opened, receiving sight! Ears once stopped are no longer deaf. The lame can now walk; they are so excited that one can envision them leaping around like deer in amazement. Furthermore, tongues which were dumb are not only loosed but free to sing. A sudden progression from silence to shouting to singing—no longer are they muted, for now they can sing!

Isaiah portrays the movement from fear to hope; people who were in despair, fearful, and depressed now have an immense sense of hope. Hope has been revealed as the prophet says, “God will come....”

Finally, in the ending of this passage, we see the movement of returning home. There is a highway, which reflects long travel. Only the redeemed and ransomed have the privilege of making this travel which is considered a “holy way” to Zion, returning to Yahweh, to I AM. This is a geographical return to Zion and a spiritual return of a heart once torn with sorrow being replaced with joy.

Do you remember any time in your life as a leader when situations caused you to be stuck in despondency and God provided a supernatural miracle that called you back to Him? It’s a call of return to greater intimacy, this “holy way” to Zion, returning to Yahweh, to I AM.

Here are so many reasons Isaiah highlights to be joyful, as we observe the move from desolation to fruitfulness, fear to hope, and silence to singing. We give thanks

to our Almighty God for this amazing restoration and birth of joy.

REFLECT.

- Think of a time when you felt very despondent, feeling your situation was too much for God to handle, and you saw God's mighty hand provide a miracle in that situation.
- How did you share it with others? How did you celebrate it with God?

DEVOTION

TUESDAY - WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

WHY SHOULD WE PUT OUR HOPE IN GOD?

BY DR. MARK D. ROBERTS

SCRIPTURE — PSALM 146:5–10

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

DEVOTION.

The season of Advent is all about hope. In this time of year, we remember the hope of Israel for a messiah, one who would be “anointed” by God to set the Jewish people free from Roman oppression. This hope was fulfilled by Jesus the Messiah,

though not in the way anticipated by those who hoped for his coming. Those of us who acknowledge Jesus as the Christ (“Christ” comes from the Greek version of the Hebrew word for “messiah”) hope that he will come again. His second “advent” will bring worldwide, lasting peace and justice.

Why, we might wonder, should we put our hope in God revealed in Jesus? After all, Jesus has been gone from this earth for a long time. Could it be that our hope is misplaced? Why should we continue to hope in God? What will help us to have resilient hope, especially when things in our lives and in the world are a mess?

Psalm 146 answers these questions by pointing to the “help” God has given us in the past and present. Our hope isn’t based on wishful thinking. Rather, it is grounded in the faithful, consistent help of God.

How have we seen and experienced this help? Psalm 146 points to many examples:

- God made heaven and earth (146:4).
- God is always faithful (146:6).
- God “executes justice for the oppressed” (146:7).
- God feeds the hungry (146:7).
- God “sets the prisoners free” (146:7).
- God gives sight to the blind (146:8).
- God “lifts up those who are bowed down” (146:8).
- God “loves the righteous” (146:8).
- God “watches over the strangers” (146:9).
- God “upholds the orphan and the widow” (146:9).
- God destroys “the way of the wicked” (146:9).

In all these ways, God is the “help” of the people of God. Because they know God

through God's helpful actions, they are able to put their hope in God and God's activity in the future.

As Christians, we know God to be helpful in the ways mentioned in Psalm 146. God still does all those things celebrated in this psalm. But we can add to this list because of how God has helped us through the first advent of Christ. In Jesus, God has been revealed to us as a God of mercy, healing, sovereignty, justice, grace, and love. Moreover, God has "helped" us through taking our sin, bearing it on the cross. God has helped us even more by breaking the power of sin and death through the resurrection. God helps us still more by dwelling in and among us through the Holy Spirit.

Thus, our hope in God is based on our experience of the God who is our help in so many ways. Looking to the past gives us confidence for the future. Thus, with the psalm writer, we can say, "The LORD will reign forever, [our] God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!" When we say this, we don't merely utter the words impassively. Rather, we lift up our voices with exuberant joy. Psalm 146:5 begins, "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob." Our happiness is not the transient emotion that comes when something good happens to us. Rather, it's a deep joy that lasts even in hard times. Why does it last? Because our help is the God of Jacob. We have known God's help in the past in countless ways. Therefore, we can rejoice in the present as we look forward to a future of God's continued blessing.

REFLECT.

- How has God been your help in the past?
- What helps you to have hope in God for the future?
- When do you find it hard to have hope?

DEVOTION

WEDNESDAY - WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

SO BE YE PATIENT

BY REV. DR. JENNIFER WOODRUFF TAIT

SCRIPTURE — JAMES 5:7–10

Be patient, therefore, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Brothers and sisters, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

DEVOTION.

If I felt spiritually unqualified to write about peace last week, I feel even less qualified to write about *joy* this week. Yet—as someone who believes the Holy Spirit works through institutional structures, church tradition, and written liturgies—I also believe that the Holy Spirit works through being told to write something on a theme I would not have chosen.

Though our Scripture passage from James, commending patience as we wait for the coming of the Lord, corresponds beautifully to our overall Advent theme of longing, the joy it carries is more hidden. To get there, I have to tell you a story.

As I've talked about before, I am a musician. Both in high school and in college, I was in ensembles that performed Brahms's *German Requiem* (*Ein Deutsches Requiem*), a remarkable piece of music. The word “requiem” was—and often still is—the name used in the Roman Catholic church for the Mass for the Dead, which

is the version of the Mass performed at funerals. Over the years, many composers have written requiems; most of them did so using the (Latin) texts that for centuries formed part of the funeral Mass, and some of those requiems have even been performed in the context of actual funerals.

