



**peace**

**Advent Reflections from LifePath Church  
2023**

*Welcome to the  
season of Advent*

....and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor,  
Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father,  
Prince of Peace.

-Isaiah 9:6

The messengers lit up the night sky in front of the shepherds, and they proclaimed:

*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward humankind."* What a vision for the world! God reigns, and peace and goodness come as a result.

It's ok if you don't believe that sometimes. That's kind of what this whole booklet is for. Advent is the season of looking up and looking out again, even if it's into a dark night sky. And this booklet is our chance to catch a glimmer of light in the darkness. It's a chance to renew our hope in a God who has come to make the world right.

And making the world right is the core concept of this year's theme. Peace, or *Shalom*, is a robust word in the Bible. Shalom means that wholeness is present. It means that what has been broken is being healed. It means that things are right. And things desperately need to be made right. In our hearts, our minds, our relationships, and our societies. These little stories from the people of LifePath are offered to help remind us that Jesus is our peace, and that Jesus came to bring peace.

But we don't do this in dishonesty or with airtight, perfect faith. You'll see that clearly on these pages. These readings are different than many Advent reflection books. They are not "curated"— they are direct submissions from you in our community. We've made sure that there are scriptures and prayers with each submission to focus our hearts, but the words and art shared in this booklet are not professionally written or forced to be something they're not. They are honest thoughts on peace, borne out of real wrestling with Jesus. Some will not fit your boxes. That's alright. The best gifts can never be wrapped up neatly anyway.

So as we enter this season of wonder and belief once again, we ask you to give peace a chance. Believe that another world is possible. Invite Jesus to restore what is broken... in us and in our world. Restoration is always possible when Jesus is 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 art.

*Jesus is coming. Watch and wait.*

## **December 3**

*"I have said these things to you, that in me you might have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."*  
-John 16:33

### **Pockets of Peace**

One of the features of my personality is "the devotion for the quest of peace" (a quote from the Enneagram Institute's Type 9 Overview). Peace in my home. Peace in my family. Peace in my country. Peace in my world. Peace in my inner spirit.

For most of my life, I thought keeping the peace was worth any sacrifice I had to make personally. As long as everyone else was happy, it didn't matter how I felt about it. This innate yearning for everything to go smoothly and without conflict has caused me quite a lot of inner turmoil.

And it seems right now, nobody is happy. There is war in the world. There is division in our country. There is violence in the streets. There is conflict within my family. And suddenly, there seems nowhere to look for the peacefulness that my inner spirit desires. So I have had to stop looking externally for what my internal soul needs.

I find it in being still and quiet before the Lord. No requests. No complaints. No words at all.

I find it when I touch a tree's rough bark and breathe in its fresh, oxygenated air.

I find it when I sit at my canvas and allow myself to play freely, letting go of the outcome.

I find it when one of my grandbabies drifts off to blissful sleep in my arms.

Even when there is turmoil and conflict in the world, I've found that I can curate pockets of peacefulness for my soul.

~Lori Kellogg

*Lord Jesus, show me a pocket of peace for my soul today, and let me rest in you.*

## December 4

*"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*

-John 1:5

I had an idea for this writing. "What is the first use of the word 'peace' in the Bible?" So I broke out biblegateway.com and landed in Genesis 15:15. Here God tells Abraham, *"As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age."*

Hmm. Sounds like a premature obituary to me. It seems God is trying to console Abraham for having to move from the place that God promised him, and for which Abraham has abandoned everything, to move down to Egypt...for a very long time. But it will be okay.

How does "Don't worry, be happy," or worse yet, "Don't worry, die happy," fit into a writing for advent? So, I clicked on the 'context' tab for some help. Genesis 15:14-16...*"But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation..."*

This didn't really help either. It sounds like, "Don't worry Abraham, your kids... and grandkids... and great grandkids... and great great grandkids will all be slaves, but it will be okay."

There is deep territory to unpack here but I will say this in short. Some of those most painful comments that have been directed toward me have been offered by people of faith at a time of deep personal loss. Surely, they intended to offer comfort with their words, but talk like, "God has a plan, all things work together for good, you'll grow from this, etc." can feel very shallow and, well, uncomfoting. Where is peace in that?

