



Moving Toward

*Nope*



Advent reflections

from the voices of LifePath Church



# Welcome to the season of Advent

***"I wait for the Lord, my  
whole being waits, and in  
his word I put my hope."***

*-Psalm 130:5*

*Talking about hope with people can feel like walking through a field of landmines. So many have experienced loss, heartache, confusion, and disorientation. We've walked through it in our lives, in our beliefs, and in our trust of the world and the people around them. The reality of life can sometimes make hope feel like a daydream— as if we're ignoring reality altogether. So I wonder.... Is hope hard because it's been separated from honesty?*

Do we feel like we must suspend our disbelief in order to practice hope, as if we are children putting on costumes and playing make believe for a bit, and then returning to reality? Is this why we hesitate to live in hope? Or is it because hope, at its core, requires trusting what we cannot see? I don't know. But I do know that hope is hard.

As disciples of Jesus, Jesus himself is our hope. He is at our center, and our hope is in him. We hope in his peace to speak to our troubled hearts. We hope that he can transform us. We have hope that he is leading us into eternal connection with God's love. We hope in his work to bring about peace, justice, and equality in our world even today. We hope in what he is doing beyond what we are able to see with our naked eyes- in ourselves, and in our neighborhoods. We hope in his salvation. This is what the season of Advent is. It's letting ourselves hope that redemption is coming. It's peeking over the wall to notice the signs that the savior is about to arrive- even while we know he's already with us.

But as we do this, we must not push away our honesty. These readings are different than many Advent reflection books. They are not "curated"— they are direct submissions from you in our community. Our pastoral team has added scriptures and prayers to each submission to

focus our hearts- but the words and art shared in this booklet are not professionally written. They are honest thoughts on hope, borne out of honest wrestling with Jesus. Some will not fit your boxes. That's alright. The best gifts can never be wrapped up neatly anyways. So as we look toward Jesus, I invite you to hold onto the robust hope that this booklet represents. It is the hope that Jesus is at work in all sorts of different ways, in all sorts of different people- reminding us that there is always beauty to be given and received when Jesus remains at the center of our lives. Thanks to all of you who have gone out of your comfort zone to share your vulnerable words. And thanks to all of you who are terrified of hope, yet willing to dive in anyways, trusting that God can work even with those feelings, if we bring them to him.

Jesus is coming. Watch and wait.

**Peace,**  
**Keith**

## **November 27th**

*“But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”*

Isaiah 40:31

At the start of Advent in 2021, my mother had just left this earth. She had been on the journey of leaving this world for a very long time but went home on November 12, 2021. For her last week, every night as I kissed her good night, I said, “I will see you tomorrow, unless you go home tonight. If you do, I will see you when I get there.” We both had this hope.

As I think about hope, this is the hope that I have:

- She is with Jesus
- She is healed, with renewed strength, running, and soaring. And maybe even singing with the angels (even though she did not have an angelic voice here on Earth – but miracles happen).
- I will see her in heaven when I get there.

The holidays will always cause me to pause and grieve for a few minutes and that’s okay. But my hope in Jesus and all of His promises doesn’t allow me to stay there. Instead, I focus my eyes and my heart on Jesus.

~Pam Connelly

*As my heart aches for loved ones I miss, help me remember that I have not lost them. Thank you that they are safe in you, Jesus.*

## **November 28th**

*"And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love."*

Romans 5:5

Throughout much of my life — particularly in my childhood — I struggled with the concept of faith. My understanding of faith alternated between blind devotion, based on what I had been told (or interpreted) to be right, and blind belief, based on what I felt should (or needed) to be right. But as I learned more about the world around me, and all its complexities and nuances, I realized that neither approach provided a good enough explanation as to why my faith was important to God.

At a critical juncture in my life several years back, I found myself in a heated conversation with my father, trying to convince both him and me that there was no purpose in maintaining faith in God because the mistakes I had made (and the resulting disappointments I had caused) were proof of my unfaithfulness (and thus, unworthiness) to God. The turning point in that conversation was when my father asserted that, "while you may have given up on God, God has not given up on you." I didn't fully understand the extent of what that statement meant at the time, but I was left with a lingering sense that, for some reason, God loved me dearly and didn't want me to "fail" in faith.

It was the unshakeable sense that God loved me that motivated me to explore more deeply why that was. As I grew to better understand God's love for me, I started seeing more and more God's love for others and his love for the entire world he created. And learning to see how God's love is embedded in all the ways that reconciliation and redemption manifest in the world today left me with an understanding that God hasn't given up on the world either. A God that has not given up on the world is a God that has inspired me to hope — a hope that does not disappoint because I know that even the smallest kernel of redemption is just God at work. And I guess holding onto that hope is just faith, is it not?

