



Prepare Him Room
Spiritual Practices for Advent

Week Three: Joy
December 13th-19th, 2020



JOY

Don't be afraid!" he said. "
I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people.
The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born
today in Bethlehem, the city of David!
-Luke 2:10-11

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.

So how can we celebrate Christmas joy when so many of the things that define it for us are out of reach this year? 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.

Sunday, December 13th

READ AND MEDITATE

Before Jesus went to the cross, He spent some time preparing his disciples for what they were about to experience. He promised them that he would send the Holy Spirit to guide them and comfort them, He encouraged them to remain faithful even when things got difficult, and He taught them about the importance of trusting Him and living in His presence.

In the passage we will meditate on today, Jesus teaches His disciples how they can have a life that is characterized by **“joy that overflows”**. He doesn't give them a three-step formula for a joy-filled life or some quick and easy tips to become happier people.

Instead, He invites them into a way of living. He calls them to a life of intimacy and obedience - to a life that is centred in His presence, fueled by His love, and dependent on Him in all things.

As we start off this week, let's allow Jesus to remind us where true joy comes from.

Spend some time meditating on this passage from John 15:5-15. Use your imagination. Picture Jesus speaking these words to you. What does the tone of His voice communicate to you? What expression do you see on His face? What feelings does this encounter evoke in you? Consider writing down a phrase from the passage and meditating on it throughout the day.

Meditative Reading: John 15:5-15

⁵ “Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. ⁷ But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! ⁸ When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

⁹ “I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. ¹⁰ When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! ¹² This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. ¹³ There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn’t confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me.

PRAY

Take a moment to rest in God’s presence. In what areas of your life have you been trying to do things your own way, or by your own strength? Surrender this area of your life to Jesus, and receive His invitation to “remain in His love.” Ask Jesus to fill you with His joy so that you can share it with others today.

Monday, December 14th

READ AND RECEIVE

Read the following verse over several times slowly. Pay attention to the key words Peter uses here, and let your heart connect with each one of them.

⁶ So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. ⁷ These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.

⁸ You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. ⁹ The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls.

-1 Peter 1:6-9

REFLECT AND JOURNAL

Prayerfully reflect on the following questions. Consider writing your responses to one or more of these questions in a journal.

How do trials show that our faith is genuine?

What does it look like to go through trials in faith? How do we be authentic and honest about our challenges, while still living as people who have hope and joy in Christ?

What "trials" are you going through right now? What is God doing in the midst of it?

How does trust in God lead to a glorious, inexpressible joy?

What would it look like for you to fully trust God in your current circumstances? How would that lead to joy?

What brings you joy? Make a list and spend some time in gratitude to God for all the good gifts He pours into your life.

PRAY

Spend some time being honest with God about any trials you are currently facing. Then, express your trust in Him and open yourself up to receive the inexpressible joy you have in Him. Ask God to help you experience His joy today, and to extend it to the people you interact with.

Tuesday, December 15th

READ AND REFLECT

Read through the following passage slowly and prayerfully. Pay attention to each of the directives that Paul gives the Corinthian church - and to the promise he makes about the outcome of their faithfulness in this!

Dear brothers and sisters, I close my letter with these last words: Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you.

-2 Corinthians 13:11

Go through the Palms Down/Palms Up posture prayer as described below, focusing on releasing any areas of discouragement, fear, or worry to God and opening yourself up to receive His joy.

PALMS DOWN/PALMS UP

Palms Down/Palms Up is a posture prayer that can help us surrender our concerns and challenges to God, and open us up to receive the blessings that he wants to pour into our lives.

As we go about our day to day lives, we all experience moments of discouragement, defeat, anxiety, and frustration. In the season we are all living through, it can be easy to lose sight of the joy that we have in Christ.

Palms Down/Palms Up is a practice that you can continue to use throughout the day to release those things that are overwhelming you or cluttering your heart and mind over to God, and open yourself up to receive God's hope, peace, and joy. Here's how to do it:

Turn your palms down, and release your concerns to God

Start by resting your hands on your knees and turning your palms down as a symbol of releasing your cares to God. What has been causing you discouragement lately? What has been causing you to feel defeated, anxious, or frustrated?

