



'tis the Reason

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
BY THE PEOPLE OF EASTBROOK CHURCH



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Introduction

How do you prepare for Christmas? Do you put up Christmas lights indoors or outdoors, decorate your apartment or house, cut down a Christmas tree to bring it home, or buy presents for family and friends? Are there certain traditions you return to each year that help you get in the mindset of what Christmas is all about?

One traditional song begins with these words: “Deck the halls with boughs of holly... ’tis the season to be jolly.” ’Tis the season... the appropriate time for joy and celebration. But we all know how quickly we can lose focus. Caught up in the rush of the season, losing our bearings in Christmas concerts, holiday parties, online or in-person shopping, and so much more, we forget why we are doing it all.

We’ve all likely heard someone say or read a bumper sticker that said, “Jesus is the reason for the season.” This is so very true, but can feel so very trite. Yes, we celebrate Jesus’ birth as a monumental marker in human history and the centerpiece of God’s salvation story. Jesus is the reason for our season of joy and celebration. But hopefully we know the Gospel story of Jesus’ birth has a depth and richness far greater than cute phraseology or bumper sticker theology. As seekers and disciples, we want to get inside that richness and depth. Like finding a vast and thrilling new territory, we want to step inside and explore the *why* of Jesus’ incarnation. ’Tis the reason... the significant meaning behind our joy and celebration.

Advent is the season before Christmas that helps us do just that. Coming from the Latin word *adventus* (“appearing”), Advent gifts us with four weeks to explore the expanse of the reason for the season. In Advent we look back with wonder at Jesus’ birth roughly 2,000 years ago. We also enter into the history of the chosen people, Israel, whose prophets anticipated Jesus’ birth in the messages. Simultaneously, we stand as the new chosen people, looking forward to Jesus’ future return at the end of human history.

This year, instead of looking at the typical infancy narratives, our Advent journey will uniquely take us through the middle of the Gospel of Matthew. There, we see Jesus turning toward Jerusalem while offering hints about and glimpses into the reason he has come as Messiah. His suffering will bring peace, His glory will bring joy, His healing will come to those with faith, and His resurrection will bring hope.

In your hands is a devotional intended as a tool for the Advent exploration of the reason for Jesus’ incarnation. This devotional can be used

individually, but is also intended for use in groups, such as housemates or families.

So, let me invite you to step into this new and glorious territory, exploring it through the four weeks of Advent. May we have a fresh encounter with Jesus through Advent on our way to the celebration of Christmas.

Pastor Matt Erickson



How to use this Devotional

At Eastbrook, we have been publishing our own devotionals for several years now, but our Advent devotional is different from any of the others! Advent is a season of thoughtful reflection that prepares us for the celebration of Christ's birth. It is the "fast before the feast", and in this way, it sets apart God's people. Instead of following our culture in its rush from one celebration to another, we pause to reflect, pray, and meditate on the profound meaning of the incarnation—Christ with us.

At the same time, because of its lead-up to Christmas, Advent is also a season of childlike anticipation. Perhaps we light another candle on the Advent wreath every week? Or, maybe we add more figures to our nativity set each day until Christmas Eve, when we finally place Baby Jesus in the manger?

Each week of this devotional begins with a Sunday reading written by Senior Pastor Matt Erickson for older students and adults. There is also a version called "Family Talk" written by a member of our NextGen team, intended for families with young children. Each day Monday-Saturday has a short devotional thought written by one of our Eastbrookers with questions at the end for deeper reflection and a few days have an activity for you to build a Nativity scene (look for this symbol: ✧).

Although it is not necessary, you may choose to pair this devotional with an Advent Wreath. On Sunday of Week 1, when you open your devotional, light one candle on your Advent Wreath. Every Sunday thereafter, light an additional candle, so there are four on Week 4. On Christmas Day, light the final candle.

Find the online version of this devotional in blog or PDF form at eastbrook.org/tisthereasondevo.

His Suffering Brings Peace

Read Matthew 16:21-28

"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (Matthew 16:21)¹

Has anyone ever said this to you: "I have some good news and some bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" Which do you pick? I usually pick hearing the bad news first, so I can end on a positive note.

In our text for today, we find Jesus interacting with His disciples about some good news and bad news. They have seen Jesus teach with unparalleled power and work wonders that were totally unexpected. He has certainly had His share of tough encounters with the religious establishment, but it really seems like He's on a roll. He draws apart with those closest to them and says, "I have some good news and some bad news. Let me start with the bad news. We're going to Jerusalem and I'm going to suffer and die there. But I will rise from death."

The disciples are dead quiet until Peter, who has lost sight of the good news about resurrection, tells Jesus this is not the way it's going to be. "This is never going to happen," Peter declares in total denial. He does not understand that the bad news must come before the good news. If peace with God and peace on earth is truly going to come, Jesus must suffer. He must take all the suffering and death that a sinful, broken world and humanity can bring. But this suffering will not be the end. Instead, because of God's power, Jesus' death on the Cross will bring true peace with God for all humanity and for human beings one with another. The Apostle Paul later wrote of Jesus to a group of early Christians with these powerful words: *"For he himself is our peace"* (Ephesians 2:14a). This Advent, let us celebrate that His suffering brings us peace.

For Personal Reflection: Use the sermon discussion questions found bundled with today's sermon. Missed the sermon? Catch up online at eastbrook.org/tisthereason.

FAMILY TALK: WEEK 1

When you go grocery shopping with your parents do you ever ask for everything you see? Ice cream? Raspberries? Corn dogs? Doritos? Fresh cinnamon rolls? Even candy? Shoppers have to decide just what to buy. We need a variety of foods for our meals and all the items we want need to be paid for. There is a price to be paid. Grown-ups know this and balance the goods they need and want with the amount of payment they actually have. So, sometimes or maybe more than sometimes, adults have to say 'No, we cannot buy that. This price is too high!'

In our Bible reading for this first week of Advent, Jesus begins to tell His followers that He will be going to Jerusalem and that He is going to suffer and have some terrible things happen to Him. His friend, Peter, becomes upset and is sure that this will never happen. But it will! Jesus knows that there is a price that needs to be paid in order for Him to complete God's mission—the price is His death on the Cross to take away our sin that separates us from God and to make a way for us to reconnect with God, our Father.

Jesus' death paid our price to be right with God. Have you told Jesus that you want to follow Him and accept the price He paid for your sins? Talk with each of your family members about walking with Jesus.

- **How do you think the disciples felt as Jesus described why they were going to Jerusalem? What is one question you would have asked Jesus, if you would have been there?**
- **What price did Jesus pay for our sin? Why do you think He was willing to pay this price (to die on the Cross)?**

Joy Arrives

Read John 14:15-27

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." (John 14:27a)

There's a difference between the peace that Jesus gives and what the world offers. The world wants to sell us stress-relief gummies, aromatherapy, or getting behind the wheel of a Lincoln. Those things might distract us temporarily, but what consistently works for me is my life verse, Romans 14:17: *"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*

I interpret righteousness to mean "right relationships." Since my #1 relationship is with Jesus, first, I must get right with Jesus, who purifies my conscience.

Because Jesus helps me feel better about myself, the second thing, as a beloved child of God, is my relationship with myself. I must take care of myself physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Then the third relationship naturally falls into place and that's all about the other people in my life. I must get right with others as far as I am able.