The holidays are a challenge for many people. It can remind us of loved ones lost. It can amplify our feelings that life isn't going as we dreamed. And when it's over we can feel lonely and broken. So much for Peace on Earth.

If nothing else this Genesis narrative tells us that God's plan for peace is way too complex to be broken down into simple soundbites on a Hallmark Card. As if God were saying right from the beginning,

"Abraham, life is going to get very dark, for a very long time. But I'll be with you." This is where Abraham's story is similar to the advent story, and to the larger life of Jesus' story: God's kingdom of peace WILL come, but don't be surprised if it takes way longer than you hope, that it will look nothing like what you imagine, and it will hurt like hell.

And I imagine it may be your story as well.

~Bill Heider

*Lord, thank you for walking with me in faithfulness, even when the night is dark.*

## December 5

*"The Lord brings strength to His people. The Lord blesses His people with peace."*

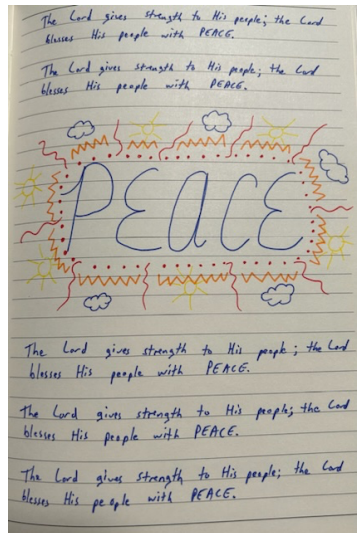
-Psalm 29:11

A few years back, I was dealing with intense panic attacks. I had two weeks between when the panic attacks started up and when I could get in to see my doctor to go back on my anxiety medicine. (I had gone off it at the end of 2019. Not great timing!!) I was *desperate* for peace, but it was nowhere to be found. I found the verse in the Psalms, and I started praying it, over and over again. The Lord blesses His people with peace. The Lord blesses His people with peace. The Lord blesses His people with peace. Then I remembered a strain of a song, just the line "What depths of peace." After a minute, the whole song came back to me. I focused on the lines "What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when strivings cease." Psalm 29:11 and the lines from "In Christ Alone" became my anchor. When my anxiety would begin to flare, I would sit and write those words. I drew them. I read Psalm 29:11 in every version. I listened to so many renditions of "In Christ Alone." When my mind was so so stormy, declaring these words helped me connect to the peace that passes all understanding that comes from our Yahweh: Shalom.

*In Christ alone my hope is found  
He is my light, my strength, my song  
This cornerstone, this solid ground  
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm  
What heights of love, what depths of peace  
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease  
My comforter, my all in all  
Here in the love of Christ I stand*

~Melanie Winters

*Lord, when my mind rages and tosses,  
bring me into the depths of your peace.*



## **December 6**

*"If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."*

-James 2:16-17

In thinking about how I would like Jesus to bring peace to our broken world, my first thought is that it would be nice if it was like Mark 4:39: "He rose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" Then the wind ceased and there was a great calm." But while I can continue to hope and pray that Jesus will directly or through other people (besides me) bring peace to the world, the fact of the matter is that *I* can bring some measure of peace to the world. I don't expect that I will ever be in a position to have a major impact on the world, but I can have an impact on the various communities I am a part of. I can seek peace with the people I encounter day to day and I can add my small effort to the efforts of others to affect larger change.

And so while I can continue to pray for miraculous peace and can anticipate the peace of the Kingdom, I can also choose to act for Peace today.

~Brian Givens

*Jesus, help me walk in both faith and action today, even in the simplest of ways. Make me an instrument of your peace.*



## December 7

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

-John 14:27

This year our family started our journey back to church. We are so thankful for the friends and family that encouraged us to take a leap of faith. We talked about it for so long and finally took that leap. Before our son was born, we had a difficult time finding a church that fit our needs, but also was where we could use our gifts in different ways. We have found peace in finding a community that is open, and Jesus centered.

It is easy to get lost in the world's idea or expectations of peace. Even when things around us feel uncertain from so many directions. I find peace in knowing that no matter the outcome God is there.