Brahms (who grew up Lutheran but, as far as we know, was an agnostic later in life) did not do this. He wrote this choral piece in German; he did not intend it to be performed at anyone's funeral in particular, though he did begin it a few months after the death of his mother; he chose texts from the Bible which no one had ever used for a requiem before, and though as a whole the piece moves (as Wikipedia puts it) "from anxiety to comfort," he deliberately did not include Christian reasons for hope—he once called the piece a "human" requiem.

And one of the Bible verses he picked was this one.

As you might expect from something called a "German" requiem, this piece is usually performed in German, but there is an approved English translation, and when I sang it in high school in a community choir that was the version I first encountered, and so when I read these words the music comes washing over me. The passage occurs as part of a larger movement of the Requiem; it begins with a sad and somber march setting the words "Behold, all flesh is as the grass, and all the goodliness of man is as the flower of grass." Then comes this plea for patience; then the somber march again. And then, out of nowhere, the piece erupts with absolutely overwhelming joy, drawn from 1 Peter 1 and Isaiah 35:

But yet the Lord's word endureth, endureth for evermore.

The redeemed of the Lord shall return again, and come rejoicing unto Zion;

Joy everlasting upon their heads shall be.

Joy and gladness, these shall be their portion,

and tears and sighing shall flee from them.

James, in fact, has signaled us that this joy is coming—very briefly, in 5:8: “Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.”

When I sang this piece in high school, in that community choir, my dad, who was also a musician, was also in the community choir. It was the first time I’d ever performed a classical work that massive as part of something he was also a part of. It comforted me to know he was over there in the bass section. You could always hear him, grounding and deepening the sound of the entire section.

He went to be with Jesus in January 2019, just as I came to work for De Pree; I was simultaneously trying to sign employment paperwork long-distance and plan a funeral. And now, when I hear this performed, I can’t hear him any longer. But I still hear Brahms, who may have intended only human comfort with these words, but has, all these years, given me Christian hope; that the Lord will come and we will all enjoy the joy everlasting that my Dad is getting a foretaste of now.

REFLECT.

- What do you hope for?
- Where do you find joy now?
- What does it mean to hope for the joy yet to come?

DEVOTION

THURSDAY - WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

MARY'S SONG

BY DR. MARK D. ROBERTS

SCRIPTURE — LUKE 1:46B-55

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

DEVOTION.

The story of the birth of Jesus, as found in Luke 2, is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. Even those who have never actually read this chapter of Scripture

will often have some understanding of the baby Jesus born in a stable and laid in a manger. Luke 1 is less well known than Luke 2, of course, but is still an essential part of the Christmas story. It provides the historical and theological context for the birth of Jesus, highlighting the extraordinary experience of Mary, Jesus's mother.

After the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she, though a virgin, will give birth to the Son of God, Mary sets off to visit her relative, Elizabeth. As a much older woman, Elizabeth is also miraculously pregnant, though her husband Zechariah is the baby's father. Elizabeth's child, whom we know as John the Baptist, will have a unique relationship with Mary's child. John will be the one who will "prepare the way of the Lord."

When Mary showed up unexpectedly at Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth's "child leaped in her womb" (1:41). She explained to Mary that "the child leaped for joy." Mary joined in the baby's joy, saying, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior" (1:46-47). In Latin, the first word of this verse is *magnificat*, which means "magnifies." That's why Mary's joyful song in Luke 1 is often called "The Magnificat."

Mary does not magnify the Lord by making God any bigger than God already is. It's not as if she has some sort of spiritual magnifying glass. What she has is more like a mirror reflecting God's nature and activity. Mary celebrates God's "bigness," especially the grandeur of God's mercy (1:50). Divine mercy is for all who revere God, throughout the generations (1:50). God "has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy" (1:54). Mary has experienced God's favor in a profoundly personal way, being chosen to bear God's own Son. Thus, she exults, "the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (1:49). She goes on to celebrate God's mercy, which is given abundantly to the "lowly" and the "hungry." Those who are proud, powerful, and rich experience divine mercy—

ironically, as judgment that can teach them to rely, not on themselves, but on God. Mary's reason to rejoice is unique in human history. No other person has been chosen by God to be the mother of God's own Son. Nevertheless, we can rejoice with Mary because of what God did in and through her. Even as Mary rejoices "in God my Savior," so can we. God has saved us through Jesus, the Son of God, who was "born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4). Because of Jesus, we are adopted as God's own children (Galatians 4:5). Like Jesus, we know God as "Abba! Father!" (Galatians 4:6). We are set free from slavery to sin and have become heirs of the riches of our Heavenly Father (Galatians 4:7).

Thus, as we reflect on Mary's song in Luke 1, we share in her joy. We join her by rejoicing in God our Savior. We celebrate God's mercy given in many ways, most of all in Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God and son of Mary. In the season of Advent, we focus on Mary's story in Luke 1 so that we might be prepared for an even greater celebration of Jesus's birth in Luke 2. Luke 1 gets us ready to sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come."

REFLECT.

- How have you experienced God's mercy in your life?
- In the seasons of Advent and Christmas, what helps you to feel joyful?

DEVOTION

FRIDAY - WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

THE LONGING OF JOHN AND JESUS' JOY-AFFIRMING RESPONSE

BY DR. MATTHEW DICKERSON

SCRIPTURE — MATTHEW 11:2–6

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

DEVOTION.