Joy arrives! A calming joy, deep in my core, despite outward circumstances. In brief: to maintain the peace that Jesus gives, we must nourish our relationships with God + self + others. Joy follows. Joy in the Holy Spirit is the consequence of these three right relationships.

The Kingdom of God = Righteousness → Peace → Joy in the Holy Spirit!

A lack of joy is a signal that I've lost my peace and it's time to re-examine my relationships with God + self + others. Just fix it! Peace returns. As I remain in that peace, gradually, joy in the Holy Spirit resumes. That's kingdom living!

For Personal Reflection: Can I confidently say I am right with God? Am I taking care of myself physically, emotionally, and mentally? Have I done my best to make things right with others as far as I am able?

Peace with God

Read Romans 5:1-5

For centuries the Jewish people had been seeking peace or shalom with God. Shalom means much more than the absence of conflict. It refers to an inner completeness and tranquility of mind, soul and body and also peace in the community. Here Paul tells us that by His death, Jesus allows Christians to be declared righteous by faith in Jesus. Sin no longer blocks our relationship with God. We can have shalom with God, with each other and with our broader community.

We then learn that we have been granted access by this same faith into God's presence. I picture myself standing before God with Jesus at His right hand in the throne room of God rejoicing in the glory of God. Paul states that *"we exult in the hope of the glory of God."* In this world we see glimpses of God's glory but *"when Christ appears, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is"* (1 John 3:2).

But for now, we live in a fallen world. Just as He had to experience suffering and death so He could purchase peace with God, we also will experience suffering and pressures in this life. Then Paul states that we are not merely to endure suffering but to rejoice in it. Why? Because suffering causes endurance and this helps us to develop a more Christ-like character (2 Corinthians 2:19). As I have matured in my walk with Christ and have experienced physical and relationship challenges, I have sought God in prayer allowing Him to increase my trust and hope in Him. Also *"for just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so our comfort abounds through Christ"* to others (2 Corinthians 1:5).

And then my favorite part of these verses. This hope does not disappoint me because Jesus has poured and continues to pour His love into my heart through His Holy Spirit. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He did not leave us alone but sent His Holy Spirit (John 16:27). The Holy Spirit helps us to experience His love and live by His power and share his love with others. What can be better than that?

For Personal Reflection: How do we as believers come to enjoy peace with God? How is it possible for us to rejoice in the sufferings and pressures of life?

A New Thing

Read Ephesians 2:14-20

Walls and fences are built for a number of reasons. Walls and fences keep outsiders outside. Walls and fences keep insiders inside. Walls and fences identify ownership of property. Walls and fences protect from undesired influences and undesired visitors. Walls and fences are built to separate.

Years ago during our second term as cross-cultural workers, our family lived in a small West-African village. We chose Mogoyafara, a 700-person village, as a base to help us connect with church leaders living in the surrounding villages. After moving into our compound consisting of four mud huts, we were encouraged by the villagers to rebuild a rickety stick fence surrounding our huts. The old termite-infested fence posed no barrier to grazing cows and goats, pecking chickens, lazy dogs, and inquisitive children! The villagers had fences for their homes—we needed a fenced partition for ours. Walls and fences are built to separate.

The apostle Paul reminded the church at Ephesus that walls separate. The dividing wall of hate and enmity that existed between the Jewish community and the Gentile community in the 1st century had existed for centuries. Both Jewish and gentile communities were aware of the stone partition in the temple at Jerusalem that was constructed to separate Jews from gentiles—a wall dividing the temple proper from the Court of the Gentiles. On that wall was the inscription in Greek and Latin “which forbade any foreigner to go in, under pain of death” (Josephus, *Antiquities* xv. 11.5). The temple wall separated.

In the sacrifice of King Jesus on the Cross, Paul proclaims that the alienating wall of separation has been deconstructed. Peace is secured through Jesus’ atoning work—peace with God and peace between members of humankind. Paul uses the word “new” (v. 15, Grk: *kainos*) to explain the new “thing,” the new humanity that exists among Christ-followers. William Barclay explains the “new in the sense that it brings into the world a new kind of thing, a new quality of thing, which did not exist before.” It is not a matter of bringing different peoples together—God has made a totally **new people** for Himself through the Cross. The wall separates no more.

For Personal Reflection: Where do you see evidence of God’s **new people** in our broken world?

✧ **Nativity Building:** Set up the stable, but leave it empty for now. Long before Jesus was born on earth, God was getting everything ready.

A Ransom for All People

Read 1 Timothy 2:1-6

Jesus knew. He passed what He knew to the twelve apostles but they were unable to grasp the why of it. People don't always like knowing someone they love is going to leave or die. That can be an impossible concept. We are human. We argue. We fight. We look for other options. We pray.

Paul wanted Timothy to get the people praying first. And by praying for everyone we lift them all in faith. Good or bad—equal or superior. God sees us all the same. He didn't want them throwing blame or being angry or confused. Paul gently tells everyone that Jesus didn't die without a fight. In fact, the fight was in Jesus' death. By believing that Jesus saved us by dying, we are acknowledging that God has fulfilled His promise and redeemed us. Paul calls it ransom, because we are held prisoner by sin and faithlessness. Once we accept that Jesus' death freed us, we are no longer captive. By accepting the resurrection, we are truly free.

Jesus is the suitcase of cash at a ransom drop point. Jesus is the key that opens our restraints and unbars all doors. Jesus is the end of darkness and loneliness. His absence is not sorrowful but joyful because His humanness is gone and His Godliness remains.

For Personal Reflection: How does the freedom that Christ has bought for us bring peace into your life?

Sowing and Reaping

Read James 3:17-18

One of the things that the COVID pandemic did in my life was to turn my minor interest in houseplants into a full-blown can't-see-out-the-windows greenhouse-level obsession with plants. Tending to plant life is something I never thought I would get into, living in Milwaukee with no outdoor space, and has been one of the highlights of this bleak pandemic season for me.

Digging in dirt and taking care of plants has been reminding me of one my favorite classes in school where I learned about the importance of reading the Bible through an agrarian lens. Because the Bible was written to an agrarian society, there is a deep significance to the language and metaphors that the Biblical writers use when talking about the land. We see this in many ways throughout Scripture: when the people of God are disobedient, their crops fail (Leviticus 26:16, Jeremiah 12:13, Micah 6:15), God demonstrates His blessings through the land (Genesis 26:12, Matthew 5:45), and the land is even supposed to sabbath, just like humans (Exodus 23:11)!

This passage for today's reading uses some of this agrarian language. In a section where he is talking about wisdom, James writes that when we plant seeds of peace, what grows is righteousness. And not just a few small righteousness plants, it's a full-blown can't-see-out-the-windows greenhouse-level *harvest* of righteousness.

I look around our world and see people who are grasping for "wisdom," hoping it will bring them peace. Instagram influencers, TikTok hacks, self-help books, and podcasts are selling us quick-fix schemes to repair our relationships and get ahead in life. But this sort of "wisdom" (v. 15) doesn't take into account an important agrarian lesson: plants don't grow overnight. Heavenly wisdom, like James writes about, takes time to take root and grow. Plant peace (v. 18), add a little humility as fertilizer (v.13), weed out envy and selfish ambition (v. 16), and wisdom will follow.

For Personal Reflection: Looking at the list of qualities godly wisdom contains, which strike you the hardest? What would you say is the connection between godly wisdom and peace? Why?

✧ **Nativity Building:** Place Mary, Joseph and an angel figure across the room from the stable. God sent an angel to tell Mary and Joseph that Jesus would be born to Mary.

