



Advent Devotional Booklet

This devotional booklet was written by the people of God at Holy Love Lutheran Church in the fall of 2019, to be used by the Holy Love community during the 2019 Advent season.

December 1 - First Sunday of Advent

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

Jeremiah 33:14

Today is the first day of Advent. It's the beginning of the new church year, and it's that time when we wait anxiously for the new thing that is happening - something new that God will be doing in the world. This year, I've experienced something like Advent a whole lot more than I probably ever have before.

When I first woke up in the ICU after the accident, I assumed I would be able to walk again. Of course, that's because I had no idea at all that my injuries were as severe as they were ... probably because in addition to the injuries to my body, my brain was also injured and not working like it should have been.

Then I started to understand the severity of my injuries. I started to consider the reality that I might need to use a wheelchair to get around (keep this in mind when you read tomorrow's devotion). I started to wonder if my cycling and skiing days were behind me. I started to contemplate any number of other less-than-ideal potential outcomes.

None of these freaked me out - maybe because I know plenty of people who navigate the world with grace and dignity from the seat of a wheelchair. Still, if I was able to move around on my feet, that was a better option. So, with the help of fantastic medical staff, I started working toward the goal of moving around as freely as I had done before.

When I started to make progress toward that goal, I started daring to hope. And the possibility that I might someday be able to walk to the top of a mountain again filled me with Joy.

I've spent most of my time since then anxiously waiting for the next new thing that is God will be doing in my world. It wasn't always joyful - sometimes it was painful, sometimes it was anxiety-producing. But I got to experience the complex joy of Advent anticipation for most of this year.

Holy God, help us to trust that your promises will bring us joy, whether or not our days and months and years work out the way we hope they will. Amen.

Devotion written by Pr. Matthew

Advent

December 2

Give Thanks

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

You should always rejoice and give thanks to God for everything. I give thanks for family, especially my grandparents. You should always be happy and glad to go out and play and work. I can go out in my wheelchair and do great things even if I can't walk. I can pray and thank God for a lot of things, like good friends and good weather, and my family, including my crazy aunt and uncle. I pray for people to have enough food even those people I don't know. Everyone is a child of God.

God of family, we give you thanks for the ability to get out and do your work in the world. Amen.

Devotion written by Jason Harvey

December 3 - Romans 12:12-13

Reflect, take joy in the journey

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Romans 12:12-13

Looking back at the life I have lived so far, there has been some very challenging situations, things one would think people shouldn't have to go through. Should we focus on the bad? Just because God loves us, is he protecting us in a way that we think he should? No, in order to survive such times and events one must focus on the learnings and find Joy in the event to overcome and move forward. I also look to share my learnings with others so they might not have to endure that lesson.

As a care taker in my career you see many different things happen to people. People at their worst times, suffering, grief, and pain. Despite doing all the medical things I was taught I also would engage in prayer with families or silently on my own.

Wouldn't this place be better if everyone shared love and joy?

Try to think that most people have good intents – fear, anger, and bitterness brings the worst in people. Not knowing what is in someone's past so all you can do is make the present better.

Know that he is here with us every step of the way providing guidance and protection. We can support others and bring Joy into their lives.

Dear God, Please give us strength to rejoice in hope and provide that foundation others need to support others and bring Joy to this world. Amen

Devotion written by Katie Sinclair

December 4

Down in My Heart

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Philippians 4:4-5

Many of us have experienced times in our lives that could really bring us down if we let them. But, have you ever heard it said, "It all depends on how you look at it?" If anyone could have been feeling down and depressed when these words were written, it would have been Paul who wrote them while imprisoned. However, he chose to look at his situation from a different perspective, and he chose to rejoice and to encourage others to do the same.

Sometimes we look at our "bad times" with so much seriousness and doom and gloom that we forget to look for the joy. To me, to rejoice means to look at the bright side or look for the happiness and to try to bring yourself out of that dark place. The song says it all: "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart ... down in my heart to stay." Joy carries with it so many positive health benefits and just puts us in a better position in all aspects of our lives. The word *gentleness* stands out to me because that is a quality that joy adds to my life. It replaces anger and frustration and feelings of inadequacy and just makes people feel better about themselves and the world in general; thus reactions to situations and to others takes on a whole different approach and meaning.

