



As We Wait

An Advent Resource

Hope

Advent Week 1

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 9:6&7 & Psalm 130

Christmas Hymns

O Come O Come Emmanuel
Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

Reading

Hope.

It's a powerful word, isn't it?

Let the word roll around in your heart and mind for a moment.

What comes to mind when you think of hope? When have you experienced hope in a way that has made all the difference for you? What is bringing you hope in this moment of your life?

When things are going well, the concept of hope doesn't tend to hold a lot of weight for us. We might like the word. We might get warm fuzzies when we see it written on pillows and mugs, or when we hear it spoken about in sermons. But ultimately, it feels like no more than a nice sentiment, an abstract concept that evokes positive feelings and invites us to try to find the bright side in every situation.

But then there are those other times – the times when life gets hard. When things feel uncertain. When things haven't gone as we have planned, and we can't see the way forward.

In those moments, hope makes all the difference. It allows light to break into the darkest situations. It gives us the strength we need to take another step and face another day.

During the first week of advent, we celebrate hope.

The hope that we celebrate isn't just a nice sentiment. It's not wishful thinking, or a naivety that requires us to look at the world with rose-tinted glasses and deny the brokenness within us and around us.

Our hope is found in a person - Jesus Christ. Emmanuel. God with us.

For generations, the Jewish people waited for their promised Messiah. They waited and they waited and they waited. Through war, exile and captivity they waited. Through pain, suffering, and silence they waited. It's easy to imagine that there were moments when they struggled to hold on to hope.

But God kept his promise.

God always keeps his promises. Jesus came into the world and ushered in the Kingdom of God. He overcame the power of sin, death and evil. He reconciled us to God and set us free to become the people that God made us to be – to live as His children, fully loved.

The hope that we have in Jesus is a hope that can never be taken from us. It is a hope that endures through all of the ups and downs and twists and turns that life takes us on. It is a hope that has the power to carry us through life's most difficult moments, and it's a hope that will last forever.

As we move into the Advent season, God invites us to be people who know His hope intimately. Who experience it, who cling to it, who build our lives on it, and who spread it to everyone we meet.

God is with us, friends. May you discover the fullness of the hope that we have in Jesus this Advent season.

Reflection

Advent is a season of waiting and expectation. As you watch your amaryllis grow this week what do you notice about the practice of waiting? Is it hard for you? Are you rushing through your days, impatient that things aren't moving at the pace you would choose? How can you practice hopeful waiting over the course of the next four weeks?

Prayer

O God of our Hope, come~

As we begin this Advent journey, restore us to faithfulness, and shepherd us through these weeks. Soften us and open us to trust in your love, your goodness, your guiding presence. May we take in your word and bring it to life, giving hope to the hopeless through our words and actions. We ask this through Christ, our Savior and our hope. Amen

Daily Practice

At the end of each day this week, name three signs of hope that you noticed or experienced during the day. Consider journaling about them or discussing them with your family or friends.

Peace

Advent Week 2

Scripture Readings

Matthew 11:28-30 & John 14:27

Christmas Hymns

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day
Silent Night
Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Reading

What does “peace” mean to you? Often when we think about peace, we imagine a beachfront vacation, a relaxing night at home, or simply an absence of conflict and violence.

But Scripture speaks about peace as something that goes much deeper than that. The Hebrew word for peace is “shalom,” and it conveys a sense of wholeness, completeness, and rightness. Shalom exists where things are as they should be. Where people are flourishing, where communities function in alignment with the ways of God, and where relationships are characterized by love.

In a well-known passage from the book of Isaiah, the promised Messiah is referred to as the “Prince of Peace.” For generations, the Jewish people anticipated that the Messiah would be a mighty warrior who would conquer their oppressors and put Israel in a position of power.

But Jesus, the ultimate fulfillment to this promise, showed us another way. He taught us how to live as peacemakers, he sought to restore justice and wholeness to everyone he encountered, and then He gave up his life in the greatest act of sacrificial love known to humankind.

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus reconciled us to God and made true peace possible. In Him, we have peace with God, peace with ourselves, and peace with one another.

We have peace with God because our sins are no longer held against us. We have been set free. When God looks at us, he sees us as holy and blameless - not because of anything we have done (phew!), but because Christ overcame the power of sin and evil on the cross. We are free to come “boldly and confidently into God’s presence (Eph 3:12),” knowing that we are loved and accepted there. This is true peace. This is the source of *all* true peace.