I am always amazed at listening to responses from children. I asked my son his favorite part of going to church and was sure he would mention the time in the gym before we start, or the time he is at Sunday school. His answer floored me. "The music room is my favorite." I asked for more information, and sure enough he loves coming into the auditorium to listen to the music each Sunday morning. I too enjoy that time and find peace in the wide selection of music each week and look forward to each Sunday to slowly get to know people more and more each time we come. God has used all of you in different ways to reassure my family and I that we are in the right place to worship. I will end with this; the series of sermons has been such a great way to end the year with giving clear paths to getting closer to God. Each pathway is important in finding peace especially as you work to get closer to God no matter where you are on your journey. May God's peace stay with you throughout the year.

~The Marsh Family (Frank, Gwen, & Desmond)

*Jesus, open our eyes to see the many ways You want to offer your peace to us and our world today.*

## **December 8**

*"Be still and know that I am God."*

-Psalm 46:10

In May of 1978, I made a retreat. Even though I had gone to church every Sunday my whole life, it was on that retreat that I first felt a personal relationship with Jesus. Reading the Bible, contemporary Christian music and talking about Jesus with people outside of Sunday service was very new to me. At the end of the first night we heard the song "Slow Down" by Chuck Girard. Every since then, Jesus has been trying to teach me to be still, to slow down and find Him in the present moment. That is where I can truly be at peace. Unfortunately I am a slow learner but fortunately, He is very patient.

Being still is hard for me. I can't quiet my mind, it just wanders.

I am good at reading scripture, journaling, and Bible study books. What I am not good at is sitting still and being with Jesus. I want to relax in His presence. I know that is the only way I can have true peace.

My prayer is that I learn to rest in the Lord and spend time with Him, truly being at peace.

~Barbara Padilla

*Jesus, lead me beside quiet waters and restore my soul today.*

## **December 9**

*"And when he had made a whip of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables."*

-John 2:15

A dear friend of ours sat in our living room yesterday and told how she had a physical response when someone in a meeting referred to her and her community (she is Black) as "marginalized". "I have never *felt* marginalized," she told us, "I haven't *been* marginalized. But they see it that way. And it bothered me. I felt it in my body."

We tend to talk about marginalized people and communities in the passive tense, as though it just happens. So, I wonder "Who marginalized them?" Who benefits from the systems and rules that ends up with some people pushed to the margins? And I know. As the song goes: "Hi. It's me. I'm the problem, it's me." And how can I find peace before everyone is whole, has what they need today, are free to live and love without want and oppression?

We relate to characters in Bible stories. (Sometimes I'm the prodigal son trudging slowly home, sometimes I'm the father, looking expectantly down the long road.)

We know the story of Jesus driving out the money changers from the steps of the temple. He knows they will not find peace while profiting from the poor and the other worshipers. He knows that they stand in the way of the seekers finding peace. So much so that Jesus physically pours out their money and drives away their livestock.

What if I am the moneychanger at the temple? The one benefitting from the plight of the poor, and profiting from their desire for shalom, standing in their way with my hand out-stretched?

What if I am the man who "came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17).

How can I find peace until I have done everything I can to bring peace and wholeness to those I have taken part in marginalizing? And how can I drag these treasures through the eye of that needle to find peace?

~Rob Seward

*Lord, help me see how my own journey toward wholeness is intertwined with the those around me, and lead to me to compassion.*

## **December 10**

*"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

Ahhh that peaceful moment! You've been running around all day, here and there, with a few more stops to go. The sidewalks are crowded and you wonder where other people are headed, what is propelling them forward. The girl in front of you is walking really slow, so you take a lunge around to the left. You continue on your way, counting one... two, don't step on the crack. Yes, you still avoid them when you can. Ok, the kids will be home at 5pm, it will be 10 minutes drive, 10 minutes back to the parking lot, 20 minutes in the bookstore, 5 walking from the drugstore and 10 inside there... you plan your moves back to this very minu... Stop! A peaceful moment! You look across the street and see the little neon orange hand. You smile and take a deep breath, relax your shoulders and tilt your head to the right and then the left. You let your eyes close while you inhale again. You love this moment. No matter what else is going on, you just stop. You don't have to keep pace or decide if now is the right time to run across the street. You are safe. And you wait. Breath in and out. Feel your chest rise and roll your shoulders back. You smile and thank God for this moment. The orange hand turns into a white walker and with one more deep breath you step off the curb and are back on your way.