All We Need is Here

Read 2 Peter 1:2-8

Have you ever thought that it is impossible to live a godly life?

The first time I read 2 Peter 1: 3, I couldn't believe my eyes—it says God has given us everything we need to live a godly life.

It was good news to find out that God through Jesus has provided for all my needs; I can access peace for my troubled soul, grace for my struggles, and more. But I was also sad because I knew that I was still struggling.

There is so much that God has for humanity. Jesus' suffering was not for some half-finished work of redemption. No, Jesus came to restore us fully to God. Jesus said that He came to give us life in all its fullness (John 10:10).

The journey of sanctification begins when we receive the gift of salvation by believing in Jesus and confessing Him as our Lord. Then Christ makes His home in our hearts as we trust in Him (Ephesians 3:17). God desires that we know Him more each day. All we need is here; God is within us now.

Daniel 11:32 says those who know their God will display strength and do exploits. We can know God by studying the Bible to learn His ways and obeying what He reveals to us in His word.

The more we know God, the more our lives bear fruit. God's nature shines through us into this dark world. Like Peter mentions in 2 Peter 1:5-7, our lives reflect moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, patient endurance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love built on the foundation of our faith in Jesus Christ.

These virtues show in a life submitted to Christ. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us that the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives when we let Him lead us.

For Personal Reflection: Write down what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection mean to you. In which areas of your life do you need to let the Holy Spirit lead you? Read Galatians 5:16-23. How will doing this bring peace to your life?

His Glory Brings Joy

Read Matthew 17:1-28

"Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light." (Matthew 17:1a-2)

In early Fall, Kelly and I hiked a portion of the Ice Age Trail that intersected Point Beach State Forest near Two Rivers, Wisconsin. It was a brilliantly sunny day as we followed the trail along the sandy beachfront of Lake Michigan before it meandered through nearby woods. As the trail rambled around the backwaters of Molash Creek, we encountered the cool majesty of old hardwood forests where blue herons and egrets stood sentinel at the water's edge or lazily soared overhead. Returning to the lakefront, we sat on a weathered, driftwood log and ate our simple lunch while staring out over the sun-sparkling water. It was simply glorious and brought deep joy to our souls.

I imagine our experience could not even compare with what Peter, James, and John experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus. With unexpected, dazzling glory, their rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, is suddenly revealed as the One who both Moses and Elijah look to as the fulfillment of their ministry in the Law and the Prophets. It is overwhelming!

No wonder that Peter, the usual one so quick to speak, tries to fumble his words into some apt response to the glory they have seen: *"Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah"* (Matthew 17:4). It's as if Peter says, "Let's stay here awhile, Jesus, because this is...well, this is the best thing I've ever experienced!"

Who can blame him? When the glory of Jesus is revealed it brings more joy than we could ever know. This Advent let us linger in the joyful glory of Jesus.

For Personal Reflection: Use the sermon discussion questions found bundled with today's sermon. Missed the sermon? Catch up online at eastbrook.org/tisthereason.

FAMILY TALK: WEEK 2

Humans can do some pretty amazing things. Think about the heroes that we admire. Who do you look up to? We also admire stories of heroes who are “super,” or above or beyond, heroes. Think about superhero stories that you have read or seen. What amazing things did those superheroes do? Did you ever want to be strong or fast like a superhero?

We know that superheroes with amazing powers are fun to think about. But in this Bible passage, Peter, James, and John see Jesus in a new way. They have already seen Jesus feed and heal many people. Now, when they go up the mountain, they see Jesus as super—above and beyond what humans look like. And they were terrified! Jesus comforts them and tells them not to fear.

When we read this story, it sounds like Jesus is a superhero. But Jesus is **MORE** than a superhero. He is God, come to earth to save us. He is **REAL**! Jesus is God’s glory come to earth as a real human that the disciples could hear, see, and touch. In their time with Jesus, His friends learned that following Him brought true joy and peace. Joy that we experience here on earth only lasts for a little while and does not satisfy us for long, like a candy that is soon gone. But Jesus’ joy lasts forever! We receive His joy when we follow Him.

The disciples got to see a little bit of what Jesus truly looks like. Some day we will see his splendor too! Think of what a joyful time that will be!

- **Use your crayons, markers or paint to make a picture of the transfigured, glorified Jesus! As you work, ask Mom or Dad to play some worship music.**
- **What do you know about glory? How is Jesus’ glory different from any “super-power” we can imagine?**

BY MEGAN HENDRICKS

Ordinary People

Read Luke 2:8-20

God became a baby.

Of all the ways He could have entered our world... a baby.

He could have torn open the sky and flooded the earth with spiritual creatures, showing Himself as all powerful to the most influential leaders on the planet. But He came quietly as a human, entering the world the same way you and I did. He came so humbly.

But then look at how He announced His coming, and who He announced it to! Shepherds. Not wealthy. Not powerful. Ordinary people. And these shepherds didn't just overhear an important conversation about the coming of the Messiah. They were the first audience. A powerful angel, surrounded by the blazing glory of God, was sent to tell them the news. "... I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide... A savior has just been born..."

Why did God choose to first share this message with ordinary people? Why did He treat them like they mattered in a special way? What does this story say about our most powerful and wise Creator? What does it say about how God sees our world, what He values?

Maybe God wants us to know that He delights in meeting us in special ways inside of the ordinary moments of life. Maybe that's where the magic is really found, where the most powerful messages from God are heard and shared and spread.

This story and many others in Scripture affirm that to be true. St. Paul said the great mystery and hope of the gospel is Christ in us... in you and me. Ordinary people doing ordinary things with the humble and powerful life of Christ growing and showing up through us.

Let this reflection encourage you to be more present, more content, more aware of the life and ministry of Jesus inside of your regular, ordinary moments. That's where the power of faith really comes alive. God delights in meeting us there to give us purpose, to prove He loves us, to form the life of Jesus in us for the good of everybody.

For Personal Reflection: Where do you see the glory of Jesus most clearly in your ordinary, everyday moments?

✧ **Nativity Building:** Place a donkey near Mary. She may have ridden a donkey to Bethlehem, because she was so close to having a baby. Years later, Jesus Himself would ride a donkey into Jerusalem.

The First Song of Isaiah

Read Isaiah 2:1-6

The Advent season is a time for joy in both the sacred and secular worlds. On December 10, 1993, that joy was literally shaken to its roots in Milwaukee. A tanker plane belonging to one of the storied and highly decorated 128th Air Refueling Wing exploded on the tarmac during routine maintenance, killing six airmen. Only a wing resting on part of an engine and the tail remained.

After the initial explosion, a plume of black smoke could be seen for miles. Two secondary explosions occurred as crews scrambled to move other planes out of harm's way. Our close friend and tanker pilot was knocked off his office chair by the explosion. My immediate coworker came home that night to learn her nephew was one of the three men working in the plane when it happened.

The following Saturday a memorial service was held at the Arena. National Air Force officers, Wisconsin's governor and state officials spoke, each with meaningful words and heartfelt emotion. Grief met with lament. Some closure was brought to the military family of the 128th and to our city.

The combined choirs closed the service with "The First Song of Isaiah." It extensively quotes the Song of Moses and several Psalms. Set to music by Jack Noble White, he used this verse for the chorus:

Surely it is God who saves me;

I will trust in Him and not be afraid.

For the LORD is my stronghold and my sure defense;

and He will be my Savior.