~Ian Yue

*Jesus, inspire hope in me today that leads to deeper faith.*

## **November 29th**

*"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"*

Matthew 6:26

The following is one of the more challenging times in my life. It was when I was working on my graduate degree in electrical engineering. I was looking at 8 years part time or 2 years full time. I put my trust in plenty of savings and quit my job to become a full time student. I also had the moral support of my girlfriend who I was head over heels in love with. My life felt blessed for the first 1.5 years of schooling, but then the carpet was pulled out from underneath me. It was the dot-com bust. In my investing, I learned what a margin call means as my savings went to nothing. While trying to focus on my thesis, a big job market with fat bonuses turned into layoffs. I started using my credit card to pay the mortgage. As a final crushing blow my girlfriend dumped me. I was mentally and morally crushed.

It was around this time that a dear friend pointed to the bird outside my window. He informed me that the bird had no savings but had faith that God would provide for it. He said, "Keith, that bird has more faith than you do." Not what I wanted to hear, but he was right. Looking back I would say I was more religious than faithful. With the pain of desperation, my faith grew. All I could do is keep putting one foot in front of the other. This zombie like trudge kept up for months. Finally, in the end, with the personal referral of a friend, I got a job and finished my degree.

Even after I put my faith in myself and my finances, the Lord still had faith in me. In the end it was the divine intervention of a friend and a coerced faith in God that actually carried me through.

~Keith Eisenhauer

*Lord, help me to look beyond my immediate circumstances so that I can trust in your goodness.*

## **November 30th**

Order, disorder and reorder. Together they sound poetic, progressive and wise. And although those descriptions may be true, going through that process feels more messy, chaotic, and scary.

I have built a house out of faith. Many of my previous houses had to be patched or rebuilt but this one.... I thought this one was good. I had built this one from experience and knowledge and I felt secure in it.

Then one day – one question leads to another, one realization leads to another, and over the course of many days my sturdy reliable house of faith crumbles around me, and I'm left questioning my foundation.

*John 6:67-69 – So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."*

My foundation is strong. So I stand on a foundation with no walls and a heart full of questions.

To be undone by Jesus..... is terrifying at times, tiring all the time, but I am supposed to be here.

Job 13:15 – Though He slay me, yet I will hope in Him.

~Kristi Meadows

*Jesus, again today I place my hope in you as I walk forward, though I know not which paths the journey will follow.*

## **December 1st**

*"Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks to God, and distributed them to the people. Afterward he did the same with the fish. And they all ate as much as they wanted."*

John 6:11

In John's account of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus sees the huge crowd of people, acknowledges their need, and knows that he will be able to meet that need. BUT, before he does so, Jesus asks Philip a leading question: "Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?"

And Philip replies, *"Even if we worked for months, we wouldn't have enough money to feed them!"*

The need feels totally overwhelming to Philip. How could Jesus expect him to meet the needs of so many?! Even if Philip tries his hardest and devotes all of his time and energy to the task, this is problem that is too big for him to fix. He feels powerless, helpless, and hopeless.

But, he's forgotten who is right there beside him.

How often have I looked at a problem or a need and felt overwhelmed in the face of my own human limitations? *Even if I worked for months*, there's no way I could fix this problem or meet that need!

But, when I take a moment to remember who is right here beside me, my hope is renewed. Because our God has done amazing, miraculous things in, through, and for his people, and I know that he will continue.

~Bethany Miller

*Jesus, today I am filled with hope that you are at work. Help me remember that you are the one empowering my spirit with yours.*

## **December 2nd**

*"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."*

Romans 15:13

Sometimes, when I have a need or desire, I confuse "Putting my hope in the Lord" with just "Wishing" for it. When I wish for something, I want it to happen my way, in my time. To me, putting my hope in the Lord means asking for it, but trusting that He, with His perfect wisdom, will have the best plan and He will be with me not matter what that plan is.

*Jesus, I know all things are possible for You.....I pray not my will but Yours.*

~Barb Padilla

## **December 3rd**

*"When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—  
the moon and the stars you set in place—  
what are mere mortals that you should think about them,  
human beings that you should care for them?"*

Psalm 8:3-4

My favorite movie is The Sound of Music. Just to think of it brings memories flooding back to crooning together in the car with my family. As a child, I loved hearing my mom sing Eidelveiss as I fell asleep, or bobbing up and down with my sister making the hand motions as we sang So long, farewell. . . , and even now to sing the goatherd song with my children and pretend we can yodel. These moments are fun and full of life. I can't recommend it enough.