In Christ, we have peace with ourselves. So many of us spend so much of our time comparing ourselves to others, striving to get ahead, or feeling bad about ourselves because we don’t measure up. By God’s grace, he accepts us just as we are, with all of our failures and weaknesses. By opening ourselves up to receive His love, we can learn to accept ourselves as we are, too - knowing that His Spirit is moving in us, transforming us from the inside out.

And in Christ, we are called to live at peace with others. In Scripture, reconciliation with God and reconciliation with others go hand in hand. We have received God's forgiveness, and so we forgive. We have experienced God's grace, and so we extend it to others. God calls us to be *agents of reconciliation* - people who do the hard work of restoring peace within our relationships, our communities, and our world.

Ephesians 2:14 tells us that Jesus *is* our peace. As we move into the second week of Advent, may we open ourselves up to receive His peace and let it overflow to everyone we encounter.

Reflection

As we continue to watch and wait during this Advent season, observe your amaryllis plant. Has it grown this week? In what areas of your life are you waiting on God's peace? As you observe the slow transformation taking place in your plant, allow yourself to be reminded of God's faithfulness. Rest in the peace of His presence as you wait on Him, and be attentive to the moments of peace that He brings you in the week ahead.

Prayer

O God of Peace, come~

Form us into your Peacemakers.

Enable us to look within ourselves,
to make straight our crooked hearts,

to patiently and lovingly await changes in ourselves and others.

As you gather us tenderly,
and hold us close,

may we also show that same compassion to the world.

Fill our hearts with your peace,
and our lives with your love,
that these may flow from our lives
and into our world.

We ask this through Christ,
our Savior and our peace, Amen.

Daily Practice

At the end of each day this week, name three signs of peace that you noticed or experienced during the day. Consider journaling about them or discussing them with your family or friends.

Joy

Advent Week 3

Scripture Readings

Luke 2:10-11 & John 15:5-15

Christmas Hymns

Joy to the World

Angels We Have Heard on High

Reading

In our culture, Christmas is marketed as a season of **joy**. As soon as Halloween comes to an end, the aisles of retail stores are stocked with tinsel and jingle bells, with candy canes and various depictions of Santa and his reindeer, while Christmas music blasts through the speakers.

We have come to associate Christmas joy with exchanging brightly wrapped gifts, with laughter and conversation exchanged across dinner tables, with hot chocolate and hunkering down for holiday festivities with loved ones. While often our experiences of the season don't measure up to the cheerful bliss portrayed in the Hallmark Christmas movies, it's what we strive for and what we idealize. It's what we think of when we reflect on the joy of Christmas.

But how do we celebrate joy when life isn't unfolding as we hoped that it would? Is joy something that is out of reach for us when we walk through seasons of suffering, difficulty, loneliness, or weariness? How can we celebrate joy when it feels like so much is going wrong in our world?

We tend to glamorize, or at least sanitize, the circumstances around Jesus' birth in our telling of the Christmas story. The truth is that nothing about the situation really seemed all that holly or jolly at the time at all.

As a nation, Israel had gone through an immense amount of suffering, and was struggling to maintain their identity as God's chosen people. Year after year had passed with no Messiah to fulfill the promises of the prophets and set things right. For many, it must have felt like all hope was lost.

On a more personal level, Mary and Joseph had to lay down the plans they had for their lives and step into all kinds of uncertainty as they submitted themselves to God's plan for their lives. When it came time for Jesus to be born, there was nowhere for Mary and Joseph to stay - so Jesus, the King of Kings, was laid in a manger to rest. These were hardly ideal conditions for bringing a new baby into the world.

But Jesus has never been afraid of entering into situations that we feel are too dark, or too complicated, or too human for God to experience. Not at all. From his birth to his death, we see Jesus showing up in situations that seem hopeless and making all things new.

This is exactly what is so powerful about the joy we have in Jesus Christ. It doesn't require us to deny difficult realities or tidy things up. It's a stubborn joy that is rooted in the deepest of truths - that God came to be with us, that God is with us now, and that God will come again and set things right once and for all.

Jesus comes to us exactly where we are - in moments when everything is going right, and in moments when it feels like everything is falling apart. He calls us by name and He reminds us of his love - his grace-filled, heart-transforming, unconditional, never-ending love. And that is the birthplace of true joy.

May your life overflow with a joy that runs deeper than circumstances this Advent season.

