

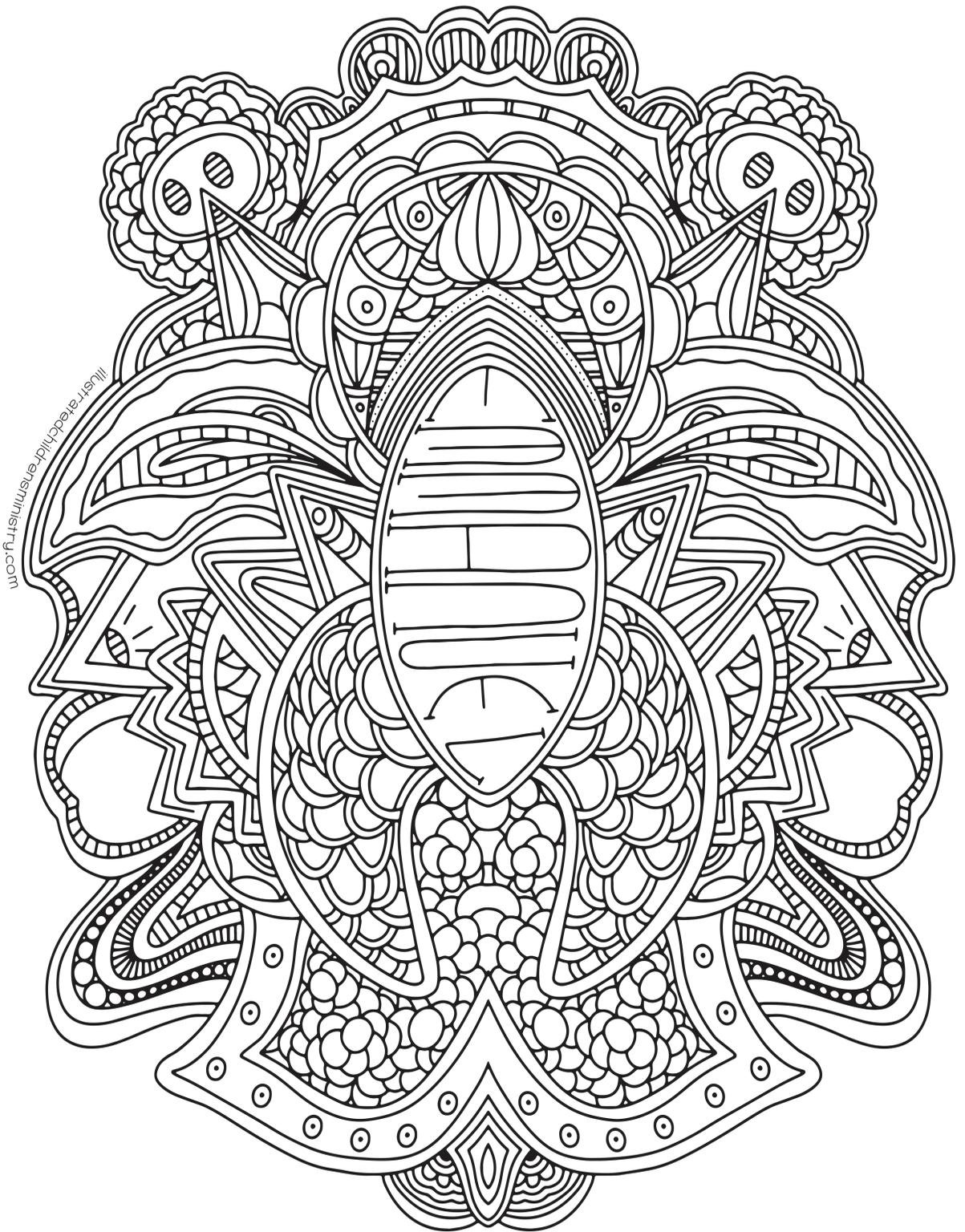


WELLESLEY VILLAGE CHURCH

A D V E N T

2022

Devotions for All Ages



www.illustrationministry.com

Introduction – Rev. Stacy Swain

Dr. Vivek Murthy, the 19th Surgeon General of the United States in his book “Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World” cites a 2018 report by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, that found over 55 million people say that they are often or always lonely or socially isolated. In that same year an AARP study found that one in three American adults over the age of forty-five are lonely. Loneliness can cause emotional pain and also can lead to many other deleterious effects on our health and well-being, he reports.

Social connection is vital to our health and thriving and loneliness is our way of letting ourselves know that we are missing out on that vital connection. Dr. Murthy says just as thirst is our body’s way of letting us know we ought to drink something. And hunger is our body’s way of letting us know we ought to eat something. The experience of loneliness is our way of signaling that we are needing connection. Dr. Murthy’s book was published in 2020. I can only imagine that the crisis of loneliness has only grown more pronounced in these last two years of pandemic.

I find it beautifully fitting, therefore, that the theme for Advent this year at the Wellesley Village Church is “Draw Near.” Drawing near, connecting, engaging, discovering we are a part of something greater than ourselves, is the remedy for loneliness.

During Advent we marvel at the mystery that God drew near to us in the person of Jesus. God showed us what a life saturated with divine love can be. Throughout Jesus’ ministry he invited people to draw near, to follow him, to share in the life of God with him.

And so, in this Advent season, we invite you to draw near to God and to each other as we make our way to the manger. Draw near through the pages of the Advent Booklet as you share in the reflections, prayers, poems, artwork, and photographs of your fellow congregants.

This Devotional Booklet is divided into four sections corresponding with each of the four thematic weeks of Advent – Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. Move slowly through the pages. Savor and reflect.

In this season, let us also have the eyes to see those in our lives and wider community who may be feeling lonely. Let us reach out with love and invite connection. Perhaps you may even want to gift this booklet to someone for whom you think it could be a blessing.

Connection is the antidote to loneliness. It is also the pathway of faith. Let us walk it together as we make our way to the manger with Mary and Joseph, with Zechariah and Elizabeth, with John the Baptizer, with the shepherds, with the Innkeeper, with the villagers, with all of us across time and place as we receive again and again the good news of God’s connection with humanity - of Emmanuel, God with us!



Linocut image by Rev. Megan Berkowitz

HOPE



*Pick a bouquet of Joy from above;
blend in the spirit of Hope for a shove.
One way or another,
they will help us discover,
the mix for the meaning of Love.*

*(remember i am with you always;
it is Spring that i bring through the lens of Love)*

*Bluets
Washington, NH 5/09*

Image and text by Casey Hayes

Advent Week 1:
November 27th, 2022 – December 3rd, 2022

Advent Week 1

New Testament Reading

Luke 1:5-20 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Hebrew Bible Reading

Malachi 3:1-4 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight--indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.

Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Song (sung to the tune of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”)

O come and be the hope in all our lives
Though chaos and confusion still survive
We know the path of hate all too well
We need our God with us, Emmanuel!
Rejoice, rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to us
And all things shall be well

Advent Candle Lighting

When the world seems scary
When we try to escape and hide
The Holy invites us to confront fear
That we may find Hope

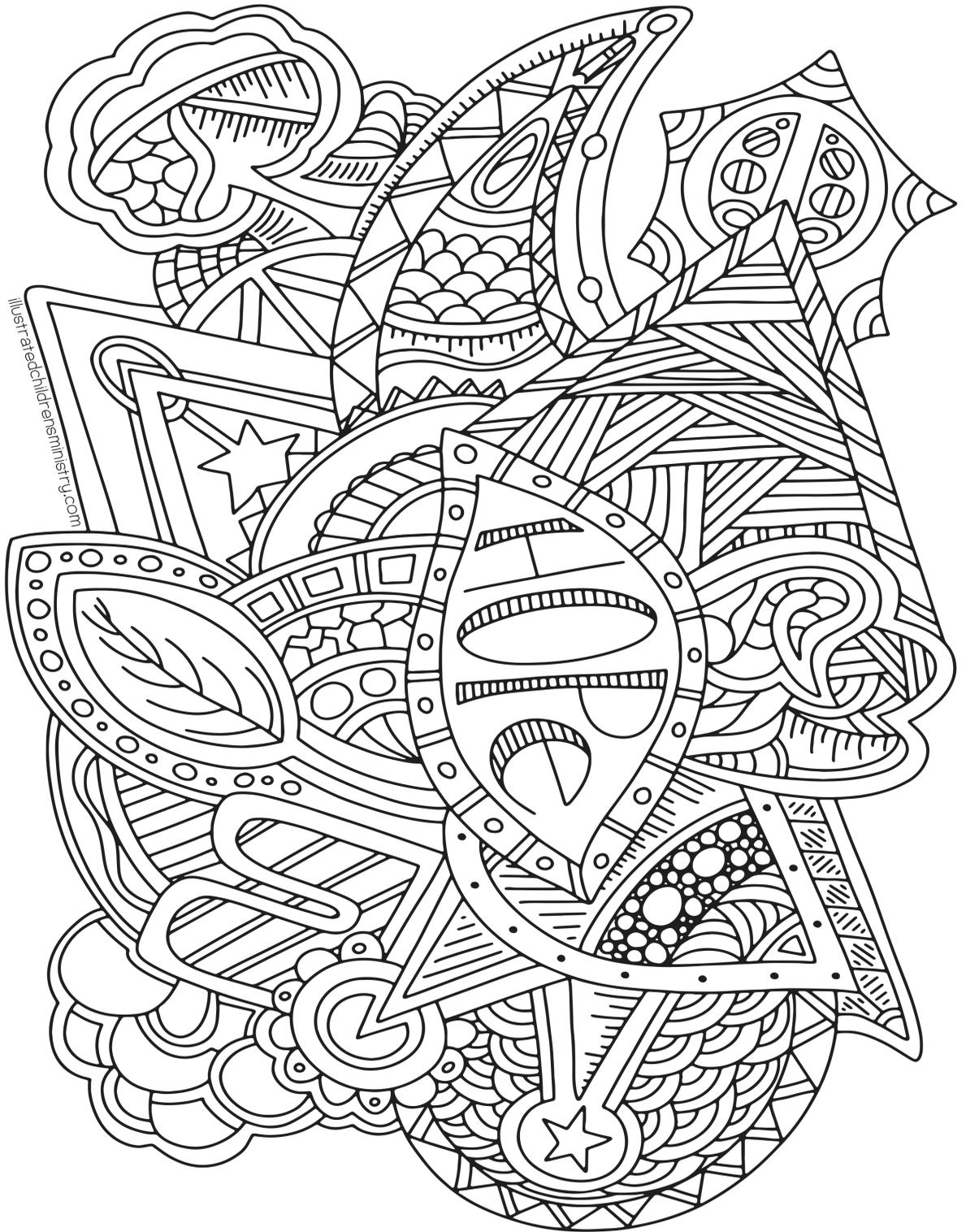
(Light a candle of Hope)

Where in the world do we find Hope these days?



Prayer for a Week of Hope

Holy One, quicken in us your hope that we may live the Good News that you proclaim.



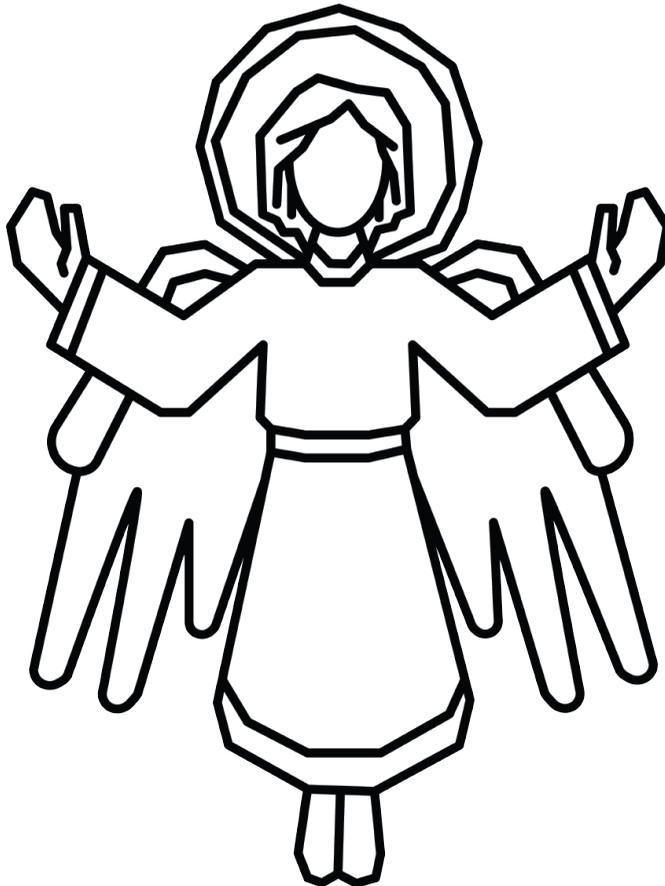
Advent for Children and Families

Hope

Sometimes we think of hope as a wish or a dream: I hope I get what I want for Christmas. Hope in God is not based on a wish but on knowing that God is with us and fills us with all that we need and ask - goodness, forgiveness, understanding. What can you ask God for that will fill up your heart? With our hearts filled, we have hope to give away and be change for good in the world around us.

- I wonder what hope looks like.
- I wonder what hope sounds like.
- I wonder how hope feels.
- I wonder how I might share hope with others.

As you color this hope art, wonder about these questions, and let God's hope fill you.

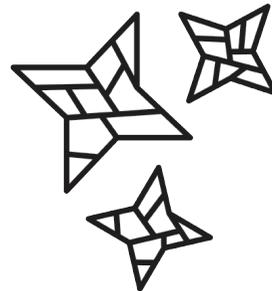
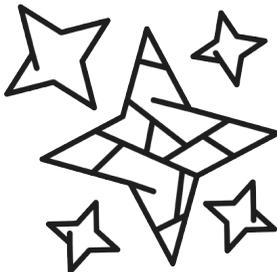


Hope

John 1:9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Image and text by Barbara Werner

Advent is a time of anticipation of the light of God coming into the world through the birth of his son, Jesus. We have the hope of a new beginning, leading us closer to God. This brings to mind dawn with the sun cutting through the darkness bringing the light of a new day with new possibilities.