The song that isn't as upbeat and silly to sing, but speaks to my heart is the title song.

"The hills are alive with the sound of music with songs they have sung for a thousand years. . . . I go to the hills when my heart is lonely. I know I will hear what I've heard before. My heart will be blessed with the sound of music and I'll sing once more. "

At any time, I can pause to look at the beauty of God's creation all around me and know without a doubt that I am loved.

My daughter tells me frequently, "You always say, oh look at that sky!" She isn't wrong, it's a near daily occurrence. I hope someday when she is far from home she will look up and see that same beauty and know that her momma loves her, that God loves her, and that she is part of His beautiful creation. I hope you know that too. You are loved, so very loved, my friend.

~Kim Givens

*Jesus, today I find hope in knowing how precious I am in your sight.*

**December 4th**

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



~Art piece by Melanie Winters

*Lord, bring your loving light into our world, and into my own life, today.*

## **December 5th**

*"See? I am doing a new thing? Now it springs up. Do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland."*

Isaiah 43:19

During the height of the fall foliage way up in the Poconos, I had the opportunity to attend a retreat. One of the activities was to create a found object collage. So I decided to go into the nearby woods to see what I could find.

Now, going into the woods by myself off of a well marked trail isn't something that I usually do. Even though I was feeling exhilarated, I was also a bit daunted and leery. I didn't really know what I was looking for exactly. So for a while I just observed...listening and noticing and trying to be fully present in the moment.

Being present is what I'm working on right now. You see, I've spent so much of my life wishing to be somewhere else, worrying about someone else, reliving something that already happened or imagining a future time. I've missed so much goodness by wishing my right now away.

So that day, I was intentionally practicing. To just be in the woods, off the trail, in the fall. Feeling the soft, cool air and sunshine; noticing the colors and textures all around; hearing the rustling and crackling of the sticks and leaves; smelling the pine trees; running my fingers over the rough bark, the supple moss, the bumpy lichen. Allowing myself to feel whatever emotions presented themselves.

As I walked, I realized that in my life, I've been experiencing my own fall. A season of endings...of letting go and not really being sure of what is next. I allowed myself to feel the melancholy of that awareness.

Then I noticed a little grouping consisting of a dead log, fallen leaves, crisscross sticks, and yellow and brown wild fern leaves. I started to walk toward it remembering a FB meme about how fall teaches us how good it feels to let go.

And then I saw a green plant with only three tiny leaves growing in the middle of it all. New life in the middle of all of that death.

That tiny plant reminded me that even in the height of one season, there is new life emerging, preparing for the next. I caught my breath as a feeling of overwhelming hope flooded me. I realized that for the first time in a long time, I felt more like the little plant instead of the fall forest. That even though I don't know exactly what form the new growth will take, its roots are forming now, and a little sprig of new hope is growing in me.

~Lori Kellogg

*Give me eyes to see the beauty in endings, and the new things You are doing, Lord.*

## **December 6th**

*"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."*

2 Corinthians 1:2-4

My dad passed away unexpectedly in October, and it still doesn't seem real. My heart was broken wide open. I'm finding hope in theology that does not view this loss as a test, or a sign, or a lesson. I'm thankful for a theology that says God does not cause harm. Rather, He meets us there in our suffering, and I'm choosing to experience His love and care in dozens of small, ordinary ways.

I've found comfort and hope in every gesture of kindness from others. Every acknowledgement of the shock and the greatness of loss. Every hug at the funeral. Every text message, every meal. These are just drops in a bucket, it's true, and they don't fix the problem or raise the dead. But these expressions of sympathy remind me that I'm not alone. Grief is a universal human experience, and it soothes me the tiniest bit when others acknowledge that they understand how terrible the loss is. All the little drops of comfort do add up, and I'm choosing to be aware of those tiny ways and to not dismiss them as unimportant. Human care and connection is keeping me going, and I'm grateful to this community for it.

~Tori Meeder

*Jesus, when there are no words... thank you for your comfort and your people.*

## **December 7th**

*"It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had."*  
Luke 15:13

*"...- this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!"*  
Luke 15:32

I had a wonderfully happy childhood. Beginning in my teen years I developed anxiety. At eighteen I discovered drugs and alcohol and the seeming solution to all my difficulties. Because of the cunning nature of substance abuse disorder, for the next twenty years I was unable to see the problem. I had not one, but two marriages that failed. I was not a good dad to my son, and I couldn't see it. It caused me problems at work. I lost a close friend to suicide because of his own substance abuse disorder. You would not have liked being with me during those years.