Today’s short reading from Matthew’s gospel describes a scene I’ve always found interesting and encouraging. In the context of Advent and the theme of longing, a first thing I note in the message from John the Baptist is a sense of waiting and longing. Brief and concise though his words are, they surely echo the thoughts and questions of many devout Jews in Israel during his day: those who have been waiting for the Messiah to come, trusting in the promises of the prophets, but not knowing when they would be fulfilled. *Is Jesus the one? Or must the long wait continue?*

In a way, John is asking the old question posed in many psalms of lament: *How long, O Lord? How long must we wait?* John longs for the Messiah. But he doesn’t just sit passively with his longing. He expresses it and actively seeks God.

This is the same John who not long before had baptized Jesus in the Jordan, and in doing so proclaimed him to be the Messiah: “the Lamb of God who takes away

the sin of the world. . . . the Chosen One” (John 1:29, 34). Now John is in prison, awaiting execution for having spoken truth to power. Everything he has believed in will now be put to the ultimate test as he is called to lay down his very life. His question to Jesus reveals a level of uncertainty—what we might call doubt. Was he mistaken in proclaiming to the world that his cousin was the promised Messiah? This is a very human and understandable response to his situation. Scripture reveals not only John’s great integrity and faith, but also his humanness in his doubts and longings.

The way John deals with his doubts and questions is a wonderful example. He doesn’t try to hide them or pretend them away. (What, after all, can we hide from God?) He isn’t ashamed to acknowledge them. He brings them to Jesus. John’s example gives me freedom when I experience doubts—freedom to also bring them to God, along with my longings for Jesus to return and usher in the promised restoration of this suffering world.

As for Jesus, there are many different ways he could have answered. At least at first glance, some seem more obvious to me than the way he actually did answer. For example, Jesus could simply have said, “Yes. I am the promised Messiah, the Son of God. You just need to have faith.” Such an answer would have cleared up doubts as to who Jesus *claimed* to be, helping to eliminate any conjecture that he really didn’t see himself as the Messiah. But I’m not sure such an answer would have alleviated John’s doubts. John might well have responded, “How do *I* know?”

What Jesus does instead is point to the evidence. He doesn’t merely say, “Take my word for it.” He invites John to look at what He has done: “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” That Jesus raised the dead is especially powerful evidence of his divinity, and I have to imagine it was

an important reassurance to John, who must have been concerned about his own life. I am reminded of the post-resurrection interaction Jesus would later have with his disciple Thomas. Thomas had seen far more evidence and reasons to believe in Jesus than John had, and yet Jesus still shows him his hands and side wounded in the crucifixion and then says, “Do not doubt but believe” (John 20:27).

This isn’t to say that Jesus’ words alone are not trustworthy. They are. And as we get to know him as the Messiah, we learn this more fully. But there were, after all, many in those generations who claimed to be the Messiah. John is wise (and we would be too) not to simply accept any person claiming to speak for God, but to look at the evidence. And this leads me to a final point. Had I written this devotion a few years ago, I likely would have stopped here. But as I reflect on this passage again, I am struck by something else as well. Jesus’s answer not only points to evidence of his Divine power—especially to raise the dead—but his words also reveal God’s character and purposes. God cares about the blind, the lame, and the deaf. He cares about the poor. He cares about those despised and neglected by the world. For the blind, lame, deaf, and poor, and for anybody who cares about those people, these are words of great joy! And for all of us living in mortal bodies, Jesus’s words to John should bring us a powerful hope and joy.

They are also wonderful words by which we might examine the character of any in the world today who claim to speak for God. Do they care about the blind, the lame, the deaf, the poor, and those despised by the world?

REFLECT.

- Ponder both the faith and the uncertainty of John the Baptist in the One he had proclaimed as the promised Messiah, and what that faith cost him. In what ways do you, or don’t you, relate to John?
- If called to identify with Jesus, what might you point to in your life that would give evidence that you value what God values?

JOY

WEEK 3 PRACTICES

READ: NOISE CANCELLATION

The spiritual practice of engaging in silence helps us find joy.
Learn more and practice silence using [this Thrive Center article](#).

PRACTICE: BOOST POSITIVE EMOTIONS AT HOME

Joy is just one of many positive emotions we can experience during Advent.
[Try one of these practices](#) that will help you boost your positive emotions.

REACH OUT: HELPING YOUTH REDISCOVER JOY

Joy is contagious. Perhaps you can help a young person find more joy
this Advent season. Learn more in this [Thrive Center article](#).

ENGAGE: JOYFUL HOLIDAY EXPERIENCES

Engage in holiday experiences that can spark moments of joy.
Try attending a holiday concert like the “[Hallelujah Chorus](#).”

LOVE

WEEK 4
OF
ADVENT

LOVE THAT COMES NEAR

ESSAY BY DR. PAM KING

“We love because He first loved us.” — 1 John 4:19

“What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.”

— Burt Bacharach and Hal David

We are made for love. It’s “the oxygen of life,” as my late mentor Peter Benson used to say. When we breathe in love, we can exhale love, and that cycle is what brings about good in human life. But, as the artists point out, there’s too little of it. And I would add, although God’s love is there for us, we often are too preoccupied to perceive it.

Somehow, we manage to live in ways that keep us aching and longing for love. Humans are restless creatures. Psychology helps us understand that unless we “train our brains,” humans have a tendency for discontent. We can be overly on alert, have a natural negativity bias, crave dopamine hits, and have increasingly fractured attention. These unchecked tendencies leave us longing.