By Alice Polley

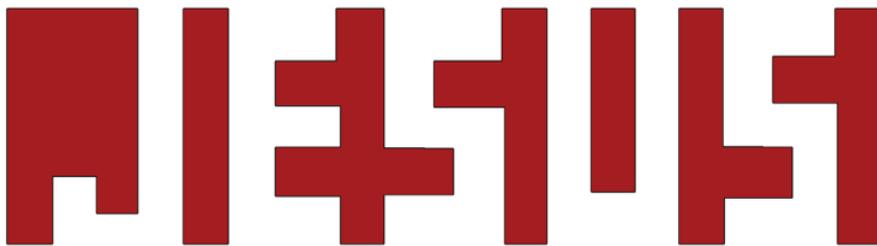
Christmas is a “noisy” holiday. Well before Thanksgiving we are confronted with Christmas music in stores along with garish displays. There are incessant ads on TV and radio and pop-up ads on the computer blaring about sales, deals, must-haves, and hurry, hurry, hurry countdowns. All of the ads and all of the lyrics depict happy people. The message is clear—Christmas is happy, everyone is happy, give this or that to make someone happy, be happy!

HAPPY, HAPPY, Happy, happy, happy.....hollow....

The journey through Advent is the road less traveled at this time of year. It is paved with Hope, has guardrails of Peace, curves of Joy, and a destination of Love. There is no speeding and no road rage disguised as happiness. There is music, wonderful music that invites rather than demands our attention and devotion. And, there is time-- if we'll take it. Time to ponder what really brings happiness, what really is important, not just during Advent but all year long.

Since that task is a life-long journey with no instruction book, Advent actually provides some guideposts. Attend church each week for some guidance and directions. Read this or another devotional for things to think about. Pray often. Breathe. And remember, there is no pressure to be happy.

God had a radical idea in giving us a baby instead of a king. Placing a focus on Advent rather than commercial Christmas is a radical idea, a road much less traveled. Experience along this road is not hollow but hallowed, full of meaning and value, and most of all Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.



By Sharon Kuhn

“Look past the darkness and see the light, Jesus is by your side every day and night...”

is the start of a poem I wrote about this sign I saw at a Christian summer camp when I was a kid. I can't find the rest of the poem now, but I still remember the meaning it held for me - a message of hope in tough times, to remember to look past the darkness and see the light, with Jesus by my side, I knew I could get through the darkest of times because He's my light, and I just have to look for Him in all things.

Right Here, Right Now

By John Hargrave

I've always wanted to write a musical about the birth of Jesus, but set in the present day. In my fantasy musical, we start with John the Baptist, who is literally a Baptist. He's a deep-South preacher who is passionately painting a picture of the second coming of Christ. "It could happen any minute!" he thunders from the pulpit. "He could be with us right here! Right now!" There's a big, Gospel-style opening number with a Pentecostal choir singing "Right Here, Right Now."

We cut scenes to Mary, a pregnant Latina teenager. Her boyfriend, Joseph, is Black. The two of them are driving home for the holidays, from New York to LA in an old Subaru, when Mary goes into labor. They're in the middle of Nowhere, Kansas, and there's not a hospital in sight. They pull off the interstate, where the only place to turn is a run-down Holiday Inn. Of course, there's no room in the Inn, but the manager is a kindly rural fellow who sees Mary's state and takes them to his place in a nearby trailer park. The trailer is overrun with a menagerie of pets – stray cats and dogs, the odd snake – but the couple make it just in time for Mary to give birth on an old sofa.

They name the baby Jesús.

The trailer park neighbors are curious about the commotion, and a cast of characters shows up at the door. First up are the shepherds, who in the musical are McDonald's workers. They have received a vision from angels, while drinking in the parking lot after their shift. Next come the Magi, who are New Age astrologers bringing weird baby gifts: a crystal pacifier, a tie-died onesie, and an Amazon gift card.

Mary has a solo number, where she ponders the meaning of all these things, and realizes that something truly wonderful has happened, even beyond the joys of motherhood. This is where the audience really gets to see Mary's vocal chops. Lots of emotion.

We cut back to John the Baptist, still preaching about the second coming of Christ, unaware of what's happened. "And until that day, it is you!" he shouts, pointing to us. "You are the ones who bring Christ into the world! Not in Bethlehem, but right here! Not in the past, but right now!" The choir breaks into a reprise of "Right Here, Right Now," while Mary, Joseph, and the cast take their bows to huge applause.

That's the sketch of the musical, but clearly there are some problems. For example, I'm not sure Holiday Inn will go for this. Finding the right Mary will be a challenge. Also, I've never written a musical.

The Nativity story, as wonderful as it is, has been told so many times that it can lose its capacity to surprise us. Yet the story of Jesus Christ is surprising in every way: from the unlikely cast of characters to the unsanitary circumstances of the birth.

Dead stories are of no use to us. We must find new ways to breathe fresh life into the “Greatest Story Ever Told.” We must plant new seeds, write new scenes, sing new songs about this eternal truth: that the Christ comes to us right here, right now.

Telling the story as something that happened 2,000 years ago is to forget that Christ is born today, in a hundred ways: a small kindness in a Facebook feed, a friendly Starbucks barista, a politician reaching across the aisle. The Christmas story is not in the past, it is the present ... if we can see it.

This Christmas, let’s keep our eyes peeled for it: the Spirit of Christ coming into our lives, in surprising and unexpected ways. If we look for new characters in this modern-day musical, we’ll find them all around us, whether we’re at work or at Wegman’s.

The most surprising, unlikely part of the story is that we are all Mary. We can bring Christ into the world through our everyday actions: our kind words of encouragement or appreciation, our patient endurance of difficult family members, our forgiveness of long-standing resentments. Whether or not this musical is ever born, Christ is born every time we make the effort to extend ourselves to each other. That is the real Christmas story: right here, right now.

A Christmas Carmen

Stanzas I and II

By John Greenleaf Whittier
Offered by Barbara Howland

Sound all over the waters, reach out from all lands.
The chorus of voices, the clasping of hands,
Sing hymns that were sung by the stars of the morn,
Sing songs of the angels when Jesus was born!

With glad jubilations
Bring hope to the nations!

The dark night is ending and dawn has begun;
Rise, hope of the ages, arise like the sun,
All speech flow to music, all hearts beat as one!

Sing the bridal of nations with chorals of love.
Sing out the war-vulture and sing in the dove,
Till the hearts of the peoples keep time in accord
And the voice of the world is the voice of the Lord!

Clasp hands of the nations
In strong gratulations;

The dark night is ending and dawn has begun;
Rise, hope of the ages, arise like the sun,
All speech flow to music, all hearts beat as one!



Linocut image by Rev. Bob Feeny

PEACE



*Sometimes i find
my Mind
dogged by the past,
or it envisions the future
as lonely and vast.
Then i discovered
how to set
my Soul free:
seek the Beauty
of NOW
for the best
memory.*

*(always remember as Time passes by,
it is how much you Care, not how hard you cry)*

*Bog Aster
Halfmoon Pk, Washington, NH 8/15*

Image and text by Casey Hayes

Advent Week 2:
December 4th, 2022 – December 10th, 2022

Advent Week 2

New Testament Reading

Luke 3:2-18 During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin 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.” And the crowds asked him, “What, then, should we do?”