The last sentence says it all – the Lord is near. In all situations we face in life, the Lord is near. He has promised this to us, to always be with us – and that doesn't just mean in the good times. He is within us, around us, beside us, behind us, and always encircles us with his arms of love, no matter what we face. This is why we as people of faith can have JOY, and have it abundantly.

Heavenly Father, help us to look for the joy in all situations and help it to bolster our faith when we need it the most. Let us always remember that our Lord is near and forever with us. AMEN.

Devotion written by Pam Engel

December 5

Present and Future Joy

This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118:24

I think this verse has been used in ways that doesn't quite match the context of the psalm in its entirety. I used to think this was kind of a "carpe diem", seize the day, kind of thing. Make something of the day by your own will and action. Or perhaps a Biblical version of the "live in the moment" mantra that was popular over the last 20 years. I now don't think either is true, though both have validity in other ways. If you read the psalm in its entirety, the writer is talking about going through really hard times. He isn't looking for a self-help bumper sticker moment. He is looking for a way to put his present difficulties into the context of his faith. He is not saying we should ignore the past. The past informs and teaches us but is still only an echo of whatever joys we experienced. We cannot live solely in the future either, but our hope, if not our joy, can often be found there. The psalmist is urging us to find joy in the knowledge that God will always be with us, regardless of our present circumstances. With God a constant in our lives, each day will be a source of joy, hope and comfort. We don't need to make it happen. God has already done it for us. Rejoice in the Lord's presence in our lives!

Thank you, God, for your continual presence in our lives. Help us to experience your Joy today, and to eagerly anticipate the Joy your future will bring. Amen.

Devotion written by Darryl Harvey

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December 6

Stillness

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Habakkuk 3:17-18

How can joy exist simultaneously with such barrenness? Earlier in this book, Habakkuk stands before God and cries out, "How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? The law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted." I have cried out to God with those exact words. Then God replies to Habakkuk – and to me – with an entirely different idea. Are you not listening? Could you at least respond to my complaint rather than change the subject altogether? "Alright," God replies. "You're not going to understand this today. But the answer is No. And Wait. And Later." How can joy exist simultaneously with such frustration and despair?

Winter is upon us here in Aurora. We were cheated out of a glorious, colorful autumn when a nasty snow froze all the trees turning the green leaves gray. There are no leaves on the trees. The fruit trees do not bloom. But it's winter, this is normal. Winter is a very important and blessed season. God is hard at work below the surface of the ground. What appears to be dormant is teeming with life. This period of rest and apparent silence is a pause, a breath, necessary to the physical earth. Justice, laws, fig trees, fruit and herds are a part of life. I am distressed when I perceive that God is withholding these gifts from me in the winter of my life. But they are only gifts. True joy is found in the Giver who is always present. He is not limited by seasons and He is not limited by my understanding. The great I AM is justice and truth. He owns the fig trees and cattle on a thousand hills. He assures me that Spring will come, and the trees of the field will clap their hands as He leads us forth in Joy. Though justice is elusive and the Christmas lights are tangled and the bad guys are winning and the cookies are burnt and the skies are all gray and the news is all bad and the chocolate is all gone ... Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, yet I will exult in the God of my Salvation.

Lord, help us to rejoice in the silent stillness of the winters of our Soul. Amen.

Devotion written by Kerry Beebe

December 7

Indescribable Joy in the Unseen Jesus

Although you have not seen [Jesus Christ], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:8-9

Living in the midst of a commercialized, greedy, materialistic society at the onset of the Advent Season can feel for followers of Jesus like we must set upon ourselves mindfully to resist temptations. What temptations? We must coat ourselves in joy to help resist the temptations to get too caught up in the trappings of perfect gift selections, decorating the perfect home, planning the best meal, watching (and envying the plots and characters of) the Hallmark Christmas Movies, and most importantly, turning into a terrifying version of Clark W. Griswold holding everyone around us (and ourselves) to unrealistic standards of the “perfect holiday family” when we gather.