**ALTHOUGH GOD’S
LOVE IS THERE FOR
US, WE OFTEN ARE
TOO PREOCCUPIED
TO PERCEIVE IT.**

A SEASON TO CONSIDER OUR LONGINGS

In our world of escalating complexity, we live lives of misplaced loves, where we’re taught and tempted to crave productivity, popularity, and perfection. We misappropriate our energy chasing these things that “dose” us with dopamine, but they don’t ultimately satisfy us. We can’t buy enough, text enough, accomplish enough to ease the ache for love and connection. So we work at it. We hustle and

try to make progress, and then we still find ourselves longing for something more. Advent provides a time to consider our longings. I want to invite you to think about what you are truly longing for in this season. What might it mean to reorder our loves in ways that bring more peace and joy?

Jesus gave us clear directions about loving rightly. He said to love God and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This teaching was the heart of his ministry. It was a radical notion at the time, and contrary to the kind of justice that the leaders of his faith tradition were offering during his life. In loving God in Jesus' radical way, we find peace, hope and joy. Yet, even as our hearts desire closeness with God, we are often left feeling achy.

St. Augustine named our longing for love centuries ago: *"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."*

The mystery at the heart of Advent—and the true gift of Christmas—is that love isn't distant. The Incarnation we celebrate is God taking on flesh and entering our mess. *Emmanuel* means *God with us*. God didn't abandon his creation—he longs to be with us, and is lingering and waiting for us to respond.

REORDERING OUR LONGINGS

What if our longings aren't flaws to fix but provide a compass pointing us home? 1 John reminds us: *We love because He first loved us*. That's a reordering. Love starts with God, not us. God made the first move when he entered into the world as a baby in a manger. And in allowing ourselves to be loved by God, we are able to love

THE MYSTERY AT THE
HEART OF ADVENT—
AND THE TRUE GIFT OF
CHRISTMAS—IS THAT
LOVE ISN'T DISTANT.

God, love our neighbor, and even love ourselves.

Advent challenges the checklist mentality of gifts to get and gatherings to get to. Advent offers a hush to the rush of the season. Advent asks us to reflect on how we spend our days and dollars. If I look at my life and how I actually spend my time—versus how I aspire to spend my time—what does that say about what I love? And where are these “loves” leading me? Where will these take me this Advent and Christmas?

I know this Christmas I want to arrive at the manger. To behold the Son of God, born in the flesh as the baby Jesus. In my imagination, I walk into that barn. I can smell the straw, the sheep, the scent of a new life. I can sense the divinity in this babe. I ask, “how can I continue to be present to this love?” This is the hope, the peace, and the joy that I am longing for.

So, I ask you, how might God be seeking you and wanting to love you this Advent? Maybe there is a solace with God that you miss. Wherever you are coming from, imagine yourself approaching the manger. As you enter, what do you see? What do you encounter, and how do you respond to this baby, God made flesh? What do you experience in this intimate encounter?

LETTING OUR LONGINGS LEAD

In these final days of Advent, find rest in what truly matters. Let your longing lead you to sacred stillness to encounter the love of Christ. Let love—God’s initiating, incarnating, unrelenting love—reorder your heart. As you move through your days and devotions this week, pause to

**LET YOUR LONGING
LEAD YOU TO
SACRED STILLNESS
TO ENCOUNTER THE
LOVE OF CHRIST.**

notice where your attention, affection, and actions are pointing. Then ask: What would it look like to live as though you were deeply loved by God? Let that love shape your priorities, your presence, and your purpose. Advent doesn't ask us to do more—it invites us to *receive* more. So, come to the manger, not with perfection, but with your longing. Come with your restless heart. And let your heart rest in God's love.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What areas of your life do you feel restless in? What longings are attached to that restlessness? What might it mean to reorder your loves in ways that bring more peace and joy in your life?
2. What does it mean to you that God is “lingering and waiting” for you to respond to his love for you? What can keep you from responding to him?
3. What might Advent be inviting you to receive? What might Advent be inviting you to let go of?

ABOUT PAM

Dr. Pam King is the Peter L. Benson Professor of Applied Developmental Science and the executive director of the Thrive Center for Human Development at Fuller Seminary. Her academic and applied efforts aim to promote a movement of human thriving that contributes to flourishing societies. King has also authored, coauthored, and edited numerous books and journal publications and is a member of the Society for Research on Adolescents, Society for Research on Child Development, and Division 36 of the American Psychological Association.

LECTIO DIVINA

WEEK 4 OF ADVENT

WEEKLY PASSAGES.

Monday: [Isaiah 7:10–16](#)

Tuesday: [Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19](#)

Wednesday: [Romans 1:1–7](#)

Thursday: [Matthew 1:18–25](#)

Friday: [Luke 2:1–14](#)

READ. Read the passage slowly and carefully. Identify a word or phrase that captures your attention or jumps out at you.

REFLECT. Reflect on the passage using the questions provided.

- What emotions surface for you as you reflect on the passage? Read through this list and identify the emotions that resonate with you. This list isn't exhaustive, so other emotions might come to mind.

Peace

Fulfillment

Excitement

Joy

Anger

Frustration

Discouragement

Disappointment

Confusion

Gratitude

Delight

Shame

Fear

Helplessness

Acceptance

Safety

Trust

Curiosity

Sorrow

Remorse

Hope

Surprise

Uncertainty

Happiness

Anticipation

Grounded

Contentment

- How does the word or phrase you identified connect to your work in this season?
- In what ways does the word or phrase you identified connect with someone or something you love?
- During Advent, we focus on the unmeasurable love of God, who “gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). In what ways is the love Jesus has for us good news for you today?