In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Hebrew Bible Reading

Micah 5:2-5a But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Song (sung to the tune of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”)

O come and bring your peace upon the earth
 That even now still longs for its rebirth
 We seek to live and move in your ways
 Guide us to peace and justice all our days
 Rejoice, rejoice!
 Emmanuel shall come to us
 And all things shall be well

Advent Candle Lighting

When conflict seems never-ending, relationships rocky,
 When we want to deny and pretend,
 The Holy invites us to make space for truth-telling
 That we may find Peace

(Light a candle of Peace)

Where in the world do we find Peace these days?



Prayer for a Week of Peace

Prince of Peace, make of our hearts your dwelling place that we may become your peace makers in our homes, communities and world.



Illustration: ahedchildrensillustration.com

Advent for Children and Families

Peace

In the Nativity story, angels appear and speak to Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds. I wonder how I might feel if an angel appeared to me. How might you feel? In each of these appearances, the angels gave them big news about the birth of Jesus. Possibly unsettling news that made them anxious or worried or over excited. The angels told each person, "Fear, not." They were each asked to trust God for peace to help them understand and know that God is with them. That same peace of God is with us each day, helping us to trust in God.

I wonder what peace looks like.

I wonder what peace sounds like.

I wonder how peace feels.

I wonder how I might share peace with others.

As you color this peace art, wonder about these questions and let God's peace fill you.



There is nothing more peaceful than a sleeping baby. Offered by Sharon Kuhn

A Falling Cross

By Bradford Harding

Given the chance to share any of the history of Village Church is a privilege for me. In many ways, events in our congregation's past reveal the work of the Holy Spirit, and how what then followed became better and richer than any mortal mind could have predicted. It expands my own imagination, and I become more aware of God's Grace. Though the history of Village Church is long, beginning even when our faithful forebears were subject to the laws of the British colony, not all the good stories are old. One I love to tell, maybe too often if it is to the same ears, is within my own experience. First published in the Spire sixteen years ago, I offer it again here with a bit of editing:

It had probably started weeks or even months before, with movement no eye could detect – slow, tectonically slow – perhaps as slow as your fingernail grows, or even much slower. And maybe on some days it stopped completely. But it was slow. No one imagined it would move as it did. The engineers who know about these things specified materials that were stronger than they needed to be. But even they might say, because they are engineers and things after all do break down, that sooner or later gravity wins.

The cross suspended in the sanctuary after the chancel was renovated in 2002, was placed to reflect both the earlier design as well as to call forth what was new. Always a sacred place for worship, the chancel now had a greater sense of free space. It was accessible to everyone regardless of any physical limitation. One could think it was now more accessible to the Holy Spirit. The cross, also recrafted, was a combination of the old and the new, and it was very heavy, enough so that the cable that supported it passed up through the ceiling to be fastened directly to the steel beam that is the ridge of the roof. At the lower end, inside the cross, the fastening was similar to that commonly used in elevators and construction cranes – a metal ferrule that binds the cable back on itself. It was designed to last for years, possible to be taken apart, but definitely not to come apart.

Except that it did come apart. Sometime in the night of July 3, 2004, the cable that had been slipping slowly, very, very slowly through the ferrule, finally reached the point where there was nothing left of the hitch. The downward motion of the cross had to have been slow for a quick instant. But then, free of all its support, it fell, perfectly straight. Down. Down, snapping the two thin tethers that had kept it from swinging in the quietly moving air. Straight down.

The empty chancel flower container still shows the marks where the bottom of the cross first struck. Then, for what must have been a second or two at least, the cross stood on its own in the near dark of the night. It next tipped and fell forward, landing face first on the communion cup sitting on the communion table. The noise would have startled anyone. Finally, before any echo of the noise could have died away, the cross dropped to the floor.

These days, the cross is suspended as it was, but with new cable and ferrules, much stronger than the engineers first specified. On the face of the cross, near its own right side, is a circular dent in the wood where it struck the top edge of the communion cup as it fell forward. The surface of the communion table bears a similar dent, left by the base of the cup as it bore the brunt of the falling cross. As for the cup itself, which was made of ordinary pottery, it was not broken – not even a crack or a chip.

It was a phone call that brought me to see all this on the morning after it happened, and the scene remains vivid in my memory. To me, a former teacher science teacher, it is all so easily explained. But is it? I wonder. A heavy cross and an earthenware communion cup; unbroken -- the fall during the night when nobody was around to be injured -- is mere coincidence overrated? I treasure the mystery. Sometimes questions alone are gifts of the Holy Spirit.

I am also glad that the dents remain in the wood of the communion table and the face of the cross. They are evidence of a story that, like so many others, is too good not to be true.



Image and text by Cathy Liddell

John 1:5 "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."

Look at this little light! Look at the pitch darkness around it! Take it in, how really, really dark that darkness is. And take in how almost blindingly bright the little flame is, that persistent little flame. It's just as bright now as it was when the "wood" cut was made. I am still surprised by the effect, or shall I say, by how affective the effect is. As I sat looking at it the above scripture came to mind: the darkness all around this flame, and how brightly it shines. I believe a flame like this is in every creature God made, no matter how many legs the creature has, a little persistent flame that can never go out because God put it there. We humans often let our worries try to cover it up, but even then, it's still there. It always was. But at one time, in one place long ago, God saw that we needed more. God sent us Jesus to show us what that flame can do, and to convince us that that same flame is in each of us. Let us keep the image of this persistent flame in our hearts this Advent, and let love and gratitude well up as we wait to celebrate that time when the flame became larger than life in the birth of Jesus.

Meeting Jesus

By Thomas Walter

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” -- Rev. 3:20

Over my years I’ve had several images of meeting Jesus, beginning with one of my earliest images of Jesus standing at the door (of my heart) knocking, asking me to answer, open the door, and let Him in. That image of Jesus standing at the door was accentuated by a familiar painting we had in our home---A garden scene, nighttime, a kind and gentle Jesus, with his hand raised in mid-knock, yearning to be welcomed in. Perhaps you’ve seen the painting, admired it, felt warmed by it. That image still resonates with me---the yearning to connect in some profound way with Jesus, to sit together, to embrace, to share a meal.

Recently I was on the Associate Pastor Search Committee that called Rev. Stacy Swain to our church. As part of our committee work was coming up with a variety of questions to ask each of our candidates, hopefully questions that would elicit information we were looking for, questions that might be a little bit outside the norm, take a candidate by surprise. One of these questions tried to understand where Jesus fits into a candidate’s life, their faith, their theology, their heart and soul. The question we came up with was to ask: “if you could spend a day alone with Jesus, how would you like the day to go? what questions might you ask? how would you like your life to be changed as a result?” We heard many wonderful “think on your feet” answers that truly gave us insight into our candidates’ faith.

I would like to ask each of you, now reading this, to ask yourself that same question; mull it over; use your imagination. “If you could spend a day alone with Jesus, how would you like the day to go?” Especially ask what question(s) you might ask Jesus? Consider how your own life might change, needs to change, by spending an afternoon together?