Yes, friends, I admit I have fallen into those trappings many a time. It never really ends the season of Christmas with a fulfilled experience, and mostly I have felt empty, disappointed, and frustrated. When I “lose sight” of the actual joy that is found in my relationship with my savior, the unseen Jesus, I am lost.

The most joyful moments this season, come from a more relaxed, “chill” celebration in which we focus on the love Jesus brings to the world. We celebrate that God’s love is bigger and more powerful than anything we can imagine, and that nothing can separate us from His love, thanks to Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. We attend Advent Evening Prayer with our Holy Love community, to celebrate and sing of that great love. We gather with friends and family, to share that love in the form of deliciously imperfect home-made food, and board games with hot yummy drinks. We share the joy we have found in our unseen savior with others by serving and giving to our neighbors in need, and sending messages of hope to those disenfranchised by our society.

Dear Lord, Please open the eyes of our hearts to find signs of Your great love in the people around us. Teach us to share YOUR love without reservation, without fear, and with utter total conviction of its unseen truth. Give us the grace and humility to receive that love, when our spirits are in need of it, from those around us. Amen.

Devotion written by Amy Schmuck

December 8

High Mountains

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”

Isaiah 40:9

It wasn't exactly a high mountain, but a high cliff along the Mississippi, where it meets the Illinois River. We had left a church community with many close friends. The small town was a mile long and about 3 blocks wide. We moved just before Thanksgiving and I knew no one in the community. We had two preschool children who needed me there all the time, as I didn't know any babysitters.

One night after their Dad got home, I went for a walk and ended up at the edge of town, until I came to the stone quarry. I started throwing rocks at the cliff, yelling about not having anyone to talk to. As my arm got tired, I sat down on a boulder. In the quiet, I heard the words "Your need to listen." Not what I wanted to hear, and threw more rocks! I sat on the boulder, watching the water that seemed to calmly flow east. The second time the same words came to me. I decided to try listening.

The next day I got a call from my recent Pastor's wife. She was upset and I let her talk. At the end of the conversation, she thanked me for being a good listener! I was suddenly grateful for God's intervention the night before. I look back at that time with joy. Many years later, I saw her in a nursing home. A nurse tried to keep me from her, because I wasn't family. She called out my name. She knew me in spite of having memory problems. We had a good talk and a few laughs. I left with a full heart. She has since passed on, and I look forward to a joyful reunion with her, and so many other, in heaven.

Dear Lord, Thank you for all the ways you listen to me. I am trying to listen, although I often fall short. Nudge me when I need to lift up my voice and shout about all the joy you have brought to my life. In Jesus name I pray. Amen

Devotion written by Char Stone

December 9

What we wear

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Isaiah 61:10

I usually wear a collar on Sunday mornings, and any other time when I want people who don't know me to know I'm a pastor. Other times, you'll see me most often wearing a t-shirt with maybe a short-sleeved button-up shirt over it, and jeans or khakis or shorts. I've worn many different uniforms - basketball, marching band, volleyball, etc. I used to work in a restaurant that required the serving staff to wear white shirts that had been ironed, a black apron, and black pants.

You know who the medical personnel in the hospital are because they're the ones wearing scrubs. You know what someone's military rank is by the insignia they wear on their sleeve.

What people wear tells others something about who they are. One of my favorite mundane experiences as a parent was watching my children try wearing different kinds of clothes as they chose what their style would be.

For ten weeks this past summer, I had to wear a brace that immobilized my neck and torso. I was glad to get rid of that thing. Sometimes when we get rid of what we wear, we experience greater freedom and joy.

Whatever it is that we put on from day to day, whatever our style is, I give thanks to our God that we have been clothed in righteousness, that we have had garments of salvation put on us by our God who loves us.

*God of Righteousness, thank you for accepting us no matter how we clothe ourselves.
And thank you for clothing us joyfully. Amen.*

Devotion written by Pr. Matthew

December 10

Joy of Music

*You are my hiding place!
You protect me from trouble,
And you put songs in my heart
Because you have saved me*

Psalm 32:7 (Poverty and Justice Bible)

This psalm was by David, and is titled The Joy of Forgiveness. I've always felt connected to the notion that my creative soul is a gift from God, that my affinity for music is a gift much like her freely given grace. Just like David, I believe that the songs in my heart are there because I am saved. I can find my safety in God, and she protects me from harm. This is a very joy-filled passage, celebrating both the gift of God's unconditional grace, and the gift to be creative and questioning, always curious in our little human way. We are free to be whatever we want to be, free to be joyful and musical. No matter who you are, because even David was just a simple young shepherd, but he was chosen and saved, and became king of Israel. He was able to hone in on his creative gift and wrote 73 of the 150 psalms.