(Based on Isaiah 12:2)

What an excellent assurance that the Lord is with us in the midst of our lives and, more critically, in the midst of our troubles. The song was restorative to all present as we experienced the very presence of the Lord.

To this day I am thankful for the inclusion of that song in the memorial service. The words restored the joy of Christmas for me in that season. Our joy is in the coming of the Messiah who was born and is profoundly in our midst during times of any trouble.

For Personal Reflection: Have you ever been in a season where the Lord lifted a burden from your shoulders as you praised Him in song? Have you been still before the Lord until you hear Him speak to your circumstance, especially in a time of loss?

A Hope Only God Can Give

Read Romans 15:7-13

Have you ever gone through a time when life seemed so dark it was palpable? A time when you walked around in a daze, mechanically putting one foot in front of another? A time when hope was non-existent and laughter dead? I have. It was 2013. Seasonal Affective Disorder coupled with the sudden and traumatic death of my brother-in-law in Nigeria stripped me of all joy and comfort and left behind hopelessness.

I love verse thirteen from this passage, because not only is the word hope repeated twice, but there are also other hopeful words like joy, peace, trust, and overflow. During the season when I had no hope and could not envision that I could ever feel better, I had two friends who literally held me up like Aaron and Hur held up Moses' arms during the Israelites' battle against the Amalekites. Both my friends were in Canada and far away, but they called and emailed and prayed. I knew they were fighting the battle alongside me. And when I mentioned the thick oppressive hopelessness, one of them (Christina) said she would hope for me.

Christ, who was very God, came to earth, donning flesh and limiting Himself to the constraints of human nature. He came to serve and accomplished salvation for all. Revealed first to the Jews, the Gentiles soon were brought into this awesome reality of the hope of eternal life. The promises that had been given so many years before were fulfilled in Christ. God pierced through the darkness and His light shone through. Darkness could not quench it then, nor can it quench it now.

Our hope is in Christ. God can fill us with hope through His Holy Spirit. The message of Christmas is one of hope. Emmanuel is come. And with Him, He brings joy, peace, and hope. So, Eastbrook, strengthen your limp hands and weak knees. Straighten your spine and raise your head. Behold, your Savior has come!

For Personal Reflection: When have you experienced deep hopelessness? How did you discover hope again? Make a list of some things that sap you of joy and peace. What changes can you make to address them?

Give the Glory to God

Read 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

The summer I turned 13, I joined my hometown's first ever girls' lacrosse team. Around me was a motley crew of girls bored with other sports, disinterested social butterflies, and the faint of heart. As time progressed I found myself completely absorbed in the new game, building skill and smarts at a pace that surpassed my teammates.

Although I enjoyed the thrill of a new passion, I did not like my coach at all. He created plays for us to pass the ball around, but I couldn't understand why he didn't just tell my teammates to get the ball to me so I could go score goals. In my head, this was a flawless winning strategy! So I took matters into my own hands by playing every position on the field at once, assuring my weaker teammates would never touch (and lose possession of) the ball. I felt great, but Coach began pulling me out of games once I started my scoring crusades. I couldn't believe it!

I was sure he had it out for me, and I was ready to quit the team. After practice one day, Coach asked to talk to me. I stayed reluctantly, expressing as much teenage indignation as possible. Coach explained that if he let me take control of the game every time, my skills as a leader were not growing and no other players were getting a chance to improve. "It doesn't matter if we win or if we lose games. It's about the team. When we win, we give the glory to God. When we lose, we give glory to God." I was stunned by the conversation, and my understanding of being a team player as well as my respect for Coach completely reversed.

A veil was lifted. From that day on, whenever I was on the field and had a chance to either score by myself or give my teammate an opportunity to score, Coach would holler "Triple G! Triple G!" I would remember our talk and pass the ball off. Give the Glory to God.

For Personal Reflection: When have you had the chance to turn your success into an opportunity to give glory to God? How did you feel afterwards?

✧ **Nativity Building:** Place the magi in another room. These travelers remind us that Jesus' followers would be from all nations. We will celebrate with JOY on the day when people of all nations, together, will worship Jesus as King of all Kings.

Longing for Justice

Read Hebrews 12:18-24

"Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father, prepare to die."

We all know the movie, and the characters in the scene. We resonate with Inigo and his desire to bring justice to his father. This sentiment is common and usually makes us feel better when the villain gets what's coming. We are made with a deep-seated longing for things to be made right in the world. And that is good. We should strive for justice for those who have been wronged.

But wait, what if we are the one who has it coming? What if we are the cause of someone's blood cry and the object of their loved one's revenge? I can assure you when I turn the mirror of villainy on myself, I don't always like what I see. Gossip, pride, strife, disobedience, impatience, and lack of mercy abound. All of which the scripture calls evil. All of which puts me on the undesirable side of justice. Suddenly, the battle cry is not so appealing when it is raised against my wrongdoing.

My mind quickly becomes sober and my spirit cries for the blood of Jesus to wash me clean; to once again grant me access to Mount Zion. I long for His Word to speak mercy over me and to shout forgiveness louder than guilt. I am thankful I do not get what I deserve because of the blood Jesus poured out at the Cross. No longer do I have to suffer "humiliations galore." Instead, I overflow with joy because of Him who took the humiliation upon Himself.

For Personal Reflection: How aware are you of the grace God has shown you? Practice a time of confession to remind yourself of the things Jesus' sacrifice has covered in your life, then rest in the joy of knowing that He is faithful to forgive.

✦ **Nativity Building:** Bring out the figures of sheep and shepherds and set them outside of the stable. These will be the first to hear the JOYFUL news that Jesus is born!

Nighttime Instruction

Read Psalm 16:5-11

Many years ago, as a newborn Christian living on my own in an apartment in Shorewood, I encountered my first angelic choir. It was in the middle of the night... I awoke to the sound of singing. Often times, waking in the dark can be unsettling—but not that night. It was a different kind of sound. A heart cry (in a 'good cry' kind of way). My soul was being ministered to by heavenly voices. The depth from where those voices came was Holy Other. The peace that accompanied it. The comfort. The intimacy of it being just for me. *"I will praise the Lord who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me"* (v. 7).

Fast forward 28 years. As a wife and mother, now my middle-of-the-night, wide-awake moments are more about worry or concern for my family. Although I have not heard the angelic choir as clearly as I did years ago, I lean into the intimacy of the night as I cry out to God in prayer for those I love. Psalm 16 has been 'my' psalm for many years. I've memorized it, praying it as life experiences find me running for safety to the Lord. *"Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge. I said to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing'"* (vs. 1-2).

As vs. 5 states, *"The Lord assigns me my 'portion and my cup,"* a metaphor referring to what the host offers his guests to drink. To the godly, the Lord offers a cup of blessings or salvation. The Lord has given me blessing upon blessing, even in the darkness of the night. Praise Him!

For Personal Reflection: Take time now to remember and rejoice in all the blessings God has brought into your life.

His Healing by Faith

Read Matthew 17:14-20; 20:29-34

"Jesus stopped and called them. 'What do you want me to do for you?' he asked. 'Lord,' they answered, 'we want our sight.' Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him." (Matthew 20:32-34)

"What do you want?!" We've all probably exclaimed those words in exasperation to someone at some point in our lives. Irritated by an interruption, we express frustration toward another person.