After more than two decades of active addiction, I became desperate enough to turn my will and my life over to the care of God and to seek help to stop using mind-altering substances. I began my recovery from this disease.

Since then, I have experienced more grace and love than I could ever imagine. After many years as a single dad living in recovery, I met Cami and fell in love. That was eighteen happy years ago.

Since then, there have been great joys and crushing sorrow, some disappointments, but many causes for celebration. And during my recovery I can gratefully say that each year since has been better and more hope-filled than the last.

~Rob Seward

*Thank you for grace, for love, and for freedom from the deaths that try to take over my life. I trust you, Jesus, to move me ever forward.*

## **December 8th**

*"For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him."*

Philippians 1:29

"How much suffering can one human heart hold?"

I asked myself this question one morning when I saw my tear-filled eyes in the mirror. I felt like I was hitting my capacity for suffering. Chronic illness, death, and persecution had come into my life. At just 24 years old, I can't help but wonder how much more will come my way over the next years? At what point will it break me?

Yet as I stood there, I could still see the glimmer of hope in my eyes. Hope is weird like that. It shows up unexpectedly in various forms: in people, a good song, an unexpected sun ray, and sometimes hope comes in the form of tears. Tears that acknowledge how painful life is but also tears that notice the comforting presence of Christ.

I realized that day that I was already broken, shattered even. The pieces of a life I once held so dear had slipped out of my hands. But hope tells me that they didn't shatter onto the ground; no, they have been held with great care by Someone much stronger than me. I turn my eyes to the cross and see a God turned human who reached out and took all the suffering off my shoulders. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection quite literally took the weight of it all.

When the suffering still feels like too much to bear, I'm learning to stop asking God "why" or seek out the answers that aren't there but to instead start asking for trust. Trust that there's more here than meets my human eyes. Trust that this isn't the whole story. And mostly, to trust in the upside-down Kingdom of God. After all, we've been told it's a privilege to suffer for the sake of the Gospel.

This where I find my hope.

~Allie Snyder

*Jesus, may my eyes, fixed on you, cause my trust to grow deeper and deeper, even through my tears.*

## **December 9th**

*"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength."*

Philippians 4:12-13

I like to share this Anne Lamott quote that stays on my refrigerator:  
"When hope is not pinned wriggling onto a shiny image or expectation it sometimes floats forth and opens."

If anyone had said to me "This is the way your life will go..." and proceeded to describe what I have experienced and even some of our current circumstances, I would say "No!"; that would be too sad, I would be crushed.

I haven't been crushed, and feel more love filled, faith filled, and hope filled as the years now move so quickly by. More grace has showed up than I could have ever imagined. The "shiny images" are broken and, as my dad once pointed out, "It's our expectations that disappoint us". So I've been working to let them go. Hope is different now. It seems to be opening.

I can't say I don't have low times or that my heart does not break over and over for the world and people around me. This makes me all the more grateful for the workings of the Holy Spirit and for the life and teachings of Jesus. What I can say is that my hope is increasingly fixed on God's loving goodness, mercy and creativity at work in the world. I am looking more these days with hope to see what's next.

~Cami Seward

*Jesus, your grace fills us with hope. Teach us to continue to lean into your loving goodness, despite the challenges we face.*

## December 10th

*"Yet I am confident I will see the Lord's goodness while I am here in the land of the living."*

Psalm 27:13



Garlic gives me hope.

I will explain.

This is that time of year when days get shorter. Nights get longer. It's cold. It's getting colder. When it rains, the cold cuts like a knife.

Sometimes at this time of year the talk is about things like "Seasonal Depressive Disorder" or "Seasonal Affective Disorder" (which may only be a gimmick so they can abbreviate it "S.A.D."). The weather affects. The lack of daylight affects. And often our past, with hurtful

memories affect.

Call it what you want, there's a lot to make you sad. I'm sad when the alarm rings and it's still dark. I'm sad when I drive home from work and it's already dark. I'm sad when it rains, and it's cold, but not cold enough to snow. I like snow. No snow makes me sad.

Nature seems to be sad as well. It seems that all is broken, all has died. Dark. Cold. Where is the goodness? Where is the life? Where is the....HOPE?

That's why I plant garlic in my garden. Garlic reminds me of hope.

It goes like this. I plant garlic in the fall, two weeks before first frost is best. In a couple weeks' time that little bulb sends up a small shoot. Then comes the cold. And the dark. That little shoot, weak and fragile as it appears, stays ALL winter long, bearing all the worst winter can throw

at it. It may go limp, but preservers. That little garlic shoot reminds me, all winter long, life is yet at work.