Dear God, thank you so much for every gift you give us, and help us navigate with those gifts through this joyous season. Amen.

Devotion written by Adam Schmuck

December 11

Active Kindness

Bless those who persecute you;
bless and do not curse them. Rejoice
with those who rejoice, weep with
those who weep.

Romans 12:14-15

I was coming home from a business trip Friday night and in the middle of the airport is a kiosk called “Be Kind to People”. And one of the tag lines on it says “Kindness Sold Here”. My initial thought was “Wouldn’t it be nice if it was just that easy?” That we could simply wear a t-shirt that says to be kind and everyone was nice to each other and there were no disputes or grudges or bloodshed? Wouldn’t there be more joy in the world? But wearing a kindness T-shirt is passive. It doesn’t ‘cost’ you anything other than the price of the shirt. Active kindness is something different. Taking a meal to a family with a new baby for example. It costs you the time and effort to make a meal, deliver it, and coo over the new baby. But no one considers it a chore, and it brings joy to everyone involved. What about forgiving someone who has wronged you. This may not require as much physical effort, but forgiveness is a specific active decision you make, and sometimes it’s very difficult. But making that decision can open up space for joy to come into your heart. There’s lots of other examples of ways to actively spread kindness and joy to each other, if we just pay attention.

Heavenly Father open our eyes and our hearts to all the ways, big and small, that we can share kindness and happiness with each other, not just during the Advent Season, but throughout the year. Amen

Devotion written by Leigh Brazee

December 12

God's Power

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Galatians 5:22-23

As a child I was taught that because Jesus loved me, these nine lovely words from Galatians 5 were really God's power working inside of me! And that as I grew, these "fruits" would also grow as long as I stayed close to Jesus.

As I grew I became aware of some not so lovely words also found in Galatians 5...like quarrels, strife, jealousy, envy, just to name a few. (See verse 21 for the complete list!)

As an adult I came to realize that life isn't always simple, easy or even fair. It's often hard, messy, and down-right complicated! So those not so lovely words are often far more visible in my life than the nine lovely ones mentioned in verses 22 and 23.

But it's times like Advent when I hear once again that no matter what, God is still here, still loves me, still cares about me, and again offers me His path and His power. The choice is mine.

So as I allow the joyful hope of Advent to rinse my heart, I sense something unseeable stirring within ... a call to an empowered life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God's power, indeed!!

O God, there are so many ways I can "dress" in this world. Please grant me the courage to choose love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control as my "go-to" outfits. Amen.

Devotion written by Ruth Roehrman

December 13

Ebenezer's Joy

Because the Lord is pleased with his people,
God will beautify the poor with saving help.
Let the faithful celebrate with glory;
let them shout for joy on their beds."

Psalm 149:4-5 (Common English Bible)

It is difficult to imagine that the Lord is pleased with his people, when we are such bumbling human fools so much of the time. We fail to fulfill the promise of loving our neighbors, working for justice, living in peace, trusting in His hope. Each and every day, multiple times a day, we fall short of the Kin-dom of God. But then we atone, we open our eyes and hearts, we give of ourselves, and we love freely and bravely. This psalm reminds me of the moment in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol when Ebenezer Scrooge awakens in his bed, after his last terrifying trip to his own grave stone with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. He hears the church bells ringing, flies out of his bed, and "... shouts with joy ..." upon confirming the news that it is indeed Christmas morning. He hasn't "missed it", and he has the chance to live out his remaining days as the LOVE that he has always been called to be.

Dear lord, thank you for your love and the daily chance we get to joyfully share it with our fellow travelers. Help us celebrate the joy of Christmas this year like we are Ebenezer Scrooge: grateful and full of hope for the love you call us to be in this world. Amen.