The stories we read today depict two very different examples of Jesus' touch of healing upon human lives. In the first story Jesus descends from the Mount of Transfiguration to encounter His disciples, who are apparently unable to bring healing to a young boy oppressed by a demon. In the past, Jesus' disciples have done such works but now they are failing. The boy's father pleads with Jesus to do what His disciples cannot do. The entire situation brings an unexpectedly exasperated response from Jesus, directed at the disciples and an entire generation marked by sin's brokenness and a faltering faith in God. The Messiah has come to bring healing and salvation, but humanity struggles to grasp it.

The second story takes place as Jesus is fixedly journeying toward Jerusalem, where He knows He will suffer and die. Two blind men, who ironically see Jesus for who He is ("Son of David"), beg Him to restore their sight. Jesus asks them a simple question, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* (Matthew 20:32). After they respond, Jesus heals them. That question of Jesus lingers for us too. We would do well to consider what it is that we want Jesus to do for us.

This Advent, let us come with faith to the One who can heal in ways we most need. Let us voice our need and let us worship Him.

For Personal Reflection: Use the sermon discussion questions found bundled with today's sermon. Missed the sermon? Catch up online at eastbrook.org/tisthereason.

✧ **Nativity Building:** Scatter some sheep figures all around the room. Let them remind you of how people are lost without the Good Shepherd, Jesus.

FAMILY TALK: WEEK 3

Has your family baked Christmas cookies yet? Are you old enough to read the recipe and add the ingredients?

If so, then you know how recipes will say things like, “Add two cups of flour, one cup of sugar, 2 eggs.” But, what happens if you only add 1 cup of flour, or just one egg? You might just be left with a big, gloppy mess!

Thankfully, our faith is NOT like a recipe! In today’s Bible story, a man came to Jesus, asking for his son to be healed of a scary sickness. He had asked Jesus’ disciples to heal the boy, but they couldn’t. Did they just not have enough faith in God? Did they have only one cup of faith when they really needed . . . 10 cups of faith? We can’t measure faith like flour or eggs. Faith is a decision to reach out to God. It’s God that does the real healing, and not us. Jesus told the disciples (and us!) that even if we have a teeny, tiny amount of faith (have you ever seen how tiny a mustard seed is?) you will see God do amazing things!

And, that’s what happened in the second Bible story! Two blind men called out to Jesus—that was their act of faith! Jesus asked them what they wanted, and they told Him that they wanted to see. Jesus understood their “mustard seed” faith and gave them sight!

God really can help us through anything we are facing. Do you believe that? Call out to Jesus with your “mustard seed” faith and wait to see what He will do!

- **How do you describe faith? Why is it sometimes hard to have faith?**
- **Is there anything that you need to call out to Jesus for—for yourself or others? Take some time to pray about that with your family.**

BY LAURE HERLINGER

Nurturing a Mustard Seed

Read Matthew 17:14-20

"From childhood ... it has often thrown him into fire or water.... If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." (Mark 9:21-22)

This story, recorded in three Gospels, introduces a man whose son lives in continual danger from convulsions. The malicious being causing them is unpredictable, so the weary father must stay on "high alert" day and night.

His cry reminds me of the dismay and frustration my husband and I felt during times when our special needs son had frequent spells of agitation and aggression—often out of the blue, as if at the flick of some unseen switch. Many families face ongoing trials: a daughter with mysterious, debilitating digestive problems; a brother struggling with mental illness and homelessness; a son losing a battle with addiction; a parent or spouse sinking into dementia. At present, *"the thief"* rules this world and wishes to *"steal and kill and destroy"* (John 10:10a).

The father first approaches Jesus' disciples, but they are unable to help. Discouraged, he turns to Jesus, who challenges him: *"Everything is possible for one who believes."* Immediately the father responds with a *"mustard seed"* of faith: *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief"* (Luke 9:23-24). And Jesus heals the boy!

What can God's Word teach me here? First, I can remember that Jesus is good and brings life: *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). I can rejoice in loving caregivers and medications that are God's provisions improving my son's behavior, and thank Him.

I'm also prodded to continue bringing my concerns to God rather than just resignedly enduring. Though the father in this story had nearly run out of hope, he brought his need to Jesus. If I don't pray, I will miss out on blessings God wants to provide.

Finally, I can be encouraged that Jesus understands my weakness, yet still loves me and wants to help. So I can pray alongside the boy's father, *"Help me overcome my unbelief!"*

For Personal Reflection: Is there an area of your life in which you've nearly run out of hope that God will intervene? Pray today with renewed faith and open your eyes to what God will provide.

Expect the Unexpected

Read Isaiah 35:3-7

A few years ago I visited Yellowstone National Park, a landscape of unique, alien beauty: geysers gushing out the ground, dangerous acidic pools, hot springs, and full of creatures roaming the grounds. I felt as if I were on another planet, far removed from the familiar land I was used to in the Midwest, surrounded by uncommon flora and fauna.

It was a place of unexpected and surreal beauty. It's also unexpected to read in Isaiah 35 of someone who is blind being able to see, and deaf ears able to hear. It's unimaginable to think of the lame leaping and mute tongues speaking. I want to believe that water can gush forth from a desert and a desert can become a pool of refreshing water. I want to believe the unimaginable—but it's hard sometimes in the midst of difficult life circumstances, where a solution or a healing or some way forward looks next to impossible.

I heard an author and speaker say recently that we suffer from an “impoverished imagination”. In other words, if we can't imagine it, then it can't be possible. Yet that's the exact thing we're reading in this passage—impossibilities—and we're told that these unbelievable, seemingly impossible things will be true one day, and we should expect it.

Life here on earth already seems like a miracle, when I consider how much could go wrong and how I'm able to breathe and take another step each day, and how this earth keeps spinning with some sort of controlled plan in place that I can't fully comprehend. Yet we're told here in these few words that we can expect even more than this. We can expect the unexpected, the miraculous, the complete opposite of what we're used to everyday.

I want to see dry ground bursting forth and wilderness singing around me in abundance and celebration. Wow! I can't imagine it—but it helps me to know that a day of rejoicing and healing awaits that is unimaginable—and it's what this season and Christ's birth is all about.

For Personal Reflection: What unexpected joys have you witnessed or heard of in your lifetime? What steps can we take to grow our “impoverished imaginations” to believe the impossible?

✧ **Nativity Building:** Bring your sheep figures close to the shepherd figures. The shepherds were keeping watch at night when they heard the news about Baby Jesus! They would be among the first to put their faith in Jesus.

Corporate Healing

Read James 5:13-16

"Lord, show me through James 5:13-16 the power of healing in the church today and the significance of corporate prayer as a body of Christ."

As a Christian living in the 21st century, I believe that the Lord works through science and medicine to heal, but I often find myself lacking the faith to ask for miraculous healing when I pray. I have heard amazing testimonies of healing like the one from my father, who God used to heal someone who was unable to walk. Yet, I struggle to ask boldly for healing when I pray.

"Lord, allow us to boldly offer prayers in faith for the healing of those who are hurting."

Reading the second part of the passage, I was struck by the language used when it says to "*confess your **sins** to each other...that you may be **healed***." I found it a bit strange that sin was contrasted with healing. Shouldn't the other side of confessing sin be forgiveness like it is in verse 15? Yet as I thought about it, I thought about how in my life there are times where even after the confession of sin, I find myself bitter, angry, and critical of myself. The beauty of the passage is that the forgiveness has already happened (in verse 15). More forgiveness isn't what we need in that moment, we need the healing in our hearts for the bitterness. We need healing from the anger. We are being called to the corporate healing of the self-critique through confession and prayer as a community.