Most recently I had a dream about Jesus. It came suddenly, surprisingly, as dreams do, without being requested. The dream came after spending an evening in a small GIFT group at our church. In the dream I was walking alone, at the age I am now, when on a clear day I suddenly came to a lake and a beach. Pulled up on the beach was a small rowboat with a man sitting on the bow, looking at me, as if waiting for me. I had the strong sense that this was Jesus. No words were spoken. Of course I was surprised and felt this was an exceptional moment. But what stood out for me was this sense of Jesus saying to me: “I’ve been waiting for you....”

Unlike the early image of Jesus coming to me, knocking on the door of my heart, here was a sense of Jesus waiting for me to come to Him. I believe Jesus, the Holy Spirit, is waiting for many of us to come to Him.

Friends, I believe Jesus had been waiting for some part of me to come to Him for a long, long time. I had the sense that Jesus is incredibly patient, as well as hopeful. I had the strong sense that Jesus KNOWS me far better than I know myself. I felt incredible love coming from Him. I also had the sense that I have been wandering, avoiding, not-yet-ready until that moment to fully embrace Jesus in my life. And yet I've been a Christian all my life. I've been a parish minister (now retired) for 40+ years. I'd given my life to Christ from a very young age. I know that early in my life I opened the door when I heard Jesus knocking. And yet.... And yet.... here was Jesus in my dream saying "I've been waiting for you to come to me".

That dream stays with me, touches me deeply, as I move into the Advent Season, the Birth of Light in a time of Darkness, and ponder its meaning in my life.

PRAYER: "Loving God, meet me where I am. Come to me in love, and kindness, knowing me far better than I know myself. Thank you for your patience. Amen."

A Time For Leaning In and a Time For Reaching Out -The Circle Grows Larger -

By Dorothy Patton

Advancing seasons - autumn to almost winter -
It is my favorite time of the year - Glorious blazing
color to shorter, colder, rainy days -

A time to have faith - knowing the renewal is coming -
What a perfect time to celebrate the birth of Jesus!

Back to leaning in - In earlier years - when my children
were young and later when they were grown
and I was still working, I attended church regularly -
even though my children and my husband did not.
The time was a welcome anchor - comfortable,
nourishing - but it was pretty much a Sunday only
thing.

Now in retirement (2001) and since Charlie's death
(2008), I find the communities within this church
sustaining - even exhilarating - providing challenges
to think in new ways, to see things differently, to give
and to receive.

A place for leaning in and a place for reaching out - the
circle grows larger.

St Theresa of Avila's Prayer

(1515-1582)

Offered by Allie Loehlin

May today there be peace within.

May you trust God that you are
exactly where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite
possibilities that are born of faith.

May you use those gifts that you have
received, and pass on the love that
has been given to you.

May you be content knowing you are
a child of God.

Let this presence settle into your
bones, and allow your soul the
freedom to sing, dance, praise and
love.

It is there for each and every one of
us.

JOY



Calla Lily
NorthHill, Needham, MA 2/22

BEAUTY
is what resonates
within the Soul
when it cannot find words
to succinctly express,
feelings of
JOY
it wants
to profess.

*[always remember that LOVE finds a way,
to apply the actionable verbs
TO CARE and TO PLAY]*

Image and text by Casey Hayes

Advent Week 3:
December 11th, 2022 – December 17th, 2022

Advent Week 3: Joy

New Testament Reading

Luke 1:39-55 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Mary's Song of Praise

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowly state 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;
indeed, 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 imagination 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 come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Hebrew Bible Reading

Isaiah 12:2-6 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Song (sung to the tune of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”)

O come to us like joy of heaven’s dawn,
 From Mary’s womb a faithful paragon
 Brought forth into this world by love’s power
 Your Spirit through her labors in that hour
 Rejoice, rejoice!
 Emmanuel shall come to us
 And all things shall be well

Advent Candle Lighting

When confusion claims us
 When we feel unable to do anything right
 The Holy invites us to be faithful
 That we may find Joy

(Light a candle of Joy)

Where in the world do we find Joy these days?



Prayer for a Week of Joy

Giver and lover of life, fill us with the generative power of your Joy.



illustratedchildrengames.com

Advent for Children and Families

Joy

What brings you joy at Christmas time?

The Angels told the Shepherds: "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people."

How does Jesus' birth bring you joy?

In the hymn Joy to the World, we sing, "Let every heart prepare him room." Let's make sure that we have room in our hearts to rejoice as we remember and celebrate Jesus' birth, God's gift of love to each one of us.

I wonder what joy looks like.

I wonder what joy sounds like.

I wonder how joy feels.

I wonder how I might share joy with others.

As you color this joy art, wonder about these questions and let God's joy fill you.



Our little bundle of joy.
Offered by Sharon Kuhn

Draw Near

By Chipo Dendre

Having a church home is the one thing that keeps me grounded as I have moved from city to city since moving to the United States from Zimbabwe. I was barely eighteen years old when I first arrived in Oregon for college. I had no idea where I was in a new world that looked completely different from my own. As I have done since, I went looking for a church and landed at the McMinnville Methodist Church. The church was in desperate need of someone to teach Sunday school. Doreen Pitman, who has since become my American mom, said I looked like I could teach Sunday school. Little did I know then that being anchored in a church family would provide me with deep roots that have helped me survive being a young immigrant away from home, working in political campaigns in Colorado, moving to Washington, DC, soon after graduation, and then surviving graduate school along with many personal losses. Each move has brought me a new church family with whom I have built strong relationships. Academia, my chosen profession, only sometimes knows what to do with Christians or how to respond to us. I recently learned how to be an academic Christian when we moved to Wellesley. Wellesley is an unlikely town for me. It is not a place I would have consciously chosen to move to and start our family. This affirms my belief that God always has a better plan for our lives than we do because, my goodness, as our toddler says, this church has been a blessing to us.

Two years ago, I was pregnant in a new town with a new job when the global pandemic struck. I look back at the time with more joy than apprehension because this church, even while we were locked away in our homes, provided us with an anchor and so much love. Our daughter was welcomed into an intensely chaotic world, but the pastoral care ministry here shielded us in ways I still cannot fully comprehend. As a young black couple, we worried about the racial tensions in this country. As a black mother, I was afraid that my outcomes would be dire, but nearly everywhere we went in Wellesley, I met someone affiliated with our church or who knew our church. The church connection has provided us with a deep sense of security. Even Veneka-Lexi is well aware that good things happen at church, although the main joy comes from church cookies for her.

Our world will never be the same as it was before COVID. The tensions that existed in communities the world over have deepened. There are wars, and politics seems more chaotic than ever before. And yet, this advent, I feel more anchored in community and love than I have done in a long time. I feel challenged to do more. To love more and to give more. To be more present and willing to use my voice and gifts for the greater good. I am deeply grateful to God for drawing me here and exposing me to a delicate goodness that anchors our church community. I pray that we give each other more reasons to smile and celebrate the good God has chosen for us.

Jesus' Grandparents

By Tom Porter

There are four important persons in the life of Jesus that aren't mentioned in the Bible—Jesus's grandparents, not to mention his great aunts and uncles.

You do read in the genealogy of Joseph that he had a father—Jacob in Matthew and Heli in Luke. But we don't know anything about these men, and there is no mention of grandmothers.