Eventually, the dark of winter WILL yield. The rest of nature will soon burst free with Spring's wild, untamed exuberance. And my little, worn-out garlic shoot will straighten up and join the celebration, growing tall and strong and yielding good fruit in its time. (Yum!)

That's why garlic teaches me hope. Even if the present season of my life may look as if nothing is happening and death reigns, life is yet at work.

Maybe for this reason it's good we celebrate Christmas in December, right after the solstice. Our season of Winter is not over with Christmas, truly it has just begun. Yet, in darkness, hope remains as a green shoot of life. Life is yet at work.

Indeed, it may be dark today, but Christ has come.

After destruction, Christ redeems.

After failure, Christ restores.

After death, Christ resurrects.

Christ is king. Christ brings hope.

And next October, plant some garlic!

~Bill Heider

*In the darkness of this season, open my eyes to see the life you are bringing forth around me.*

## **December 11th**

*"So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless."*

I Cor. 15:58

There are many times, especially when reading news or scrolling through social media, when I feel despair about the way many are treating their fellow human beings, including LGBT folks. I see the encouraging work of some to hold back and push back against this current, but it seems to be a futile task. Some days I can easily feel like we are moving further and further from loving our neighbors and this will just continue on getting worse year after year.

But then God gives me a peek into His plan for the future, in the overheard conversations of my children. I hear them matter of factly affirming the names, pronouns and genders of their friends and who they are attracted to. I hear the unstated, implicit love for their peers and respect for their humanity.

Of course! It's so obvious, why act any other way?

It fills me with hope for the future and with hope that the work we can do today is not in vain.

~Brian Givens

*Lord, please grow in me the love for all of my neighbors, even those who don't yet see the need for love within their own hearts.*

## December 12th

*"You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water."*

Psalm 63:1

Emily Dickinson wrote many poems about hope. This is one of my favorites. Emily knew much about waiting in anticipation with faith in times of uncertainty. She wrote this in 1862, during the second year of the American Civil War.

~Rob Seward

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chillest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.

~ Emily Dickinson

*In the storm, the chill, or when I am surrounded by things unfamiliar, help me sing with trusting abandon to you, Lord.*

## **December 13th**

*“Those who wait in the Lord will renew their strength”*

Isaiah 40:31

In some ways, the verb *to wait* has been hijacked. We have waiting rooms in hospitals. Depending on what we are waiting for, the wait can be awful. We are waited upon at restaurants, often the wait there isn't worth it.

*Waiting*, though, is not a location or a state so much as a heart posture. The word for hope in Spanish is *esperanza*, which shares a linguistic root with the word *esperar*, which is the infinitive of the verb to wait.

Often times, we confuse things. We are *waiting* for time to pass, we *hope* the Phillies can rally from three games down to clinch the pennant. We *wait for*, we *hope in*. While linguistically we need to affix the appropriate proposition, in as far as our heart's posture is concerned, we use the wrong ones at times.

Sometimes, waiting and hoping are the same thing. As we wait, room is given for hope to take root. It cannot be forced – there's no priming the pump when it comes to hope. Like Gandalf, it is neither late nor early, but arrives exactly when it's meant to. Furthermore, it seldom appears as we had envisioned. This is so because hope *in* is conditional, like hoping for the Phillies to rally from three games down. There is a definitive way a thing must go for hope to be legitimate. But this is not how hope works or looks. Hope looks like waiting. And waiting.

So as we wait during this season of Advent, perhaps it's not the worst practice to envision that act of waiting as giving room for hope to arise within us. As it arises, it is shared. No greater gift can be given in any season than hope.

~Phil Jones

*Help me wait the way you have designed me to, O God, humbly allowing space in which hope can grow.*

## **December 14th**

*"From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise."*

Philippians 4:8

Is there a secret to living a life filled with hope? Seek for the good and hopeful things in this world, and you will find them. When I am filled with despair and cynicism, it is when I am not looking for the good, but looking for the bad. How often do I go into a situation, expecting to be ripped off, expecting the worst, expecting hard times and that being exactly what I find? The more I complain about my circumstances, the more I hate them.

I am filled with the hope of Jesus when I look at the world around me for kindness, compassion, joy, because it is present everywhere. Recently I was filled with hope when my family had a stressful housing timeline, and an army from LifePath showed up to help us move. The men's retreat filled me with the hope of greater connection and honesty in our community, and the hope that laughter brings. I was filled with hope when I heard stories of how PrisonCare gives value back to lives where it has been stripped away. When I stop to think about it, our community is doing so much good, in my family's life and in the broader world, and I'm grateful to be a part of it.