"Lord, show your church the forgiveness, healing and freedom that comes with confession of sin within Your body. Show your church the powerful and effective prayers of righteous people and let us all strive to be those righteous people."

For Personal Reflection: Where do you most need Jesus' healing right now? Physically? Emotionally? Relationally? Bring these needs to Jesus today.

Compassionate Presence

Read Mark 5:25-34

The most striking part of this passage for me is that despite the urgency of Jesus' journey to heal the dying daughter of a synagogue leader (see 5:21-24), Jesus stops and does not rush compassion. He felt someone touch Him and the NIV says He *"kept looking around;"* He did not stop until the woman came forward. She did and, amazingly enough, Jesus listened to her as she *"told Him the whole truth."* We don't know what she said, but we do know Jesus listened to her whole truth, however long that took.

I see Jesus practicing presence with this woman, listening to her, showing compassion. He then calls her daughter, encourages her faith, and offers a fullness of healing. She was physically healed by Jesus and He restored her to community (due to her condition, she likely would have been isolated, causing social, emotional, and mental pain, as well as the physical pain of the bleeding). Jesus also extends to her peace and freedom. Jesus' healing is a healing of wholeness, not solely physical! And Praise God for that.

I can't read this passage and not long for that peace and freedom Jesus offers, that wholeness of healing. I love that part of this woman's healing journey was to share *"her whole truth."* Her vulnerability and expression was met with compassion and healing. In a world filled with problem solvers and fixers, we too often skip the step of sharing our whole truths, maybe because we rarely can find someone who will listen compassionately. This woman sets a beautiful example for us: like her, we can reach out to Jesus in the midst of suffering.

Sharing our whole truth about a situation, a season of suffering, or pain is about vulnerability, honesty with self, and honesty with God. Then comes faith: trusting and believing that Jesus the Healer will meet us with compassionate presence when we reach out to Him. Knowing we are heard, seen, loved, and valued, that is a powerful thing. And this can be the beginning of healing.

For Personal Reflection: What would it look like for you to reach out to Jesus when you are hurting and share with Him your whole truth?

Those People.

Read Luke 7:1-10

This story is a Sunday School classic. Raise your hand if you heard it before; I see that hand, thank you. This story is commonly told for a reason. A Roman centurion was exhibiting a huge amount of faith: a Roman, the enemy, the bad guy, the dudes who were an occupational force in the lives of every Jewish person in Israel. And yet this story is included in the Gospels. This story is about faith, for sure. Luke tells us this in verses 9 and 10. But let's look at it from a different angle.

Jesus didn't hesitate to go to this man's house to heal his servant. Jesus Himself told people He was sent to the "House of Israel", and yet we see Jesus go. Jesus didn't say, "Wait, who is this person?" "Who is sick?" "I don't go there." He didn't say anything. Verse 6 says, *"So Jesus went with them."* He went.

Now, maybe you have lived in a place where there is an occupation. A place in which an army lives to make sure you, the conquered citizen, obey the rules. But I would venture to say many of us haven't. I know I haven't. I do know a few people who have, and the typical response is not to be super helpful to the occupational force. In fact, not too many years later from this event, Peter was deeply criticized for going to a Gentile's house with the Gospel. And yet, here we see Jesus responding to human hurt and need. He went.

When we see Jesus act in this way, what does it tell us about how we should respond? We all have those people in our lives, people who we regard with little respect or outright animosity. We all have people in our lives who, when they ask for help, we hesitate, we pause, we don't help. We don't serve. How does that advance the kingdom of God? What does that do to the faith of those we refuse? What did Jesus model here for us?

For Personal Reflection: When you read this story, what is God drawing your attention to? How will you respond?

✧ **Nativity Building:** Move Mary and Joseph and the donkey a little closer to the stable. Mary and Joseph were filled with faith, trusting in God's messages to them, as the time for Jesus' birth came closer.

Longing for Healing

Read Luke 7:18-23

In Spring of 2000, when I was 7 years old, I was diagnosed with type 1 “juvenile” diabetes. All the signs were there: I was too thin and getting thinner even though I was eating and drinking everything in sight. I made my family stop at least ten times for the bathroom on our annual 6 hour road trip from Minneapolis to Milwaukee, extending our trip by hours. I didn’t enjoy performing in the church musical because I felt “sludgy” and sick. It was obvious to my mom, and the doctor agreed. My parents took me to Minneapolis Children’s Hospital almost daily in the weeks following my diagnosis to learn my new way of life: finger pokes and insulin shots.

For so long, doctors, nurses, and nearly every article someone cut out to save for me promised a cure that was “just around the corner.” Even the best medical advancements are still often painful, expensive, and not a cure. You might know what it’s like for you or someone you love to receive an awful diagnosis and to pray for God to just take it away. Or you’ve wished desperately for restoration for a relationship or freedom from addiction, loneliness, depression. . .

Wouldn’t it be amazing to live in Jesus’ time and hear about a man who was actually healing people right and left? To be able to touch His cloak and receive healing and restoration? To know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this man, Jesus, is your God and King made man to save us from evil and pain, to make everything right and all things new?

As I read this passage and write this, I pray that God will help my unbelief, show me that He truly is the King I long for, and teach me to trust in Him for healing and restoration. How we long for justice, comfort, restoration, and healing in our world today. How we long, during advent, for King Jesus, who heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, raises the dead, and proclaims good news to the poor!

For Personal Reflection: If you could “reach out to Jesus” to have one piece of your life transformed, what would it be? Pray for that transformation today with humility, confidence and hope!

His Resurrection Brings Hope

Read Matthew 17:22-23; 20:17-19

"He said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.'" (Matthew 17:22-23)

Have you ever faced a diagnosis you did not want to hear? Sometimes there is a clear pathway to healing, while at other times there is not. Sometimes the pathway to healing requires procedures or surgery that are painful to walk through. Sometimes the healing can only come after great difficulty.

If this is true in our individual lives, how much more true is it for all humanity and the entire created order? When God the Father sent Jesus the Son as incarnate Messiah it was so Jesus could *"seek and to save the lost"* (Luke 19:10) and *"save the world"* (John 3:17). Such a vast and amazing work does not happen with the snap of a divine finger or by an armchair decision of a distant deity. Such redemptive work will come by Jesus the Son descending not only from glory but also by *"taking the very nature of a servant"* and *"becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross"* (Philippians 2:7-8). Jesus' death on the Cross will be the entry point for salvation for all humanity and the created order.

But His death is not the end. Although it may seem unimaginable, Jesus tells His disciples ahead of time that He has not only come to die but also to rise again. As the old saying goes, "you cannot keep a good man down." Though His victory over sin on the Cross and His victory of death in the resurrection may seem unimaginable, it is no less shocking than God Himself taking on flesh and living among us.

This Advent, let us celebrate the joy of the unimaginable becoming reality!

For Personal Reflection: Use the sermon discussion questions found bundled with today's sermon. Missed the sermon? Catch up online at eastbrook.org/tisthereason.

FAMILY TALK: WEEK 4

Have you ever hoped for something? Did you get what you hoped for? When did you get it? Most of the time when we hope for something we are not sure what is going to happen. We hope that we get a new bike for our birthday. We hope that we will win the game. We hope that our friend will be able to play at the park. Sometimes what we hope for happens, sometimes it doesn't.