What were Jesus's grandparents like? What role did they play in Jesus's life?

My imagination tells me that they were like the Wise Men. Yes, they brought gifts. This is what grandparents do. And they brought the wisdom of their years, which they expressed in acts of love more than words.

Maybe they were even more like the Shepherds who showed up expressing sheer joy, delight and wonder.

And they must have been crushed when Joseph and Mary rode away with their grandchild to Egypt.

These are more than speculations of my imagination. They are my experience as a grandparent. I have often said that being a grandparent or grand aunt or uncle is one of the experiences of life that is not overrated.

All I have to do is see the face of the grandmother I know best with our grandchildren—unconditional love, joy, and radiance. In this Moment for her and for me we feel connected and in union with all that is sacred. Brian O' Donovan of Celtic Sojourn was quoted recently in the Boston Globe as saying that "Grandchildren fill a hole in our lives that we didn't even know existed."

Isn't this how we experience the baby Jesus in our own lives?

The meaning of Advent and Christmas is that God's love is incarnate in Jesus—and in our Grandchildren and Children—in every aspect of creation, including the Bluebird and the Great White Oak Tree.

In this season we recognize that the foundational reality of all creation is Love, unconditional, forgiving reconciling Love, which we call God. This is what we mean by the Incarnation.

All we need to do is "Draw Near."

Joy

By Lori Bruce

Christmas is a reminder to celebrate the blessings in our life.

Yet, I also know God's gifts can be hard to acknowledge when painful feelings get in the way.

My gratitude can be challenged when in pain or feeling frustrated.

Yet, joy is always there; it is always close by.

I can see it in nature, smell it when cookies are baking and hear it in the laughter of others.

To let joy in, I must start by pushing away any rapid thoughts of self-consciousness and fears.

I remind myself to connect to nature and be present with others.

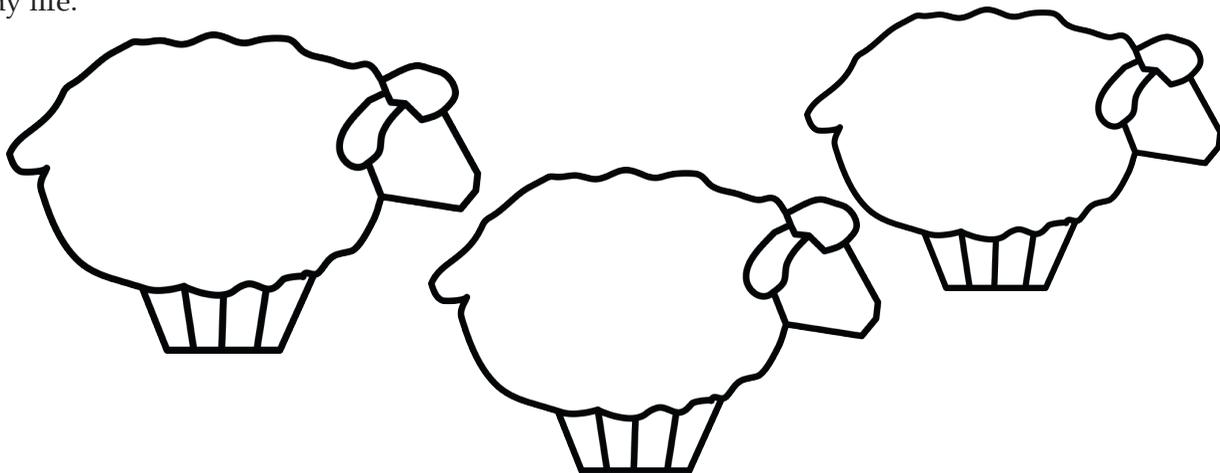
I also need to throw away expectations of how things should be so I can enjoy what is.

Joy is constantly knocking, yet getting up and answering the door can sometimes be hard.

No need to rush, joy is patient; it will wait and be there just when I need it the most.

By Ron Smith

When I was young, I discovered Micah 6:8. Through the years it has been my go to bible verse. Kindness, (mercy) and justice and walking humbly with my God speaks to me and how I live my life.



LOVE



*In the space
where songs
are written by Joy in the Moment,
and Souls are smitten by
a flower's bloom.
i'm reminded how
LOVE's
persistence,
born of Beauty,
empowers us
to lift the shackles
of gloom.*

*[remember i am with you always,
often speaking in other voices or as echoes of Love's tune]*

*Christmas Cactus
North Hill Retirement Community, Needham, MA 1/21*

Image and text by Casey Hayes

Advent Week 4: **December 18th, 2022 – December 24th, 2022**

Advent Week 4: Love

New Testament Reading

Matthew 1: 18-24 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 pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce 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 become pregnant and give birth to 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.

Hebrew Bible Reading

Psalms 89:1-4, 19-26

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.

I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David:

"I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.'" Selah

Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said: "I have set the crown on one who is mighty, I have exalted one chosen from the people.

I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him;

my hand shall always remain with him; my arm also shall strengthen him.

The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him.

I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him.

My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him; and in my name his horn shall be exalted.

I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers.

He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'

Song (sung to the tune of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel")

O come you source of Love unto us all
 Enlighten us and help us hear your call
 To bear your Love out into the wild
 And celebrate God's wondrous holy child!

Rejoice, rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to us
 And all things shall be well

Rejoice, rejoice!

Emmanuel has come to us
 And all things shall be well

Advent Candle Lighting

When we feel invisible, ineffective,
 Too small to make a difference
 The Holy invites us to be God-Bearers
 And we shall find Love