REQUEST. Spend a few minutes in prayer. Give thanks to God for the wisdom found in the Scriptures. Request understanding and guidance from the Spirit. Then, ask God to fill you with love so that you may more wholly love those with whom you work.

RESPOND. Respond to God by deciding on one specific attitude or action you’re going to adopt today in your work based on what you’ve discovered.

NOTES.

Monday:

Tuesday:

Wednesday:

Thursday:

Friday:

DEVOTION

MONDAY - WEEK 4 OF ADVENT

EMBRACING GOD'S LOVE

BY RAVEN CAREY-JAMES

SCRIPTURE — ISAIAH 7:10–16

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”

But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.

Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.”

DEVOTION.

My parents worked tirelessly to put food on the table and pave the way for my brothers and me to have a comfortable and successful life. They paid for music lessons, ballet, martial arts, computer programs, you name it. Whatever we needed, they provided so that we could have a shot at a future far away from the woes of our environment.

As a result, I never asked for much. If there was an emerging fashion trend at school, I avoided it. If my parents asked me what I wanted for Christmas, I'd request a new pajama set instead of the latest electronic device. In my mind, my parents had already done enough—more than enough, so I counted myself blessed

and adopted a pervasive spirit of gratitude. Even as an adult at work, I couldn't tell you the last time I asked for a promotion or requested a raise.

Much like Ahaz in our text, I didn't want to test my parents or managers by asking them to fulfill my desires. I didn't want to risk seeming ungrateful or putting them in a financial spiral by asking for what I wanted. However, what I didn't know was that my incessant humility drove the people who cared for me up the wall. After several back-and-forths with my parents and workplace leaders, they often admitted that they wished I would just speak up and express my wants. My parents explained that they relished the opportunity to do things for us kids and that they worked hard, not out of obligation, but from a sense of pride and purpose. My managers encouraged me to push the limits and negotiate, understanding that I was deserving of compensation and blessings. The people who loved and cared for me instructed me to receive that love freely.

God instructs us to do the same.

Though we're often too afraid to ask, God, our Father, loves us unconditionally, desires to bless us, and teaches us to ask for what we want. When we fail to do so, as Ahaz does in our text, God takes it as a sign of disrespect, a lack of faith, and a test of his patience.

Still, God blesses us anyway—with God's love, with God's presence, and with the desires of our hearts. In this passage, we find a profound example of God's unwavering love and faithfulness, even in moments of doubt and fear. Ahaz, the king of Judah, faces the threat of two opposing kingdoms, but instead of trusting in God's love, he hesitates to ask God for help. In response, God still extends grace to Ahaz, offering a sign of hope and reassurance despite Ahaz's reluctance. God not only promises Ahaz victory, but also prophesies God's enduring presence through

the coming of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

God's love and presence are still alive with us today. Therefore, God invites us to come as we are, even at work: openly expressing our needs, desires, and even our fears. When we hesitate to ask God for what we need, we inadvertently limit our experience of God's grace and provision. God's heart is full of love and generosity, and God delights in meeting our needs in ways that exceed our expectations. Just as God provided a sign for Ahaz, God is ready to give us signs of love and reassurance in our lives and workplaces as well.

So, this Advent, in our moments of doubt or fear, let us remember the depth of God's love and faithfulness through Jesus Christ. The name "Immanuel," which means "God with us," reminds us that we are never alone in our struggles. God is always present, guiding, comforting, and providing for us. This means that we can boldly ask for God's help, trusting that God hears us and is always willing to respond with open arms.

REFLECT.

- Are you reluctant to ask God for what you truly need in life or at work, and what might your reluctance reveal about your understanding of God's love and provision?
- Reflect on a time when you experienced God's love and reassurance during a moment of doubt or fear. How can that experience encourage you to trust in God's presence and guidance in your current circumstances?

DEVOTION

TUESDAY - WEEK 4 OF ADVENT

GOD'S SHINING FACE

BY DR. MARK D. ROBERTS

SCRIPTURE — PSALM 80:1–7, 17–19

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!
Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.
Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved. . . .
But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

DEVOTION.

Psalm 80 begins by asking God, who is “enthroned upon the cherubim,” to “shine forth.” In the Bible, cherubim are glorious heavenly, winged creatures. To be enthroned upon the cherubim, therefore, is to assume the place of greatest honor, power, and brilliance in the universe. The psalm writer is likely picturing God as even brighter than the sun: glowing, piercing, utterly glorious. Asking God to “shine forth” is a poetic way to express what is stated more literally in verse 2: “Stir up your might, and come to save us.”

The association of God’s salvation with God’s light is emphasized repeatedly in Psalm 80:

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved (80:3).

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved (80:7).

Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved (80:19).

When God’s face shines upon God’s people, they will experience God’s mercy through salvation and restoration.

Light features prominently in our celebrations of Christmas. We celebrate the fact that “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:9). One of our most popular Christmas carols, “Silent Night,” begins with the phrase “All is calm, all is bright, Round yon virgin mother and child.” In the third verse, this brightness comes from the face of the baby Jesus:

Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth! Jesus, Lord, at thy birth!

Notice the combination of themes here: God's love as "pure light;" "radiant beams" from the "face" of Jesus, the "dawn of redeeming grace." What was once said of God in Psalm 80 is now applied to Jesus. His shining face projects the love and grace of God. Yet this love and grace isn't distant, enthroned in highest heaven upon the cherubim. Rather, in Jesus, the shining face of God is personal, intimate, and inviting.