Devotion written by Amy Schmuck

December 14

Walk in the Truth

I have no greater joy than this, to hear
that my children are walking in the truth.

3 John 4

I've spent a lot of nights wondering how to raise good children. It's not easy, and I'm not always sure I'm doing the right things. It seems when John says the above passage, he's talking of anyone who he has helped to shape. Watching someone who you have mentored walk in the footsteps of your values and beliefs was John's greatest joy. This again, as most things in the Bible, require faith. Faith in your convictions, yes, but faith that your message, your mentorship, and the person receiving the lessons will all coalesce into understanding and adherence.

I mean, John had a bit of success right? Maybe I can watch my kids walk in truth. I just have to have faith.

God our parent, lead us in your footsteps so that those we encounter will experience faith in you. Amen.

Devotion written by Ian Condie

December 15 - Third Sunday of Advent

Joy in Song

... They sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

Ezra 3:11

Music is such a universal, emotion-inducing phenomenon. It can bring waves of joy, sorrow, inspiration, and longing, among others. To sing with other people can be a very bonding experience, each person needing every other voice as much as their own, to create the harmonies that define the song.

It is easy to find the joy in happy songs, the upbeat tunes that make us tap our toes or even break out into dancing. In reality, there is joy to be found in every song, even the most mournful of laments. The joy is found in the solidarity with our fellow humans. The songs that really speak to your heart, no matter what they say, the words are coming from another person who felt the same thing you feel and put it to music. Music is a gift from God to help us relate to one another in new and meaningful ways. The foundation of the house of the Lord has always been the people, and I believe music is one of the ways God bonds that foundation together. What a precious gift, and an incredible way for God to show us His steadfast love that endures forever! And all God's people (joyfully) said, "AMEN"!

Dear Lord, Thank you for the gift of music. Thank you for giving us the tool to hear the songs of each other's hearts, and to sing together through the ups and downs of life. Help us to always find the joy in the solidarity with one another, and in remembering the songs are all gifts from you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen

Devotion written by Lauren Kennedy

December 16

Witness of the Women

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

John 15:11

Losing my mother Helene Schmuck this year has definitely taken some of the joy out of things. Thankfully I remind myself that she did enjoy a long and joy filled life that included a loving family and close friends. Shortly after my mother's passing, I was hit by the oddest thought and feeling. One that I had not foreseen. I am the oldest of the Schmuck line of the family. I am now the old guard. It made me feel a little adrift without the anchorage of my parents grounding me. Luckily for me, the women in my life were gracious enough to lead me gently, even if I was kicking and screaming, to a foundation of faith. First my mother by rousing a surly teenager's behind out of bed on many a Sunday morning. Then my wife Amy convinced me many many years ago of the need for God to be an active part of our lives. They are truly my saving angels. Their faith in God and me, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, has brought me to the true mainstay of my life, Jesus Christ. As soon as I remember that we are all beloved children of God, that feeling of being untethered and adrift disappears completely and is replaced by the joy and comfort of being in communion with Him.

Gracious Lord, I thank you for all the amazing women that you have put on my lives' path. Their faith, grace, and strength is always an inspiration to me. Amen.

Devotion written by Alan Schmuck

December 17

At the Peak of Joy

While [Jesus] was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Matthew 17:5

Morning twilight peeks behind Mt.Bierstadt tinting it in shadow. I take a quiet breath and listen to the sound of my feet carrying me away from life's distractions. The first rays of sunlight reveal the 7 mile out and back dirt path. Time slows, each step guided by wonder. The light changes in the valley to unveil wet marsh, a misty lake and lush vegetation. Passing the soft treeline, wildflowers smile along the mountainside. Cairns stand like sentries poised in peaceful prayer. Higher I hike, the stunning peaks in view.

Nearing the top, tired legs feel like jelly navigating the difficult scree. I look up at the massive piles of rocks layered on top of one another leading to the peak, and climb slowly and steadily intimately aware of the sheer drop-offs on either side. I feel vulnerable as fear grips my nerves causing me to flinch. At this moment, bubbling joy awakens just under the surface hidden by set determination. Breathless, I dig deep inward summoning the joy found between each boulder. One foot, one hand in front of the other, I crest the top.