Allow your heart to surrender these burdens to God. You might pray something like "God, I surrender my discouragement about...to you.", "Lord, I give you my worries about this meeting", or "God I release my fear about...to you". You might feel a sense of release in your heart or in your hands as you pray. Take a few moments to lean into this posture of surrender.

Turn your palms up, and receive God's hope

Now turn your palms upwards and posture your heart to receive from God. Ask God to provide you with His joy in the area you have been struggling. You may pray something like "God, I pray that you will fill me with Your joy in the midst of this difficult season" or, "Father, please give me Your peace as I enter into this conversation". Take a few moments to enjoy God's presence. Allow your heart to rest in fellowship with Him before continuing on with your day.

Wednesday, December 16th

LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio Divina is an approach to reading the Bible that opens us up to hear God speak to us in the present moment. Central to the practice of Lectio Divina is the belief that the Holy Spirit actively uses the Scriptures to lead us and change us. Lectio Divina places us in a position to be transformed by the Scriptures as we immerse ourselves in them and surrender to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the gospels, we read many stories of people encountering Jesus and being transformed. Luke tells us about an encounter that Jesus has with a man named Zacchaeus, who is filled with joy when Jesus decides to become a dinner guest in his home.

Try practicing Lectio Divina using this passage. Beneath the passage, you will find the steps that will walk you through Lectio Divina.

PASSAGE - LUKE 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town.² There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich.³ He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd.⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way.

⁵ When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. "Zacchaeus!" he said. "Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today."

⁶ Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy.⁷ But the people were displeased. "He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner," they grumbled.

⁸ Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"

⁹ Jesus responded, "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham.¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost."

LECTIO DIVINA - STEPS

1) Prepare: Centre yourself in God's presence

Start by taking a few minutes to breathe and quiet yourself in God's loving presence. Express your willingness to hear from God and your desire to be led by the Spirit.

2) Read: Listen for the word or phrase that God lifts to your attention

Read the passage all the way through slowly. Savour the words and let them sink into your heart. As you read, listen for a word or phrase that stands out and seems to resonate with your heart. Don't let yourself

feel pressured or worried about whether or not God will speak to you. Lean into the Holy Spirit and rest in the knowledge that God is already with you. Take a moment to sit with the words that have been drawn to your attention.

3) Reflect: How does this word connect with my life?

Read the passage through a second time. As you do, reflect on how this word or phrase relates to what is going on in your life at the present moment. How is God revealing himself to you through these words?

4) Respond: What is my response to God?

Read the passage through a third time. Following this reading, take a few moments to pray to God in response to this encounter. Express your feelings about what you have read. Pay attention for any sense that God is calling you to step out in obedience in some way based on what you have heard. This may be a good time to journal your prayers.

5) Resolve: Live it out!

As you continue on with the rest of your activities for the day, carry this word with you. Allow the Holy Spirit to bring it to your attention throughout the day. Live it out and let the Holy Spirit lead you into a deeper understanding of its meaning as it relates to your everyday life.

This structure follows the approach to Lectio Divina laid out in an article called "Lectio Divina: Engaging the Scriptures for Spiritual Transformation" by Ruth Haley Barton. Read the full article here: transformingcenter.org/2019/07/lectio-divina-engaging-the-scriptures-for-spiritual-transformation-2

Thursday, December 17th

READ AND RECEIVE

Read through the following verses slowly. Allow yourself to be reminded that you are in God's presence, and that He alone is the source of all joy!

⁸ I know the Lord is always with me.

I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.

⁹ No wonder my heart is glad, and I rejoice.

My body rests in safety.

¹⁰ For you will not leave my soul among the dead

or allow your holy one to rot in the grave.

¹¹ You will show me the way of life,

granting me the joy of your presence

and the pleasures of living with you forever.

-Psalm 16:8-11

BREATH PRAYER

Breath prayer is an ancient prayer practice that can help us become mindful and attentive to God's presence and provision in every moment of our day. Breath prayer is simple form of prayer, in which our expressions of worship, declarations of truth, and petitions to the Father, are expressed rhythmically as we inhale and exhale.

Look over the following breath prayers and find one that resonates with you. Inhale deeply as you pray the first half of your breath prayer, and then exhale slowly as you pray the second part of the breath prayer.

Calm your heart and mind and spend a few minutes breathing through the breath prayer. Allow your entire being to be re-centred in God's presence and find joy in the truth that you are declaring as you pray.