But, when the Bible talks about our hope in Jesus, it is different. Our world is full of hurt and sadness and sin. There is sickness and death. There is anger and hatred. We don't love God the way we should. We don't love each other the way we should. But as followers of Jesus, we have hope that the world will not always be this way.

The source of this hope is Jesus—His words and His actions. He taught that he was the way to new and eternal life (John 3:16). He told His followers that He was the way to be with God the Father again (John 14:6). In this passage, He tells His disciples that He is going to die and rise again. And, He doesn't just say it—He does it! Even though it seems impossible, Jesus rose to life again three days after He died. He is stronger than death.

Because we know that Jesus is stronger than death, we know that He can give us the new wonderful life in His kingdom. As one of my favorite authors, Sally Lloyd-Jones, puts it, "All sad things will come untrue." So we live now, waiting for Jesus to come back to make all things right, but waiting with an absolutely positively gonna happen hope that Jesus will keep all His promises.

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of King Jesus who invites us to believe in Him and have eternal life in His kingdom forever and ever. We have hope that the world will be made right because He rose from the dead.

- **What are some of the exciting things we hope for when Jesus comes back as King?**

BY COLLEEN MITTAG

Great Mercy and Love

Read Psalm 25:4-6

I underlined verses 4-5 in my Bible earlier this year, because I think it's a wonderful prayer to pray straight from David's pen. I could spend the rest of my life asking God to teach me His paths and lead me in His truth, and never run out of things to learn.

"For you I wait all the day long." When I first noticed these verses this year, I felt that I was waiting for God, and was worried about how long I'd have to wait to see Him act; it was comforting to know that not only did David, the man after God's own heart, have this feeling, but he gave me words to verbalize it to God too. The writer also did not show resentment, but was willing to wait for God.

"Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love." God's greatest mercy was in sending His son for us; we can also see "small" mercies in our daily lives (how we avoided getting in a fender bender, or did well on a project), and larger overarching mercies in the course of our lives (how He rescued us from a dangerous relationship, or how the lessons we learned in one time of life helped us later), and can thank God for each of these.

I love the mix in these verses of requests for God to help the writer spiritually, praise (*"you are the God of my salvation"*), and recognition of God's attributes and past deeds. This reminds me to not only pray for things I want, but to acknowledge what God has done and who He is in my prayers.

If we pray these verses to God, He will renew us—He will teach us, and will bring to mind His steadfast love and mercy as He has shown it to us in the past. Thank you, God, for giving us words in Scripture that we can pray back to you!

For Personal Reflection: Are you waiting for God in any area of your life? How can these verses encourage you? Pray these verses to God.

✧ **Nativity Building:** Place animal figures in the stable. This barn was a humble place for Jesus to be born, but Mary and Joseph were filled with hope in God's promises.

Remember

Read Psalm 78:1-7

Several years ago, I began creating annual photo journals. It is fun to periodically look back and remember the events of each year. So many joys and blessings. I am sometimes baffled, though, by the number of meaningful occasions that I do not readily recall, and end up thinking, “Oh, yeah! I remember that!”

We, as Christians, are blessed by our Father with every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3) and are equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17). Jesus promised that He would be with us always, *“to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20b). We have a personal advocate in the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-17). Why is it then that we find ourselves frustrated, anxious, stressed, discouraged or fearful in our daily lives? Simply put, we are prone to forget. As a consequence, we do not trust God as we ought. We neglect to consistently bring to mind and meditate on the *“things (of God) that we have heard and known. . .”* (Psalm 78:3a)

Asaph, the writer of Psalm 78, reminded the Israelites (and us!) of God’s command to tell of *“the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done”* (Psalm 78:4b). They were, from generation to generation, to share about the God who performed miracles in Egypt, the One who divided the sea and led the people through on dry land. Asaph reminded the Israelites how *“He guided them with the cloud by day and with light from the fire all night”* (Psalm 78:15) and how *“He split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them waters as abundant as the seas”* (Psalm 78:15). Remembering the awesome deeds of God caused the people to again put their trust in Him and keep His commands (Psalm 78:7).

We serve a God, who *“is the same yesterday, today, and forever”* (Hebrews 13:8). He continues to work wonders and miracles in each of our lives. As with a photo album, let us consistently look back and remember, recalling His faithfulness, as well as the joys and blessings that He has richly lavished on us.

For Personal Reflection: Reflect back on your past week, month and year. Where has God “shown up” in your life? Praise Him for the hope this brings you for your next week, month and year!

Grow Where You Are Planted

Read Jeremiah 17:7-8

I recently started working here at Eastbrook. Our staff went on retreat this fall to the Nashotah House Seminary near Delafield—a place where it was impossible not to notice the trees.

The vibrant shades of their changing leaves drew my attention. What kept my focus was the thought that these gentle giants simply exist, fully given over to the forces of nature around them, and by relinquishing control, they experience great beauty. They lose branches they're no longer able to support, allowing the light to filter through in new ways. They sway delicately in the wind, creating shadows that dance us to sleep or soundtracks that score a cozy night on the couch.

Unlike the trees, we humans often find it hard to loosen our grip on what happens around us. In relationships, in work, in traffic, you name it—it's easy to think we can control the outcome if we just [insert action here]. But ultimately, there is only One who knows how best to respond to the winds that blow through our lives and rustle our leaves.

The tree planted by water *“does not fear when heat comes”* and *“has no worries in a year of drought”* (v. 8). In due time, it always receives what it needs from the nearby stream to thrive. Similarly, we are best served by rooting ourselves in faith, leaning into the confidence that the Lord will provide. He blesses those who delight in His law: *“That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither — whatever they do prospers”* (Psalm 1:3).

Much like nature's seasons, change in our lives doesn't always happen overnight. How appropriate that Advent is a season of waiting! Jesus has predicted the ultimate gift: the promise of eternal life by His death and resurrection. Our job is to wait faithfully. In the meantime, look outside. By now, a soft dusting of snow probably sits atop the trees outside your window (but who knows...it is Wisconsin, after all!).

For Personal Reflection: What do you think is the relationship between patiently waiting and hope? How can you live in that space more faithfully?

The Door of Hope

Read Hosea 2:14-20

Sometimes, the book of Hosea makes me feel a little uncomfortable. The themes of unfaithfulness, loss, brokenness, and shocking redemption can be hard to understand. Yet, Hosea is a picture of the hope we have because of Jesus! *"I will lead her into the wilderness"* (v. 14) speaks to a time when Israel relied entirely upon Yahweh. For some a wasteland, but for God's people it was a place of deliverance...and a time of testing. I've often been marked by the "wilderness." Seemingly senseless moments fraught with waiting, inactivity, dryness. I'm sure you can relate!

Corrie Ten Boom's analogy of the underside of a tapestry comes to mind; knotted, intertwining threads, a chaotic array of colors. Yet the top shows a beautiful pattern, order, and purpose. God sees what we cannot. The Valley of Achor (trouble, v. 15) points to judgment (Joshua 7:1-26). But God now speaks of a new covenant with His people! The Valley will be transformed into a Door of Hope. Hope is a place of expectation in the midst of trouble...Jesus is our Door of Hope (John 10:7-10)!