What stands before me? A 360 degree view that defies words! Beauty at eye-level. A sea of peaks. Overwhelmed by mind-blowing emotion, I stand on the edge ... exposed, fully aware of the vastness and brightness all around. I gaze at the brilliant blue sky and clouds so near to touch. This is the closest I have ever felt to God. There's a stillness drawing me to stay just ... like ... this ... for awhile surrounded by His grace. No impulse to fill the silence. An invitation to "Listen to Him!" All fear, worry and self-doubt are replaced with the rebirth of immeasurable joy! "You are my beloved".

Oh, what joy Peter, James and John must have felt upon that mountain! Witnessing the power of God and being in the presence of Glory, Love personified! Jesus shows us the way up the mountain. Listening to His word gives us the strength to face the challenges life brings despite our weaknesses: to strengthen our faith, to persevere, to shout with joy and revel in the change of living a life in Him. Advent brings an opportunity for us to participate in the joy of listening and to soak up the experience on top of the mountain.

Leaving the beautiful peace-filled mountaintop is so difficult. The hike back down from the peak is uncomfortable and strange as I feel the dizzying nauseousness of altitude sickness for the first time. Yes, it's easier to climb up a mountain than to climb down! I have to work at it, the same as listening. Sometimes I don't listen to Jesus or I pick and choose what I want to hear. I can talk to God and know with confidence that He will hear me. Prayer intimately connects me with His intense love as if I have entered the clouds so close to glory to remain with him for a little while. This is my journey of joy! Our journey of joy! To embrace the glorious power of His words and be transformed. Listen to Him! These three simple omnipotent words build the path for us to come down into the valley with renewed vigor and see the needs of others, to reach out in service and gift others with His love.

Father in Heaven, Bring us to the mountaintop so we may listen and be transformed by the remarkable power of your words. Bless us as we continue this Advent journey and fill our hearts with joy and peace to share with others. Amen.

Devotion written by Melissa Meacham

December 18

Beauty in Surprising Places

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.
I will be glad and exult in you;
I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.

Palm 9:1-2

My 3rd career is the one that usually surprises people. After two separate teaching careers, I decided to become a trucker. There are so many joyous wonders across this country that show God's amazing creation. Trucking in the mountains reveals so many beautiful views. Each turn and each rise of the interstate reveals a new scene to behold. The pictures are still with me in my mind. There are also man made wonders, like bridges over deep valleys, and tunnels through mountains. The engineers must have had God's help to develop the tools to create the suspension bridges I drove over.

Another part of trucking that brought me joy was seeing so much more wildlife than I could have otherwise seen. Driving along the Great Lakes, from northern New York state to Illinois, included some of God's creatures I hadn't seen before. I was able to see the birds my father loved, at eye level, when seated in the semi. I was up where a lot of birds flew.

Appreciating God's wonders is not something that springs to mind when you think of truck driving. But it's the same as with anything else in life. If you look for ways to be in awe of the wonders of God's creation, you'll never stop seeing them.

Dear Lord, We stand in awe of the wonders of your creation. Sometimes in the busy-ness of life, it can be all too easy for us to overlook the awesomeness of it all, or take it for granted. Help us to stay awestruck, so that we may better appreciate and praise your beautiful handiwork. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Devotion written by Char Stone

December 19

Privilege

[We are treated] as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

2 Corinthians 6:10

We all recognize that we are living in a time of great tumult. When I think about this scripture, for me it highlights the many thoughts and feelings I've had over this past few years as a result of the complex, crazy and scary times in which we live. Although I've felt bad at times, I've also discovered that painful and stressful times have led me to embrace some truly amazing people, black or brown, old or young, gay or straight, with whom I've laughed, cried and celebrated.

I've loved and embraced the diversity that exists in our very community and our world. I've made so many friends who have nothing, yet they are so rich. And I have friends who are rich in material wealth and who have everything yet they are poorer in other more profound ways.

I am privileged in many ways and so disadvantaged by my own privilege. God allows such irony in life so that I can be a better person. And its wonderful knowing that with all of my faults God loves me and all of us—sorrowful or rejoicing, rich or poor--without condition.