~Lacey Leatherwood

*Lord, slow me down enough to breath deeply today, filled with your presence and perspective as I go about my day.*

## December 11

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you."*

-John 14:27

Peace is a profound notion. It is said that when things are calm, we barely notice. Discord has the funny habit of drawing all focus toward itself. Peace is so much more than an absence of discord – it is a natural state. It is a state of things as they are meant to be.

How are things *meant* to be? Ah... there's an awful lot of room in that question for no small amount of disagreement. By "meant to be" I mean a state wherein we are truly free to act upon the world from our truest selves. When there is perpetual strife, no peace at any turn ever, then even the strongest among us will crack.

Ideally, *shalom* is both an inner state and a social condition. Under true *shalom* conditions, justice is a foregone conclusion. War is never an option. No one ever goes hungry. No one says goodbye before it's time. There is no want. All needs are met. *Shalom* is vast... and has yet to be truly consummated in this broken world.

Shepherds on a hillside two millennia ago witnessed legions of angels declaring peace to the world at the arrival of the Christ. Peace is the province of Christ alone. Peace is the state wherein Christ is known. As the Apostle Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 13, we know in part, we see in part. *Shalom* is the vast reality that is so clearly articulated in the contours of our longings and is, as such, still so painfully unrealized in our reality.

So every year, Christ is born again in our midst, and peace is again proclaimed. We declare it again, as countless generations before us have, that *shalom* is the promised state the Christ left for us, gave to us. Not as the world would give: a conditioned peace. No, the peace of Christ *is the condition*. We all sense what it is *meant* to be like. We all know it isn't here. We all want it, aspire toward it, the *shalom* that we somehow sense and have yet to fully experience.

~Phil Jones

*Lord, give me hope and strength today to walk in the already/not yet promise of your shalom.*

## **December 12**

*"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

I frequently forget about God. I spend much of my day just living my life, either lost in my head or wrapped up in caring for what's around me. I spent much of my life feeling guilty about what seemed like a lack of spiritual attunement.

So this fall's message series about pathways to Jesus was really powerful to me; I love the idea that we can practice being more intentional and spiritually aware, in these very specific ways. And then over time, new neural pathways form in our brain, the fruits of the Spirit ripen and mature, and we get better at life with God, or at least more familiar and reflexive. It's not a formula, but it's a hope.

I've known the folk song "Simple Gifts" since childhood, but it struck me differently when I sang it a few weeks ago during our week of simplicity. The phrase, "To turn, turn, will be our delight/ Til by turning, turning we come round right," reminded me of dancing. I like to think that every time my awareness comes back to God, no matter how long it's been, I don't need to view it as a failure. Instead, I can think of turning my attention back as the next step in the dance.

~Tori Meeder

*Jesus, your grace and invitation keep me moving forward in new growth.  
Keep leading my steps.*

## **December 13**

*"They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. "Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace."*

-Jeremiah 8:11

"No justice, no peace." That was the chant that stood out during our march in downtown Newark a few years ago, protesting the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

That stuck out to me. Peace on earth can't really happen when there isn't justice. An absence of conflict is not the same thing as true peace. I might not have the same problems that people of color face, but unless they are freed from those problems there is not peace.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the Peacemakers because they will be called the sons (and daughters) of God" (Matthew 5:9). If I claim to be a follower of Jesus, I need to be committed to making peace happen (reversed Peacemaker... see what I did there?). It can't just be passive and being "nice." It **MAKES** peace happen. It might be by stepping in when you see injustice occurring and asking some uncomfortable questions. It might be by donating excess time and money that you have to make someone else's life a little more just. It might just be by stepping out and protesting when you see injustice happening.

When we topple injustice we will see peace!