When I think of the shining face of the baby Jesus, my mind immediately jumps back to a miraculous moment that happened 30 years ago. Linda's and my daughter, Kara, was born on November 4, 1994. Linda, of course, was devoted to Kara day and night, feeding her, rocking her, embracing her. You might say Linda's smiling face was shining brightly on Kara.

Kara, however, didn't at first respond in kind. In fact, in the third week of Advent, she smiled quite plainly . . . at me! (No, it wasn't gas. It was a real smile.) Linda was happy for me, of course. But she felt a bit disappointed. Why hadn't Kara smiled at her?

On Christmas Eve, our family participated in the Christmas pageant at church. Linda was Mary. I was Joseph. Kara was the baby Jesus. Because Kara always cried in the evening, sometimes incessantly, we were worried that this might be a disaster. But, amazingly, Kara didn't make a peep when she was playing Jesus. Away in a manger . . . no crying she makes? It seemed like a miracle. Plus, Kara never

again had fits of crying in the evening.

On Christmas morning, Linda was rocking Kara, smiling at her and talking to her softly. All of a sudden, Kara smiled back at Linda. This was not some little smile like I had received a few days earlier. It was a giant, enthusiastic, glowing smile. I ran to get my camera, sure that by the time I got back, that smile would be gone. But, no, Kara continued to look at Linda's face, beaming with love and delight. It was truly like "radiant beams from thy holy face."

Throughout history, artists have portrayed the baby Jesus with a glowing face, a traditional halo. Whether or not his face actually shone with radiant beams, we cannot know. But what we can know is that Jesus did indeed embody "love's pure light." He was the "true light" who had come into the world, bringing "grace and truth." And whether his face actually glowed or not, the "beams" from his face did indeed project the "dawn of redeeming grace."

In this age, you and I won't see the real face of Jesus. As it says in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "now we see in a mirror, dimly." But that's not all. Verses 12 and 13 continue, "but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Here, something wonderful is added to our Advent hope. In God's future, we will see Jesus "face to face." We will know him completely. Our hope will be realized as we come to know the fullness of Christ's love for us.

REFLECT.

- When you think of God as light, what do you imagine? What do you envision? How do you feel?
- What helps you to know God's love for you?

DEVOTION

WEDNESDAY - WEEK 4 OF ADVENT

LONGING FOR LOVE

BY REV. INÉS VELÁSQUEZ-MCBRYDE

SCRIPTURE — ROMANS 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for the sake of his name, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

DEVOTION.

In Nicaragua, where I grew up, my childhood was filled with the thrill, joy, and lights of Nochebuena. Nochebuena means “the good night,” and it marks Christmas Eve in many countries of Latin America. The particular rituals and ways of celebrating Nochebuena vary by country, but one thing is for sure: in the Nicaraguan community, we go all out for Christmas Eve! On Nochebuena we make special nacatamales (dough with pork or chicken, rice, roasted veggies all wrapped in plantain leaves) for family and guests. We also go ahead and open presents at midnight and throw fireworks. Joy has come. Light has come. Salvation has come. Yes, presents have come a day early! Nochebuena is a huge deal because the waiting. is. just. too. much! What is better than two days of Christmas celebration,

because why not?

Paul, in the introductory verses of Romans 1, has Nochebuena-type energy about the life and resurrection of Christ. He cannot wait to tell the world, via Phoebe who carries and reads the letter to the church in Rome, that the One who was promised by the prophets and prophetesses has arrived. That the One we have all been waiting for lived, died, and rose again! Messiah Jesus, whom he and his people have been waiting for, after a long and unresolved waiting, is here! I imagine the voice of Phoebe, reading Paul's dictated words, opening the gifts he brings such as grace upon grace, peace upon peace. Not only that, but children are named as beloved, grace is available to all—the calling to sainthood.

Someone asked me once if I could sum up the entire gospel in one sentence, and I responded: The gospel is the love of God in the face of Christ. And if I could reduce the sentence to one word, it would have to be LOVE. Wherever you find yourself and whatever you may be facing, I pray for a Nochebuena that overflows with the blessed assurance that you are loved more than you can imagine. God loves you with an everlasting love and draws you with lovingkindness. May I gift you a piece of my cultural Nochebuena so that preemptive love rushes in today in all the dry and desert places where your body and soul need it: Love that comes from God our father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Love that has set Love's eyes on you. ¡Feliz Nochebuena!

REFLECT.

- Where do you need the gift of love, grace, and peace in your Nochebuena today?

DEVOTION

THURSDAY - WEEK 4 OF ADVENT

TWO UNUSUAL NAMES

BY DR. MARK D. ROBERTS

SCRIPTURE — MATTHEW 1:18–25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

DEVOTION.

When I was just getting to know the woman who would one day be my wife, she mentioned a couple of names that made me curious. While talking about her family, Linda casually referred to “Popcorn Grandma” and “Raisin Grandma.” “What did you say?” I asked. “Oh,” Linda laughed, “I should probably explain the names of my

grandmothers.”

Both grandmothers were named by their first grandchild, Linda’s older brother, Bob. When he was quite young, he was impressed by the snacks his grandmothers would give him. So, to keep them straight, he named one Popcorn Grandma because she always gave him popcorn. The other became Raisin Grandma for a similar reason. By the time I became associated with Linda’s family, the names “Popcorn Grandma” and “Raisin Grandma” were so familiar that they didn’t seem in the least odd to family members. For outsiders, however, an explanation was needed.