The Hebrew root word of "master" (v. 16b) emphasizes a husband's legal rights over his wife (Exodus 21:3; Deuteronomy 22:22). In contrast, the root word of "my husband" (v. 16a) speaks of an intimate partnership (Genesis 2:23, 3:6). What an amazing picture of God's grace and mercy! No longer a legal commitment but now an intimate love. From conditional and dependent upon obedience (Leviticus 26) to unconditional and dependent upon grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). The "I will" statements prevalent throughout this passage speak of the inevitability of God's goodness. Have you ever stopped to think of that? Love is not merely an attribute of God—He *is* love and cannot be false to Himself (2 Timothy 2:13)!

This new covenant is marked by peace (v. 18), permanency (v. 19), perfection and purpose (v. 19b-20). Righteousness, justice, love, compassion, and faithfulness. The bride price we could never pay, paid on our behalf. As we celebrate Jesus' birth, let us also remember Good Friday and the hope of Easter!

For Personal Reflection: Spend some time today thanking Jesus for being your Door of Hope.

✧ **Nativity Building:** Place Mary and Joseph in the stable. The time has almost arrived for Baby Jesus to be born!

Better than Expected

Read Matthew 12:18-20

The Israelites expected the Messiah to come and put an end to all the oppression and injustice in their physical circumstances. They expected a political or military leader to free them from the oppression they faced at the hand of the Romans. However, this passage from the prophet Isaiah paints a very different picture of Jesus the Messiah: Jesus came quietly and in peace to restore broken lives from the inside out, forgiving sins, mending hearts, and healing physical circumstances.

I have so often prayed and expected God to show up in a certain way, to answer my prayer the way I think best, but then I end up discouraged or confused when He doesn't move in the way I expect or I don't seem to see Him work at all.

Many of the Israelites completely missed the Messiah they had been hoping and praying for because of their expectations of who He was supposed to be and how He was supposed to come.

Just like the Israelites, I can so easily get caught up in my own expectations instead of seeking His reality, and end up completely missing the ways He is constantly at work in and around me. But when I look back on those times where I thought God hadn't delivered, I see now that He was at work powerfully—just in ways I didn't recognize because I had my own warped expectations.

Jesus didn't directly deliver the Israelites from oppression and injustice at the hand of the Romans, but God's plan was immensely better than their expectations: Jesus came to bring hope and salvation that is eternal; salvation that is so much deeper than just freedom from the physical oppression of our enemies. He came to turn the whole world upside down and to bring His kingdom here.

For Personal Reflection: When was a time God showed up differently than you expected or wanted? Looking back, why do you think He answered your prayer differently than you had hoped?

✧ **Nativity Building:** Place the Baby Jesus figure in the stable. In the middle of the night, in this little barn, Jesus was born! *"God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son..."* (John 3:16).

FAMILY TALK: CHRISTMAS EVE

Imagine a dark night, lit only by stars peeking through windows and maybe a small oil lamp or two. Imagine dusty, scratchy straw poking through your clothes as you lie down. Feel the chill in the air, and every now and again, a waft of warm animal breath. Smell the clean hay mixed with the icky smell of animal...well, you know!

Is this where a baby King should be born?

Jesus could have been born into a palace—into a spacious, well-lit room with cozy rugs and a brand-new crib. He could have had the cutest little clothes and loads of baby toys! That's what God's people were expecting when they were waiting for the promised Savior to be born.

But, in many ways Jesus did the unexpected! He did not live in a palace and shout orders at everyone. Instead, He lived among friends and served people. He did not just hang out with people like Himself—He cared for everyone.

This is why God's people were so confused. They expected a super-important, powerful king who would free them from the Romans. Instead, God told His people, through the prophet Isaiah, that Jesus would be a gentle servant, but a strong servant who would win in the end:

He will not break a bent twig.

He will not put out a dimly burning flame.

He will make right win over wrong.

The nations will put their hope in him.

(Matthew 12:20-21, NIV)

How does Jesus win? By dying on the Cross to pay for sin, and then rising again! He has crushed sin and death, so that one day, all the wrongs can be made right. Everyone who trusts Jesus can share in this victory! That's why the "nations will put their hope in him", too. When you look at the manger tonight, remember Jesus—the unexpected servant king!

BY LAURE HERLINGER

His Life, Our Life

Read Matthew 1:18-25 and Philippians 2:1-11

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us')." (Matthew 1:22-23)

"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:8)

Christmas Day is a time of great celebration. Some of us will open presents. Some of us will gather with family or friends to share a meal. Some of us will enjoy certain annual traditions with those we love. Some of us will remember those no longer with us, feeling both the sadness of loss but also the depth of meaningful memories.

Regardless of what fills our day, Christmas puts into sharp focus the greatness of God's gift to us in Jesus becoming incarnate by the Holy Spirit's power working in the Virgin Mary. From start to finish, Jesus' story is one of God's life given so that we might have life. Jesus enters our world as a baby who will grow into a man destined to save all humanity. His infancy is humble in a variety of ways: coming from glory to earth, born to ordinary parents with little reputation, growing up outside the centers of power, and more. So, too, Jesus' adult life embraces the humility as he is misunderstood as Messiah, lives dependent upon others' financial supply, and ultimately in a sacrificial death for our salvation.

His life for our life. This gift is beyond measure. May we celebrate Jesus as we enter into this Christmas Day.

For Personal Reflection: As you reflect back on your time spent in this devotional, which of the aspects of Jesus' coming that we've discussed (His Suffering Brings *Peace*, His Glory Brings *Joy*, His Healing by *Faith* or His Resurrection Brings *Hope*) is the greatest gift that God has given you this year? What is the "Reason for the Season" you most needed to be reminded of this year?

✧ **Nativity Building:** Place the shepherds near the stable. The angel told them that the Savior had been born! They believed, and there were the first to see Jesus and to tell others about Him!

FAMILY TALK: CHRISTMAS DAY

When a new baby is born, everyone asks: What's the baby's name?"

Some babies are named for family members. Others are named for places, like "Dakota" or "Cheyenne" or "London." Others are named for seasons like "Autumn" or months like, "April". Do you know what your name means, or why it was chosen?

Mary and Joseph already had their baby's name given to them by an angel: "You must give him the name Jesus. That's because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21, NIV).

The name "Jesus" is special to us, but it was common for God's people. The name "Jesus" was actually "Joshua" back in the time of Moses. Many years later, it changed to "Jeshua" (pronounced "Yeshua"), and then finally in the Greek language, it took the form of "Jesus". All of these versions mean the same thing: Savior.

Jesus' name was a clue about why He was born. This baby Savior would grow up to save His people by dying on the Cross.

The Bible tells us that the name "Jesus" is "above every name"—that means that it's the most important name of all time! One day, everyone will bow in worship when Jesus' name is spoken. (Read about this in Philippians 2:1-11).

Today as we celebrate Jesus' birth with feasting and gift-giving, let's remember that the joy of Christmas is just a clue about the joy to come! Now, we remember Baby Jesus. One day, all of heaven and earth will worship the name of Jesus together!

Special Thanks

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WORKS CITED

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted. *The Holy Bible*, New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan House, 2011.

JESUS' MINISTRY TAKES A DRAMATIC
TURN IN FOCUS, TONE, AND
GEOGRAPHY IN MATTHEW 16-17.
THIS ADVENT WE EXPLORE THE
TURN OF JESUS TO THE CROSS AND
WHAT IT MEANS THAT JESUS'
SUFFERING ON THE CROSS IS THE
REASON FOR OUR CELEBRATION OF
CHRISTMAS AND ADVENT.

DIG INTO THE REASON FOR THE
SEASON THIS YEAR WITH THE 2021
EASTBROOK CHURCH ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL, "TIS THE REASON."