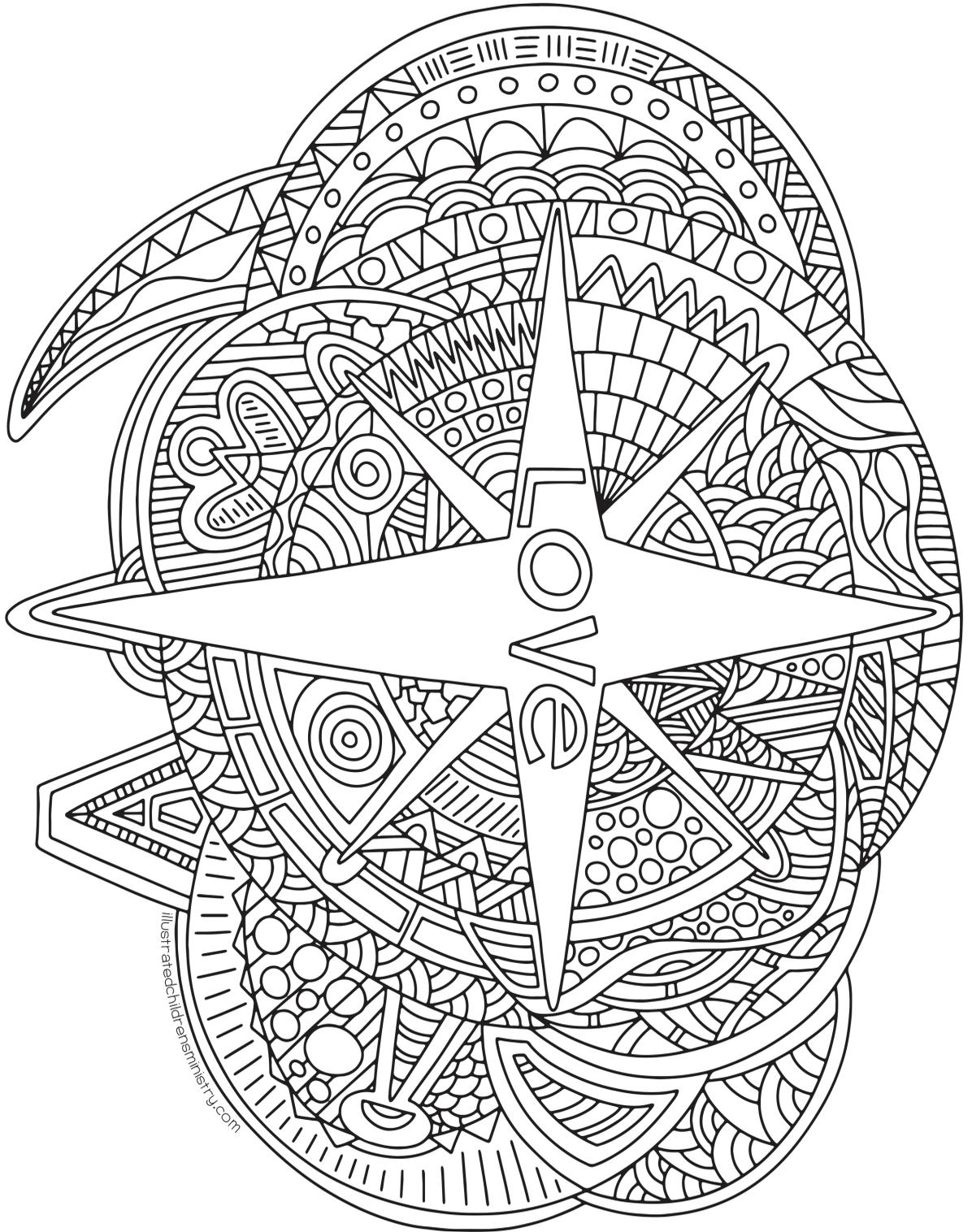
(Light a candle of Love)

Where in the world do we find Love these days?



Prayer for a Week of Love

Holy God, we thank you for the gift of your Love made manifest in Jesus.



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Advent for Children and Families

Love

Can you make a list of things you love? Shout some out! I hope it was an easy list to make. God's love is a different kind of love from loving pizza and ice cream, new toys and being with friends. For God so loved the world (that's us) that God sent Jesus to be born, to live, to die, and to be resurrected. In this gift of love, Jesus shows us through his words and actions, God's love. We are called us to be followers of Jesus and to be God's love in action towards others.

I wonder what God's love looks like.
I wonder what God's love sounds like.
I wonder how God's love feels.
I wonder how I might share God's love with others.

As you color this love art, wonder about these questions and let God's love fill you.



We have really felt the love pouring into us from our church community during thistime of new parenthood. Offered by Sharon Kuhn

Peter On the Neighbor

By Khalil Gibran, excerpt from Jesus the Son of Man
Offered by Christina Mathews

Once in Capernaum my Lord and Master spoke thus:

“Your neighbour is your other self dwelling behind a wall. In understanding, all walls shall fall down.

“Who knows but that your neighbour is your better self wearing another body? See that you love him as you would love yourself.

“He too is a manifestation of the Most High, whom you do not know.

“Your neighbour is a field where the springs of your hope walk in their green garments, and where the winters of your desire dream of snowy heights.

“Your neighbour is a mirror wherein you shall behold your countenance made beautiful by a joy which you yourself if not know, and by a sorrow you yourself did not share.

“I would have you love your neighbour even as I have loved you.”

A Prayer for LOVE

By Joanne E. Ritsert

The meaning of Christmas can be explained in one little four letter wordLOVE. Thank you for sending your gift of pure LOVE to us on that first Christmas. LOVE lay in a manger in Bethlehem. The final week of Advent helps us to reflect on the greatness of God's LOVE that was made manifest in Jesus.

The greatest gift of all came that first Christmas. It wasn't wrapped in a beautiful package set under a decorated tree. But, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the rough wood of a manger.

Father, this final week of Advent, fill our hearts and minds with LOVE. Thank you Lord for loving us enough to send Jesus. In his name our prayer of LOVE. Amen.

Drawing Near

Offered by Kate Ellmer

A poem from Sunny Shell - a Christian blogger whose words I often resonate with quite immensely.

In this post from 2013 she writes the following cited below. I have read this poem a dozen or so times and each time it offers me something new and different, depending on where I feel most in need of repentance, grace, affirmation and a gut-check. I hope the members of WVC also find this as meaningful in their own way.

Drawing near
To the throne of grace;
To fix our eyes
On Christ's glorious face
...to worship.

If we say
That we are saved;
Shouldn't it change
The way we behave
...always?

Like hypocrites
...because this grieves You.

Thank You Lord
For saving us;
Help us live
With full trust
...in Your word.
Turn our eyes

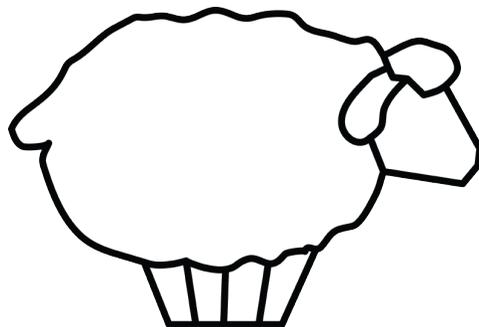
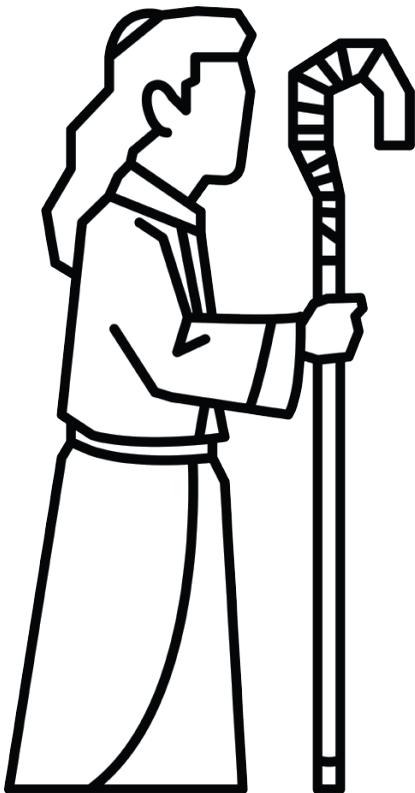
If we repent
From our sins;
Then why do we
Return again
...so carelessly?

From worthless things;
Incline our hearts
To bring offerings
...that are worthy.

Lord help us please
To abide in You;
And live as those
Who've been made new
...in Christ.

As we draw
Near to You Lord;
Grant us strength
To know You more
...and love you better.