An explanation is also needed for the names of Jesus in Matthew 1:18–25. In verse 21, the angel tells Joseph to name his son “Jesus.” Then, in verse 23, Jesus is to be called “Emmanuel.” We might wonder: Why these two names? What did they mean? What do they mean for us?

Matthew helps us understand the meaning of Emmanuel, adding to verse 23, “which means ‘God is with us.’” In fact, *emmanuel* (sometimes spelled *immanuel*) is a Hebrew word that means “with-us-God.” The word Emmanuel wasn’t a proper name in ancient Hebrew. Rather, it signified the role and calling of a special person about whom Isaiah once prophesied: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Matthew applies this name to Jesus, not because Emmanuel was what he would be called, but because Jesus was indeed “God with us.” As it says in John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

Matthew does not clearly explain why Joseph’s son was to be called Jesus. In Matthew’s gospel, the angel said Joseph, “[Mary] will bear a son, and you

are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (1:21). The connection between the name *Jesus* and saving his people becomes clearer when we understand that *Jesus* is a version of the Hebrew name *Joshua*, by way of the Aramaic name *Yeshua*. *Joshua*, in Hebrew, meant “Yahweh is salvation” or “The LORD is salvation.” So, the name *Jesus* reveals two things about the son of Mary. First, Jesus would be the one who brings God’s salvation to humankind. Second, his name implies that Jesus is not merely a human being, but is also in some sense God, since his name means “The LORD is salvation.”

The two names of Jesus in Matthew 1:18–25 inspire our celebration of Christmas. At Christmastime, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Savior. At Christmastime, we celebrate the birth of Emmanuel, God with us. At Christmastime, we celebrate the God whose grace, mercy, and love make all the difference in the world, not just on Christmas Day, but every day.

Merry Christmas!

REFLECT.

- What does it mean to you that Jesus is your Savior?
- What does it mean to you that Jesus is God with you?

DEVOTION

FRIDAY - WEEK 4 OF ADVENT

LONGING WORTH WALKING TOWARDS

BY DR. DELANO SHEFFIELD

SCRIPTURE — LUKE 2:1–15

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to register all the empire for taxes. This was the first registration, taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone went to their town to be registered. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David. He went to be registered with Mary, who was promised in marriage to him, and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Now there were shepherds nearby living out in the field, keeping guard over their flock at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were absolutely terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid! Listen carefully, for I proclaim to you good news that brings great joy to all the people: Today your Savior is born in the city of David. He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a vast, heavenly army appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among people with whom he is pleased!”

When the angels left them and went back to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, that the Lord has made known to us.”

DEVOTION.

Some longing requires us to be still, as the Psalmist said in Psalm 46:10. The unrealized kingdom sends a hint of what is to come, and then we are restless like many kids are the night before Christmas as they anticipate—virtually these days—wrapping paper for a new gift. The Habukkukian visions of an unrealized kingdom linger; coming soon, but not yet. The patient longing for Job’s “why” questions—asked of a kingdom. Some longing does require sitting.

But love softens hearts and compels people to take proper action. There is a song we sing in the African American tradition that speaks to the tension between waiting and walking:

I am weak, and I need Thy strength and power
To help me over my weakest hour;
Let me through the darkness Thy face to see,
Lead me, O Lord, lead me.
Lead me, guide me along the way;
For if You lead me, I cannot stray;
Lord, let me walk each day with Thee.
Lead me, O Lord, lead me.

Doris Akers’ words here are sung with a resilience that presses against the longing, reminding us that someone is guiding us. The Fall impresses a longing for independent sovereignty into our lives that falls flat, and then failure mocks us in our weakness. But the Kingdom comes with a lowly King who stoops to our weakness and speaks to the poor and tells them, “You are blessed” (Matthew 5:5). He comes to varying forms of weakness—social, political, ethnic, and racial—and in this text, he comes to the occupational week.

Sometimes we long so deeply that we forget how long it has been since we last truly longed for something. We have grown accustomed to darkness for so long that we have forgotten what light looks like. The shepherds, on a silent night, found it to be a holy night. An angel told the shepherds that a better shepherd had come to lay his life down as the perfect lamb. The anointed one had come to lead captives to freedom (Isaiah 61:1-2). And the angelic host brightened the night with adoration and singing. They were shepherds, but they were longing also. It is a humbling moment that should remind them they were also sheep.

God grants peace to those who serve him and long for it (Psalm 37:27). And is that not what we want? A realized kingdom, where there is no more weeping or hay fever. Where there is consummated wholeness. Where things are in glorious fullness. The promises that are worth longing for are coming; and God provided pledges guaranteeing the promise. For the shepherds, it was a baby (common), wrapped in clothes (common), and lying in a feeding trough (uncommon). Now it is up to them to decide whether to pursue the longing.

And now, as disciples with varying degrees of responsibility and influence, we are given glimpses of a promise of a new heaven and a new earth—pledges of baptism, the table, and the gathering of saints. We find ourselves in our longing, wrapped in God's love, seated in Christ; gospel treasure uncommonly lies in broken vessels, angels singing glory over one sinner who comes to repentance. The Spirit is leading and guiding along the way. We are longing, but we are also given pledges that tell us to seek the kingdom. And we are left to decide whether we are going to say the same thing as the shepherds: *Let us go over to the new kingdom and see this thing that has taken place.*

REFLECT.

- What do you think the shepherds thought when they found exactly what was promised?

LOVE

WEEK 4 PRACTICES

REACH OUT: LIVING OUT LOVE

The holidays can be lonely for those without loved ones nearby. Live out Christ's love by [befriending an older adult](#), helping at a food bank, or inviting someone over for Christmas dinner.