~Ben Meeder

*Jesus, sharpen my eyes to see visions of your hope in your world, all around me.*

## December 15th

*"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good."*  
Genesis 1:1-4



When our boys were younger, we had a garden on the side of our house full of fresh veggies. The blueberries mostly got eaten by the birds, but we got to harvest all the lettuce, tomatoes, kale, cucumbers, and peppers that didn't get overtaken by weeds. In our country of modern conveniences and next day delivery, it was meaningful to us to have a little connection to our food. Matt would get the seeds ready and involve the kids in planting. Cooper would pick the sugar snap peas right off the vine for an afternoon snack. He still loves them, even though we now get them in a bag from the grocery store.

Have you ever watched a seed grow? It really is a thing of wonder. All that unrealized potential tucked inside a dry, hard shell, just waiting for earth and water and sun to bring it to life. It feels a bit like having a front seat to creation, and it fills me with hope.

Fast forward to this summer, with Amazon boxes by the door for the recycling bin, and I was struck again by how God breathes life in surprising ways. We were cooking dinner, and a couple of dry black beans spilled into the sink. We don't use that sink much, apparently, because a few days later there was a little plant peeking out of the garbage disposal. Cooper carefully pulled it out, sharing the joy of the discovery. While it wasn't the season for it to become a full bean plant, this is what grew!

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. May the light of Christmas, the greenery, the life all around us fill you with hope and wonder today.

~Jessica Sinarski

*Jesus, help me hold on to signs of life and light today.*

## **December 16th**

*"The Lord replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'"*  
Exodus 33:14

Greetings from the Hamilton County Justice Center! Winter seems to have come early here, even though we're in Southern Ohio, where the climate is very similar to Delaware. My daughter Allison mentioned about the advent messages and I told her that I really enjoyed them last year after getting a huge disappointment from the court in December of 2021. I had considered writing something about 10 days ago but I couldn't do it. Sometimes we feel the spirit move and sometimes we don't. I was on my morning stroll around my pod when I received some inspiration. I was contemplating spending the holidays in jail and feeling sorry for myself. But then I heard the still small voice that I've heard in my life enough to keep me going. The voice said, "He'll show up."

And I know He will. He's shown up repeatedly in the last 6 years as we've stood up to false allegations from multi-billion dollar entities and a jealous family member. We've seen Him in the smiles and tears of our children, in the love of friends and family, in the caring of lawyers, and in our hearts and minds.

The living God won't give you what you want all the time; the free will of other humans mess things up for us time and again. But the fruits of the spirit are there for us always, and for me, it starts with peace. When God gives me peace in the worst moments of life, I can then dare to hope and love despite my circumstances. When I heard from Him this morning it soothed my anxiety and frustration.

I hope that this Christmas season you will experience God's graceful presence and know at your core that you are not alone and you are loved. Wherever I spend Christmas this year, I know Jesus will be with me, just like He was with us on that first Christmas day so long ago. I will walk in peace and hope because He still shows up!

~John Snyder

*Lord, today I stand on the simple and astounding truth that you will never leave me.*

## **December 17th**

*"Let's think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let's not neglect meeting together..."*

Hebrews 10:23-4

As someone who has long struggled with depression and a penchant for pessimism, hope is a tough concept for me. If Emily Dickinson was right when she said "Hope is a thing with feathers," hope in my life has had its feathers clipped, so it can't soar and get me excited for something that inevitably will turn out terribly and leave me disappointed, *again*.

Send us out as a people known by love. Amen.

No, no, that's not where this ends, because, thank God, Jesus is hope fulfilled. When I struggle to find that hope, to feel a connection to the hope that is found in Advent, I have found myself turning to the words of others, who more easily connect with hope. Isn't that the beauty of community? When I am depleted, I can lean on someone who isn't.

If you are like me and struggle to have hope yourself, find hope in the other contributions in this packet. Hope is like warm sunlight: even a teeny bit of warmth can spread.

~Melanie Winters

*Lord, may I be humble enough to share in the hope of others when I am struggling, and generous enough to spread my hope around in times when I feel strong.*

## **December 18th**

*"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."*

Isaiah 43:19

When I read "hope" was the theme I thought "ugh I have so much more to write about disappointed hopes these days." (Yes, this is why traditions like advent reflections are so important lol) I had a whole list of hopeless feelings running through my mind... family conflict, seasonal depression, a lot of folks in crisis... Anyway, it was a dark moment.