Father in Heaven, Bring us to the mountaintop so we may listen and be transformed by the remarkable power of your words. Bless us as we continue this Advent journey and fill our hearts with joy and peace to share with others. Amen.

Devotion written by Lance Wheeland

December 20

Advent Royalty

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

Isaiah 9:2-3

This book of the eighth-century Isaiah offered the Jews words of comfort and spoke of Israel's restoration after the judgement of exile. This was an ancient "royal psalm," used in festival celebrations. For the Christians these prophetic words of promise found perfect fulfillment in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that the book was occasionally called "the gospel within the Old Testament."

This hymn looks forward eschatologically to the restoration of the promise to David of a kingdom with "no end". Later generations of Christians would look for yet another future person who could more completely fulfill what is promised

Today we remember Israel's hope for the coming of God's Messiah to save, to forgive, and to restore; and now we prepare for the "advent" of Christ at Christmas. Christmas marks the point in human history where God's long-declared promise of redemption was fulfilled in the birth of Christ. Advent is the season of preparation and anticipation leading up to the celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas.

Life is filled with times of waiting, though many people today do not want to wait for anything, but everyone has such experience of waiting. We continually experience incompleteness and await, hope, and expect. We wait for some realization, fulfillment, and salvation. Like God's people centuries ago, we also look forward with hope to the coming of Christ. Help us to refocus our attention on the hope and joy we already have found in Jesus Christ during this time of preparation for the celebration of Jesus birth. Amen

Devotion written by Elvi Bjorkquist

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

Romans 15:13

Today, December 21, it's almost time for Christmas. Not quite, but almost. Today, December 21, it's also the day of the year with the least amount of daylight.

Today, December 21, we've been waiting for weeks already for Messiah to arrive. And if we look outside this morning or this afternoon, it looks pretty bleak. It's been getting gradually darker and darker every day for months, and the silliness of daylight savings time doesn't create more light - it only moves the hours of darkness around.

But we know enough about the way the earth spins on its axis and about the way the earth moves around the sun to know that as soon as today is finished the daylight will start to lengthen.

And while it might feel like an interminably long time that we've been waiting, that it might seem like Christmas will never get here, we know what's gonna happen in a couple days. We'll celebrate the incarnation of our God.

And in celebrating Christ's birth, we can trust that despite our best efforts to find despair in the world around us, God will continue to fill us with the Joy and Peace that come with the faith that we have already been filled with by God's Holy Spirit.

The days will get longer again; and God will (continue to) show up in the world, bringing the promise of new life for all of creation.

Light of the Nations, fill us with Hope as we anticipate celebrating the birth of your Messiah; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Devotion written by Pr. Matthew

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."

Luke 1:13-15a

There's something surreal about children. On the one hand, I want the best for my children - I want them to be happy when they grow up; I want them to enjoy life, and for the life each of them leads to be fulfilling; using their particular skills and preferences and predilections, I want them to figure out how to make the world a better place.

And at the same time, as I think about Zechariah, I realize that before I was a parent, I had completely no idea what it meant to raise a child. I had no idea what the demands would be, how little sleep I would get some nights, and how challenging it could be to keep scissors away from electrical outlets.

I imagine Zechariah knew, though, that there was joy in the anticipation of new life. And there was special joy in anticipating the arrival of new life into one's own life

We who are members of an intergenerational community like a church, whether we're biological parents or not, are especially lucky that we get to witness the advent of, and participate in influencing for the better the growth of, a new generation of the faithful.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's son John (known as the Baptist) had a special calling - to point to the Messiah. Which might be the calling of you and me and every one of the children that gets raised in church congregations. A diet of locusts and wild honey probably isn't necessary for most of them. But we, as a congregation, are gifted to be able to help young people figure out what their special gifts from God are. And we're lucky enough to be able to let young people help us to figure out what ours are.

Loving God our Parent, help us to rejoice at the news of new life, and to celebrate the gifts you continually give to us. Amen.

Devotion written by Pr. Matthew

December 23

Sing for Joy

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.