**You will show me the way of life,
granting me the joy of your presence.**

-Psalm 16:11

**Always be full of joy in the Lord
I say it again—rejoice!**

-Philippians 4:4

**You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence.**

-Psalm 16:11

**I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy.
Yes, your joy will overflow!**

-John 15:11

Friday, December 18th

READ AND REFLECT

Read through the following verse a few times slowly. Spend a few moments reflecting on the ways that God has rescued you from the kingdom of darkness and transferred you into the Kingdom of His Son. Imagine this prayer being prayed over you.

¹¹ We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy, ¹² always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, ¹⁴ who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.

-Colossians 1:11-14

EXPERIENCE JOY: PRAY

One practice that helps us to experience joy is gratitude. Spend some time thanking God for the good gifts that He has given you. Ask God to open your eyes to see the gifts that He has poured into your life, even in this season. Ask Him to help you experience His joy today.

SPREAD JOY: PRAY

Now spend a few moments praying for others to experience joy.

You can pray using your own words, or pray using a simple blessing like this one:

“May their hearts overflow with your joy.”

Pray joy over somebody you care deeply about and have a close relationship with.

Pray joy over somebody you look up to.

Pray joy over the last person you spoke to that was struggling in some way.

Pray joy over somebody you don't know very well - the first person who comes to mind.

Pray joy over somebody you find difficult to love.

Pray joy over our church family.

Pray joy over our community.

LIVE JOY: ACT

Ask God to show you a practical way that you can spread some joy today. Maybe it's setting aside the to-do list to have some memory-making experiences with your family or friends. Maybe it's offering an encouraging word to somebody or surprising them with an unexpected gift. Who can you bless with an act of kindness? Let God show you how He is inviting you to spread His joy today, then go ahead and do it!

Saturday, December 19th

READ AND REFLECT

Read through the following passage slowly. When have you experienced God's joy in the midst of hardship? How are you experiencing God's joy now? Spend some time in prayerful reflection.

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

-Habakkuk 3:17-18

THE EXAMEN

The Examen is spiritual practice that helps us become more aware of and engaged in God's activity in our lives – both in the big things and the small things. The prayer involves reflecting back on everything that happened over the course of the day, paying special attention to how God was moving and how you were responding. As we open ourselves up to the Spirit in this reflective practice, God will be able to speak to us about the gifts he has given us, the way we have been responding to Him and to others, and how He may be calling us to move forward.

While the Examen is often done at the end of each day, today we will use this practice to reflect back over the past week. We will pay attention to the ways we experienced God's joy, the ways we allowed Him to use us to spread joy to others, and how He is calling us to move forward with joy as we look ahead to a new week.

PRACTICE THE EXAMEN

1) Ask the Holy Spirit to lead this time of prayer. Start by centering yourself in God's loving presence. Take a minute to remind yourself that God is all around you, He is closer than the air that is filling your lungs. Try sitting up straight with your feet flat on the floor and your palms up. Take some deep breaths. Breathe in God's hope. His peace. His joy. His love. Breathe out everything that is not of him – your anxieties, your fears, your anger.

2) Give thanks. Take a few moments to express your gratitude for the gifts that he has given you over the course of the week – both big and small. Don't rush to create the longest list that you can come up with. Instead, take the time to really savour these blessings.

3) Reflect: Did I receive and experience God's joy this week? Take a few moments to reflect back on your week, walking through the significant moments of each day. Did you take time to celebrate God's goodness? Were there any moments that you struggled with hopelessness or despair? Bring them before God and let your heart be encouraged by God's character – his faithfulness, power, and love. Thank God for the moments that you experienced his joy.

4) Reflect: Did I spread joy this week? Think about the interactions you had with others. Did your actions and words spread cynicism, bitterness, or negativity? Or did you spread joy? Did you take time for your close relationships? Did you make space for fun and laughter?

5) Choose a feeling or situation from your reflection to pray through. Where in your life do you need joy to drown out the darkness? Where could you let God use you to spread his joy? Pray through this situation. Speak to God about your thoughts and feelings. Then open yourself up to listening to what he might have to say.

6) Look ahead to tomorrow. Scripture tells us that God's mercies are new every morning. What will it look like to experience and spread joy tomorrow? Receive God's grace and ask the Spirit to empower you as you look forward to the week ahead.