And is it just me, or is it more natural to think of (and focus on) disappointed hopes? A moment of hopelessness is so viscerally felt. A hopeful thought is so much more ephemeral. It's for the future. It requires vision and action. The lightness in a moment of hope can often be overshadowed by the risk of failure and further pain at the loss of another dream. But worst of all, hoping for the wrong thing and getting what you hope for. I'm the queen of that.

I can't be trusted to hope for anything.

So I started to use "Deo Volente" (God willing) as my centering prayer. Sometimes I'll add something to the effect of "please God do not give me anything I 'want' ever again and just tell me in which direction to face and who to learn from and what to give and who to care for-in fact take my entire will, I don't want it."

I have found that when I put my entire hope in my path being revealed to me rather than grasping at a thing I thought I wanted, I get far more than I could have ever dreamed.

~Rachel England

*Jesus, right now in this moment, I trust you for direction.*

## **December 19th**

Psalm 121 says- *"I will lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?"* In my mind the verse has always read *"where does my hope come from?"* When I lift my eyes to the hills, to the heavens, it does give me hope. It gives me peace and joy. To see the beauty of Gods creation, to experience the sun shining down and clouds passing above the trees, to see the intricacies of nature-this all gives me hope.

~Britt Hernandez

*Lord, in this busy season, help me look up today and find hope in the beauty of your creation.*

## December 20th

*"...your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."*

I Thessalonians 1:3

I don't know what I'm hoping for. I am hoping hard, for sure, I just don't know what for.

This current pace is not something I can do for much longer. I don't want things to be like THIS any longer, but I'm not sure what they SHOULD look like.

I'm waiting expectantly for change, and I am taking responsibility for the pieces that I, myself, must choose to change, lay down, or pick up.

But I'm not asking God for anything in particular.

So...what does that indicate about whether or not my hope is in Christ?

When you're a fixer by nature, asking God for solutions to unsustainable situations often relies on **you** to figure out the best course before asking. Explore the options, weigh the pros and cons, discern it, then ask for it, like getting your boss to sign off on the project you worked on for months.

In this current season of life, my "fixer motor" has worn down. My "explore the options" operating system is no longer supported. Weighing my "pros and cons" has broken the scales. My "discerner" has shorted out. So I have no proposal to place on the Boss' desk. And yet I am not in despair.

I begin each day with a sense that what I do today matters, that I am loved, and that I have good things ahead. I just don't know what they are.

This vague, wordless sense of "something's gotta give," is perhaps the purest exercise of placing my hope in Christ to date.

~Sabrina Justison

*Lord, when we cannot fix things, may even our cry to you be an expression of hope.*

## **December 21st**

Depression and hope are often thought to be opposites – one cancels out the other, you possess one or the other but never both. However, I have found that hope is what sustains me through my depression.

*Psalm 42:5 Why are you in despair, O my soul?  
And why have you become disturbed within me?  
Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence.*

Hope allows me to call a friend, schedule an appointment with my counselor and take a walk on a sunny day. Hope is why I continue to get up each day.

On April 26, 1986, the No 4 reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant located in modern day Ukraine exploded, causing a plume of radioactive smoke to kill the nearby forest which is now called the Red Forest. Over the decades of studying the ecological impact of this explosion we have learned that the initial radioactive wave killed all life, including bacteria and fungi. The results are that many of the trees that died in April 1986 are still standing tall and dead today. Bacteria and fungi play a huge role in the life cycle of woodlands. They decay and decompose as well as create fertile grounds for the new life. Without this key element that forest is frozen in time.

Fungi is akin to hope, it comes in the dark and prepares for the future. If the earliest evidence of spring is the snowdrops and crocuses, then the hope of spring is the fungi that creates the space and adds the necessary nutrients to the soil.

Scientists in the Ukraine are re-introducing fungi to the Red Forest and have successfully begun to bring hope back to a wasteland.

Depression without hope is like the Red Forest, you will stay where you are; but the spores of hope spread easily and need little to take root. Even when we are without, we are never beyond hope.

~Kristi Meadows

*Lord, help me grasp onto the smallest glimpses of hope during dark moments, knowing that you are always at work to create life.*

## December 22nd

*"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night."*

Luke 2:8

Reading the Christmas story I am once again struck by how God reveals himself in specific ways that individuals are uniquely prepared and wired to receive and understand. God wants to connect!

Luke tells us that the shepherds were living out in the fields. That means they knew the night sky. If you've ever camped out or backpacked you know what I mean. And so God connects in a way they would understand- he brightens the sky with messengers from heaven. The shepherds get over their fear, find Jesus, and begin spreading the good news to anyone who would listen. That's what happens with God-connections.