~Adam Winters

*Jesus, help me learn how to actively live out your calling to be a peacemaker in our world.*



## **December 14**

*"So they got into a boat and started out. As they sailed across, Jesus settled down for a nap. But soon a fierce storm came down on the lake. The boat was filling with water, and they were in real danger. The disciples went and woke him up, shouting, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and the raging waves. Suddenly the storm stopped and all was calm."*

-Luke 8:22-24

"When the storms of life are raging, stand by me..."

Many years ago I was looking for a simple new song to learn to play on the piano. I found a psalter in my hymnal that seemed easy enough for me. The words to be sung are, "When the storms of life are raging, stand by me." At first I heard this as the song of someone crying out to God. And that was comforting, firmly believing that God hears us and longs to care for us.

Years went by, life changed, and I started to hear this song differently. It was as if God was the one singing to me. A reminder that when the storms come He is already there and I should stand by him. This also felt right, to know God loves me and calls me to him.

Time marched on and the more I hear the song the more I hear both voices singing as a call and response, a beautiful duet. I sing "when the storms of life are raging, stand by me". And God replies, "Stand by me." And both are true at once, I can call out for His strength and comfort, and He will call back, always there, as my strong tower. Whatever the storm may be, we are never alone. God is our shalom.

If you want to hear the full song, my favorite version is performed by Reverend Timothy Flemming, Sr. linked here on Spotify (or use the QR code):

<https://tinyurl.com/stormsoflife2>

~Kim Givens

*Lord, you invite me to security in you, whatever my storm is. Thank you for your peace.*



## **December 15**

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

-Psalm 27:13

Peace is a funny thing. When I was younger, I thought peace was the equivalent of full clarity and the complete lifting of any sense of weight. While life experience has shown me that this may be true in certain circumstances, I learned earlier this year that it need not be true in all circumstances.

In January, I had the privilege of traveling to Hawai'i for work. It came at an interesting time of life for me. In the months leading up to my trip, I had been worn flat out. Much of this weariness was intertwined with the struggle of taking on a new position at work that I wasn't fully prepared for. I had spent much of the latter part of 2022 dealing with imposter syndrome, wondering if I was truly set out for the career path I had chosen. And those challenges continued in Hawai'i. My time there was immensely meaningful, but also frustrating and at times bewildering.

I still remember those last few hours in Honolulu. I was walking on a busy beach, trying to "make the most" of my time in "paradise" before I hopped back on the plane back to the continent. Yet, it was hard to focus on the beauty around me when my mind was working through all the disappointments of my work trip.

Before I knew it, I found myself spilling my thoughts to God, letting Him know all that I didn't do and couldn't do. And He answered – not with a clear refute or a complete untangling, but rather with simple statements:

"I see you."

"I am with you."

"I have a purpose for you."

It's hard to describe how overwhelming simple statements from God can be to take in. I stopped in my tracks, feet sinking in the wet sand, and just let the tears flow.

What's curious, though, is what I *didn't* feel in the moment. I didn't have complete clarity. I didn't have the immediate removal of weight. Yet, there was still the sense of knowing that I would be okay – both in my present and my future – and it's hard to describe that in any other way than calling it peace.

~Ian Yue

*Jesus, thank you for being my peace, even when it's nearly impossible to describe .*

## **December 16**

*"In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."*

-Psalm 4:8

From the start of this year, there was high hope and anticipation for the things I was hoping to accomplish all year long. I had my little vision board with my goals neatly tucked into categories and niched down accordingly. I had it hanging up, and diligently referring to it for several months. At some point I took it down. I am not sure why. Maybe it was the impatient spirit with which I was approaching this road map. Or maybe it was the fact that a lot of it was beyond my control and me putting it down on paper was just a measly attempt at having some semblance of control. So like most people who begin the new year with new year resolutions and end up abandoning them a little while later, I forgot all about my vision board or at least tried to. It was always in the back of my mind, like a judge watching my every move to see if I was actually working towards my plan. Nonetheless, I have never been more glad that most of the plans I have made are beyond my control and that allowed me to actually live without succumbing to analysis paralysis. Reminding myself that God is the author of it all has been a source of peace.