WATCH: SILENT NIGHT

Be reminded of God's great love for us in sending Christ by watching this performance of "[Silent Night](#)" sung by the Los Angeles Children's Chorus.

PRACTICE: COURAGEOUS & CURIOUS CONVERSATIONS

Spending time with family can be tough at times. If you're struggling, [practice having loving, courageous, and curious conversations](#).

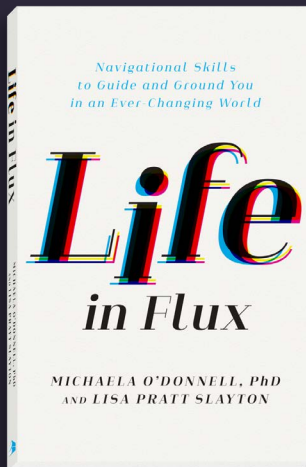
EXPERIENCE: BOARD GAME NIGHT

Have some fun with your loved ones! Check out this [list of board games](#) to try out this holiday season.

LOOKING FOR BOOKS TO HELP YOU FLOURISH AS A LEADER?



*EXPLORE LEADERSHIP BOOKS
AND MORE AT [DEPREE.ORG](https://depree.org)*



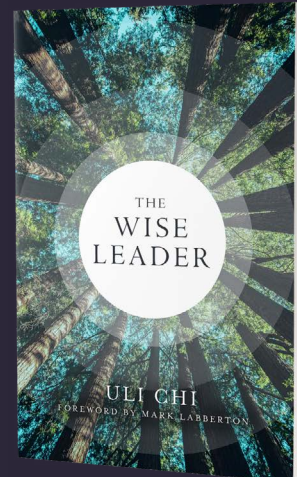
LIFE IN FLUX

BY MICHAELA O'DONNELL
AND LISA PRATT SLAYTON



MAKE WORK MATTER

BY MICHAELA O'DONNELL



THE WISE LEADER

BY ULI CHI

*CLICK TO
LEARN MORE!*



THE HIDDEN WORK OF LEADERSHIP

WITH MICHAELA O'DONNELL



BRINGING HIDDEN WORK TO THE
SURFACE TO HELP YOU LEAD WISELY IN
ALL SEASONS OF LIFE AND LEADERSHIP.

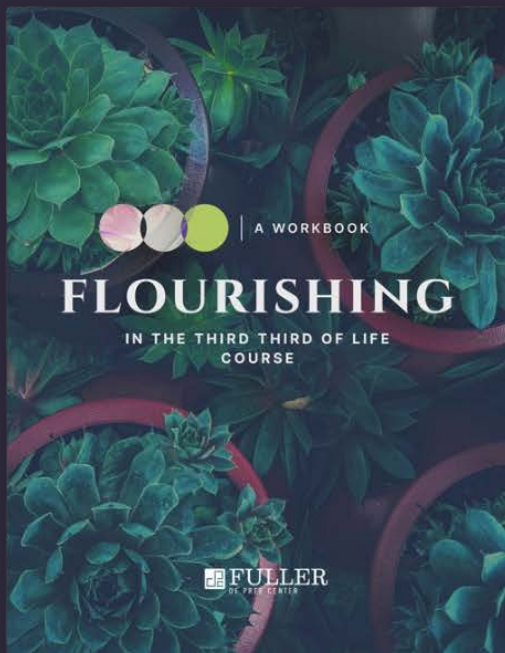


CLICK TO
LISTEN!

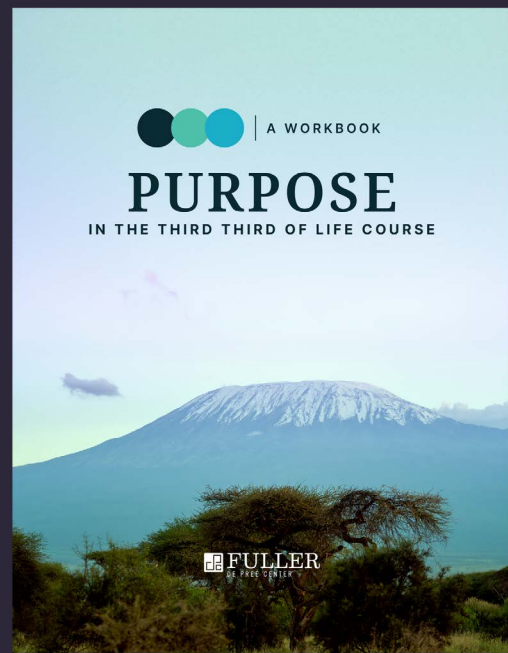


EXPLORE OUR THIRD THIRD COURSES

*LEARN HOW TO LIVE
FRUITFULLY AND FAITHFULLY
IN THE THIRD THIRD OF LIFE.*



CLICK TO
LEARN MORE! 



CLICK TO
LEARN MORE! 



SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTERS

Join a community of leaders seeking to flourish, serve, and make a difference. Stay informed, encouraged, and equipped for every season of leadership.

*CLICK TO
LEARN MORE!*



*FOLLOW US ON
SOCIAL MEDIA*





CHECK OUT OUR ONLINE COURSES!

ROAD AHEAD COURSE

A toolkit designed to help you navigate seasons of transition and disruption.

*CLICK TO
LEARN MORE!* 

ALONGSIDE MENTOR TRAINING

This course equips and encourages those thinking about becoming mentors.

*CLICK TO
LEARN MORE!* 