God also used the night sky to connect with another group of people. This time it was some Gentile scientists. Astrology is the belief that there is a connection between astronomical phenomena and events in the human world. An unusually bright star (was it a rare alignment of Jupiter and Saturn as some believe?) was enough to compel these astrologers to embark on a quest of discovery- a quest that ended in worshipping God.

But don't miss the main point for us today. Sure, Biblical stories tell us what God DID- but they also tell us what he is DOING. Two thousand years later God is still connecting. The question for each of us is 'Can he get our attention?' The shepherds and the astrologers remind us that he will connect in a way we can each understand- but it requires open eyes, listening ears, and a heart that's willing to begin a most remarkable quest.

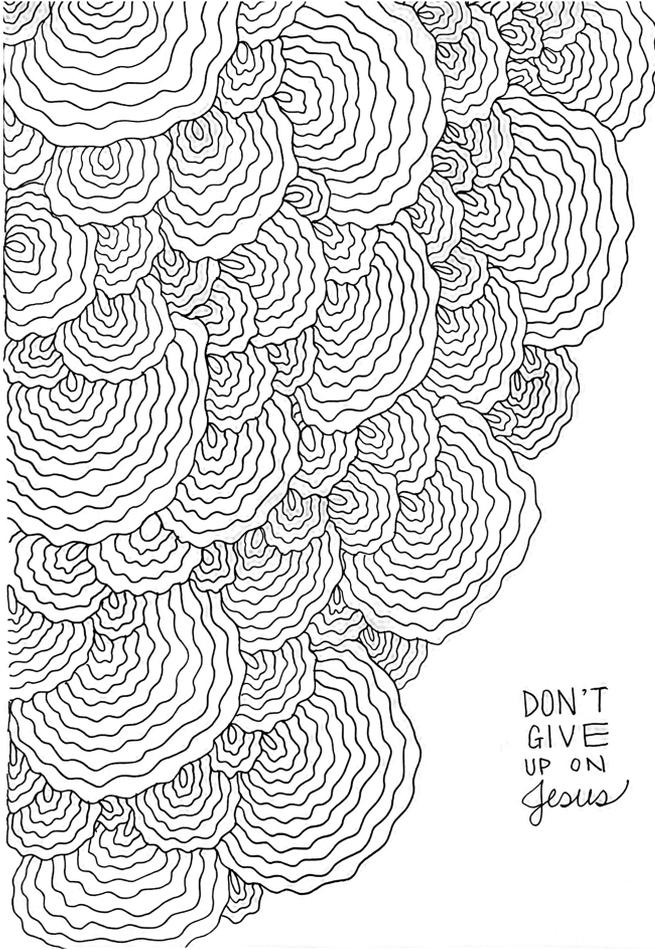
~Doug Miller

*Lord, I trust that you are revealing yourself to me in unique ways. Give me eyes to see.*

**December 23rd**

*"But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord,  
I wait for God my Savior;  
my God will hear me."*

Micah 7:7



DON'T  
GIVE  
UP ON  
*Jesus*

~Elisa Cottrell

*Don't give up on us, Jesus.*

## **December 24th**

*"She gave birth... and laid him in a manger"*

Luke 2:7

Like every family, the high holy days of the year are accompanied by some degree of ritual in our household. Thanksgiving dinner is at my parents' house, always. Easter Sunday always has the big Easter egg hunt – it's non-negotiable. We now have our traditions around Christmas too – fire in the fireplace the night before, lights off, Christmas music. It brings a sense of expectation and excitement, the little rituals.

That said, the most memorable Christmas from my childhood was the one we spent away from the family home, without the obligatory Christmas tree or the customary Christmas breakfast. We had a palm branch for a tree. We were by the beach, so we improvised, and it became the one Christmas we all remember.

In the last several years my children and I had to dream up new traditions, and the holidays have been challenging. Once the initial upset passed and things settled for a bit, new things emerged. These become traditions going forward, so long as we've been willing to embrace the new thing.

This year will be hard for some of us. Family members may have passed or moved away. We'll find ourselves in that weird limbo, in-between what was and what is emerging. Sometimes, we need to make things up on the fly. I'm pretty sure neither Mary nor Joseph thought "gee, let's lay the kid in this food trough," as if this was going according to script. They did it, though, and we still remember that bit of improvisation.

May we all learn to go gently with ourselves when confronting a less-than-ideal holiday season. Perhaps your act of improvisation today becomes part of the story tomorrow, for all the right reasons.

~Phil Jones

*Jesus, your cradle was a manger, you spoke to a storm to save the boat, and you died to bring us life. Help me trust your improvisational Spirit to guide me, as I navigate the challenges this season.*