Isaiah 12:4-6

There were many reasons my husband Alan and I decided upon our first visit to Holy Love Lutheran Church four and a half years ago, that we were done with our search, and no longer needed to scope out other congregations. We checked in with our two tweens, they didn't object, the pastor seemed to know what he was talking about, the congregation wasn't so big that they ignored us completely (that actually happened at one visit), and it wasn't so small that they exuded the scent of desperation in their conversations with us. The warm and friendly living out of the congregational name "Holy Love" was as Goldilocks says, "Just Right" for us.

The worship experience at Holy Love Lutheran was extremely enriching for our family. Our previous congregation had two different worship settings with a praise band, and we missed that. However, what we discovered is that this congregation in particular truly exudes JOY in their singing of praises to God. "THIS IS A SINGING CHURCH!!" I exclaimed after services one Sunday. No half-hearted mumbling through of the hymn with the organ drowning it all out anyway. This congregation sings out loud and proud.

So even though we moved out of Aurora, and have a bit of a drive, we decided we wanted to weave ourselves into the fabric of Holy Love's congregation for much more than just one year, and we are so grateful for all the ways our family members' faith lives have deepened because of each of you. I give thanks to God for you, Holy Love. I will lift my (out of tune) voice with all of yours in joyful praise that God is in our midst once again this Advent Season. You have brought the joy of God's love to me in beautiful ways. Thank you!

Dear Lord, Thank you for being "great in our midst" for all eternity. You bring joy into our hearts, and life and light to a dark world. Be with us as we share that light with one another, the stranger, the hopeless, the poor, and all the world. Amen.

Devotion written by Amy Schmuck

December 24 - Christmas Eve

Merry Christmas

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Luke 2:10-11

I'm sure that God' really got the shepherds' attention not only with the angel's appearance but especially with what the angel had to say. This was a promise from God that His people had been waiting to hear for centuries.

The angel tried to calm their fears yet I'm sure that their heart rates increased dramatically. Yet, God's promise was fulfilled that night in Bethlehem ... King David's town. As their fear subsided, the shepherds' first reactions were probably replaced not only with a plan of action but also with joy. Yes it was joy that overcame fear because Messiah at long last had come.

As we turn our calendar's page to Christmas what are our plans on how to celebrate the coming of our Lord, Messiah? Also how has God captured your attention to disclose His plans and His promises? In this, one of the busiest of the twelve months how often has His Will for you intersected or even disassembled your plans as well as your life? Is it difficult for any of us to experience that joy that is to be a continuous constant in our lives and lifestyles? Someone once told me years ago, "Let go and let God." I've tried to do that and it does help.

Dear Father in Heaven, continue to bless us with the joy of our Savior's birth. Especially help us when the plans and parties and other celebrations threaten to overwhelm us. Instill and increase the gift of joy that Jesus' birth has brought to each of us individually and to our world. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Devotion written by Pr. Jim Engel

December 25 - Christmas Day

Relax, enjoy the leftovers

A space for notes, thoughts, and reflections

Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Nehemiah 8:10

One of the traditions in our house is that every so often, especially if we've spent a few days doing a lot of things, is to have a lazy morning or a lazy day. We sleep as late as we can (which really isn't very late when there's a 3-year-old in the house), and basically stick around the house for the morning or the day. There's book-reading, music-playing, tv-watching, videogame-playing, trampoline-jumping, snowman-creating, and continual snacking.

The thing is, sometimes it's good to just stop. To take a break for a while. The religious word for that concept is Sabbath. God has recommended (commanded) that we take a Sabbath every week. And the holidays are a good time to take more Sabbath - to set aside additional time to remember that God is in charge of the universe, and that the world will continue to exist without our input when we take a break from working.

We've been holiday-ing for at least a month. Today is a great day to stop trying to make the world go 'round. Take a break. Enjoy the feast of leftovers that might be in the fridge.

Today is a Holy Day, on which we celebrate the gift of new life that God is giving to you and me and all of creation. We didn't work for it. We didn't earn it. This gift has been freely given to us. And continues to be freely given to us.

Enjoy the gift. Enjoy the leftovers. And if there's any more than you need (today, or any other day of the year), give some away to someone who could use it. You never know, you might just make a new friend. And more compellingly, you might just share God's love.

Life-Giving God, hold us in your care. And continue to grace us with the gift of new life. In the name of God Incarnate, Jesus Christ. Amen.