Let us not
Just praise with lips;
With hearts so far



The King and The Maiden

By Søren Kierkegaard – Offered by Kristjon Imperio

Who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. - Philippians 2:6-7 (NIV)

Imagine there was a King who loved a humble maiden. She had no royal pedigree, no education, no standing in the royal court. She dressed in rags. She lived in a hovel; she lived the ragged life of a peasant. But for reasons no one could quite figure out, the King fell in love with this girl in the way the kings sometimes do. Why he should love her was beyond explaining, but love her he did, and he could not stop loving her.

One day there awoke in the heart of the King an anxious thought: “How in the world is he going to reveal his love to this girl? How could he bridge the chasm that separated the two of them?” His advisers, of course, told him that all he had to do was command her to become his queen, and it would be done. For he was a man of immense power, every statesman feared his wrath, every foreign power trembled before him, and every courtier groveled in the dust at the King’s voice.

This poor peasant girl would have no power to resist; she would have to become the queen! But power, even unlimited power, cannot command love. The King could force her body to be present in the palace, but he could not force love to be present in her heart. He might be able to gain her obedience this way, but coerced submission is not what he wanted. He longed for intimacy of heart and oneness of spirit, and all the power in the world cannot unlock the human heart – it must be opened from within.

He met with his advisers once again and they suggested he try to bridge the chasm by elevating her to his position. He could shower her with gifts, dress her in purple and silk, and have her crowned the queen. But if he brought her to his palace, if he radiated the sun of his magnificence over her, if she saw all the wealth, pomp, and power of his greatness, then she would be overwhelmed. How would he ever know if she loved him for himself, or for all that he had given her? And how could she know that he loved her, and would love her still if she had remained only a humble peasant? Would she be able to summon confidence enough never to remember what the king only wished to forget – that he was the king and she had been a humble maiden?

Every alternative he considered came to nothing. There was only one way. The king arose, took off his crown, relinquished his scepter, laid aside his royal robes, and he took upon himself the life of a peasant. He dressed in rags, scratched out a living in the dirt, groveled for food, and dwelt in hovel.

He did not just take on the outward appearance of a servant, he became a servant – it was his actual life, his actual nature, his actual burden. He became as ragged as the one he loved so that she could be his forever. It was the only way. His raggedness became the very signature of his presence.

How The Light Comes

Offered by Caroline Johnson Hodge

To me, Advent is a particularly holy season because it cultivates and encourages qualities we desperately need: stillness, rest, anticipation, and hope. I find comfort and stability, if also challenge, in the dual task of appreciating the place where we are (the darkness of December, for example) and anticipating that light that is gently coming, returning, with every winter solstice. It is no accident that those who followed Christ in the early centuries began to celebrate his birth near the solstice, near the return of the light. As I hear this poem by Jan Richardson, the light and Christ become one; they become God's love, always seeking out what is in pain, tenderly embracing our flawed and beloved bodies, always seeking to enfold us, even in the darkness. I hope you, too, can hear and feel how God seeks you out this Advent season.

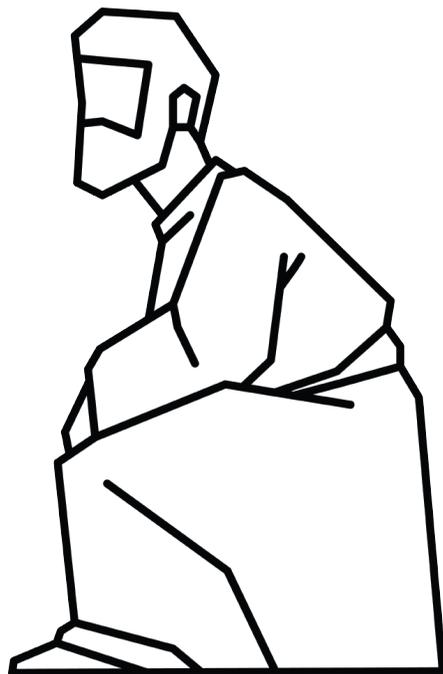
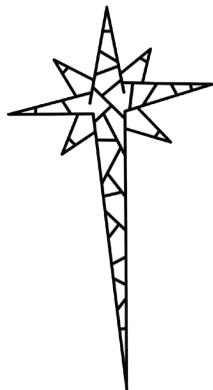
I cannot tell you
 how the light comes.
 What I know
 is that it is more ancient
 than imagining.
 That it travels
 across an astounding expanse
 to reach us.
 That it loves
 searching out
 what is hidden
 what is lost
 what is forgotten
 or in peril
 or in pain.
 That it has a fondness
 for the body
 for finding its way
 toward flesh
 for tracing the edges
 of form
 for shining forth
 through the eye,
 the hand,

the heart.
 I cannot tell you
 how the light comes,
 but that it does.
 That it will.
 That it works its way
 into the deepest dark
 that enfolds you,
 though it may seem
 long ages in coming
 or arrive in a shape
 you did not foresee.
 And so
 may we this day
 turn ourselves toward it.
 May we lift our faces
 to let it find us.
 May we bend our bodies
 to follow the arc it makes.
 May we open
 and open more
 and open still
 to the blessed light
 that comes.

How We Love Christmas

by Barbara Howland

Oh, how we love Christmas bells ringing,
and Christmas carols singing;
Oh, how we love the Christmas wreath hanging on the door,
and garlands galore;
Oh, how we love to decorate the Christmas tree
and light the Christmas candles;
Oh, how we love gathering with family for
gift giving and receiving; and so much more.
Oh, how special is the anticipation and the preparation
for receiving God's greatest gift to the world.
A holy babe born in a manger.
One whose hope, peace, love and joy can be
received and kept in our hearts forever.
And as written in Isaiah 9:6 of the Old Testament,
"He shall be called Wonderful, Counselor,
Almighty God, Everlasting Father and
Prince of Peace."
Oh, God, we celebrate your arrival, please come
Into our hearts anew this day and always. Amen.



My First Christmas in Heaven

Author Unknown

Offered by Carolyn Pruyne

I see the countless Christmas Trees around the world below,
with tiny lights, like heaven's stars, reflecting in the snow.

The sight is so spectacular, please wipe away that tear,
For I am spending Christmas with Jesus Christ this year.

I hear the many Christmas songs that people hold so dear,
But the sounds of music can't compare with the Christmas choir up here.

I have no words to tell you the joy their voices bring,
for it is beyond description, to hear the angels sing.

I know how much you miss me. I see the pain inside your heart,
but I am not so far away. We really aren't apart.

So be happy for me dear ones. You know I hold you dear,
And be glad I'm spending Christmas, with Jesus Christ this year.

I send each of you a special gift, from my heavenly home above.

I send you each a memory of my undying love.

After all Love is the gift, more precious than pure gold.

It was always most important in the stories Jesus told.

Please love and keep each other, as my Father said to do,
For I can't count the blessing or love he has for each of you.

So, Have a Merry Christmas and wipe away that tear.

Remember, I'm spending Christmas with Jesus Christ this year.

Christ Candle Lighting Ritual for Christmas Eve

When the world seems predictable
Stuck in patterns of injustice and hurt
The Holy astonishes us with good news
And we find Awe

(Light Christ Candle)

Where in the world do we know Awe these days?



Thank you to all who contributed to this booklet. Your care, thoughtfulness, and generosity is a gift to us all. Thank you also to Rev. Megan Berkowitz who designed and produced this booklet.

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References:

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