Reflection

Take a look at your amaryllis. Notice the ways it has changed since last week. Try to look at your plant with the eyes of a child. Allow yourself to experience awe and curiosity as you behold the plant's beauty. Then look back over your week with the same lens. When did you experience moments of joy during the past week? What filled you with a sense of awe? Keep your eyes open for opportunities to revel in joy as you move into the week ahead.

Prayer

O God of our Joy, Come~

In gratitude we remember you as creator of all,
yet still mindful of each of your children.

Grant us the patience

to live in joyful hope,

to trust in your abiding presence.

Open our eyes to see your healing

at work in our lives

that we might touch the world

with tender, compassionate care.

Give us the wisdom, courage and strength

to bring the joy of your love

to transform the earth

and to light the way to a more

just and peaceful world.

We ask this through Christ,

our Savior and our joy. Amen.

Daily Practice

At the end of each day this week, name three signs of joy that you noticed or experienced during the day. Consider journaling about them or discussing them with your family or friends.

Love

Advent Week 4

Scripture Readings

John 1:14 & Romans 8:31-39

Christmas Hymns

O Come All Ye Faithful

O Holy Night

Reading

Love is a powerful thing. The way we have experienced love and the way we understand it are foundational to the way we think, live, and interact with other people every single day.

Our obsession with love has been showing up in pop culture throughout history. We sing songs about it, we write books and poems about it, and we paint canvases in attempt to depict it. Love has such a strong impact on us that at times we are willing to rearrange our entire lives to chase after it.

And yet, at the same time, love is a terribly complicated thing. As we grow up in this broken world, we all develop skewed ideas about what love is, whether or not we can trust it, and who deserves it.

Most of us are cautious - even stingy - with our love. We offer it only to people who love us in return, or who have something to offer us in exchange. When we are wronged or offended, we quickly retract our love and withhold it until circumstances change and we are able to make amends.

Many of us struggle to receive love ourselves. We worry that we aren't worthy of it, and we spend all kinds of time and energy trying to earn it or prove that we deserve it.

Scripture tells us that "God is love (1 John 4:8)." Pause for a moment to reflect on the weight of that statement. God **is** love. It doesn't just say that God is **loving**, although he certainly is. This isn't just one quality amongst many that describe what God is like. John tells us that God, in his very essence, **is** love.

So when Jesus came into the world, fully God and fully human at the exact same time, He revealed once and for all what love really is - what it looks like when it's wrapped up in flesh, living and breathing and walking amongst us.

Not only did he provide us with the perfect example of love, He died on the cross and rose again so that we could be reconciled with God and live in His perfect love forever.

God loves **you**. Perfectly. Unconditionally. Exactly as you are. Exactly where you are. Each and every minute of each and every day, you "live and move and have your being" in the presence of His love.

It's amazing what a difference love can make in our lives. Love can give us hope in even the darkest situations. It can give us courage in the face of our fears. It can fill us with a deep sense of peace in the midst of unbelievable chaos. It can transform us from the inside out and help us to see the world in a whole new way.

On Christmas, we celebrate the world-changing reality that love came for us in Jesus Christ. He is with us now. And one day He will come again to renew and restore all things to the way they should be.

May you experience a deep sense of His perfect love for you as you prepare to celebrate Christmas this week.

Reflection

Have a look at your amaryllis. How has it changed over the course of the last week? Has it bloomed? If so, take a moment to marvel at its beauty and to be reminded of God's faithfulness in bringing about new life. If your amaryllis hasn't bloomed yet, don't be discouraged! The Jewish people waited hundreds of years for the Messiah to arrive. Nobody knew when God was going to act to fulfill his promises. And yet, they waited with hope because they knew that God could be trusted. God is always good and faithful, even when things don't happen according to our plans or our timelines. As you continue to wait for your amaryllis to bloom, allow yourself to be formed in hopeful anticipation.

How did watching your amaryllis grow impact you during the season of Advent?

Prayer

O God of Love, Come~

On this the last Sunday of Advent, as the new day dawns,
may we remember how your birth
lit the darkness of night
with the hope of freedom,
the joy of a promise fulfilled.
Be with us.

Shine your light in our hearts
so that we might know your wisdom, see your faithfulness,
and believe in your creative, seemingly impossible ways.
We ask this through Christ,
our Savior and our love. Amen.

Daily Practice

At the end of each day this week, name three signs of love that you noticed or experienced during the day. Consider journaling about them or discussing them with your family or friends.