I have seen so much of what I was hoping for come to life. I have also had my neatly organized categories become muddled and intertwined. I have seen growth in areas of my life that I never even realized needed renewal. The biggest thing for me was being granted the freedom to actually have a life here in this country. The freedom to leave the safety of my home and not be cautious of every single person I meet because one little mistake could send me thousands of miles away from my loved ones. The freedom to actually smile and converse with people without the shadow of my legal status always looming in the background. A huge weight was lifted off my shoulder and with it came a peace so tangible I feel it every time I take a walk, or drive to the grocery store or see how Hawi's face lights up when we go experience something new like a different playground with 'fancy swings'. I will always know this peace and what it means to me and how heavy and alone I felt without it.

As in any case of we-get-some-we-lose-some, I have also experienced the loss of a relationship with my eldest sister and this shook me to my

core. It deeply breaks my heart every time I think about her and wonder about the kind of relationship I hoped we could have. Even in this state of brokenness I find rest in God's peace knowing that He alone makes me whole. It may be in physical and tangible ways, or in dealing with the hard emotions and sometimes it is in the solution of legal problems that cascade into other areas of life. And in some ways I am learning to experience God's peace by living it and proclaiming it over my life. I do not think I have ever felt completely whole but I believe I am now more than I was yesterday and I continue to believe in God's continuous transformation of my life. That even when I may not be feeling at peace, I have His peace that's freely given and I do not need to be perfect to receive it. It already lives within me! And reminding myself of this here is the true challenge.

~Elizabeth Corkum

*Jesus, thank you that you alone are the author of my peace.*

## **December 17**

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you."*

-John 14:27

This year's advent theme of peace and shalom immediately took my thoughts to those who are incarcerated. An unlikely word association for sure.

Perhaps it was triggered by a recent 'Chosen' episode of Jesus reading from Isaiah that he had come to proclaim good news to the poor, bind the broken hearted, free the captives, and release the prisoners. But everyone knows that poor and broken hearted are literal terms but captives and prisoners are metaphorical. Hmm....

Perhaps it was reading about the incarcerated preachers Paul and Silas in Acts 16. When the officers finally came to release them, their parting words were "Go in peace."

Perhaps it was some of the recent comments I've received from my incarcerated 'pen pals':

- "Thanks for taking the time to think about me- someone so removed from your inner circle."
- "You are doing things that remind me there is so much to live for. There are things I still aspire to do."
- "Over the time I have been incarcerated, I've witnessed four suicides. So I am a strong advocate for those who do not have the strength to carry on."
- "I pictured myself on a hike with you guys. I have a good imagination."
- "Thanks for building me up to keep my face in the Bible."
- "My mission is to help others become their best selves. Helping others helps me to keep my spirit aglow."
- "You're my brother in the faith and my only friend."

I'm discovering that it doesn't matter if the captivity is concrete that separates or brokenness that isolates. Peace can break through both. This year I have extended peace to and received peace from those in captivity.

Hebrews 13:3 - "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners..."

~Doug Miller

*Lord, as we remember your coming, do not let our hearts grow calloused to the suffering of others.*

**December 18**

*"The Lord bless you  
and keep you;  
the Lord make his face shine on you  
and be gracious to you;  
the Lord turn his face toward you  
and give you peace."  
-Numbers 6:24-26*



~Art piece by Adam, Emily, & Jonah Winters

*Lord, draw me unto your simple promise of peace throughout my day today.*



## **December 19**

*"In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together;*

*the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.*

*The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,*

*and a little child will lead them all.*

*The cow will graze near the bear.*

*The cub and the calf will lie down together.*

*The lion will eat hay like a cow.*

*The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra.*

*Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm.*

*Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,*

*for as the waters fill the sea,*

*so the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord."*

-Isaiah 11:6-9

I've been thinking about moving through the world in a more light and playful way. This can sound insensitive and out of touch with reality, which is, in my experience, often serious and sad and wrenching. So I don't mean playful in a tone-deaf way. I mean playful IN SPITE OF reality. As an act of resistance or defiance to the forces of death and destruction.

I suspect that if my joy is permanently extinguished by hardships, then they've won. I'm not light and playful all the time, but I also can't ignore the pull to discover and expand what brings me joy. If I'm able to sometimes lean into playfulness, lightness, gentleness, peace, awe, and care, then the hope is to use this energy to care for those around me and perhaps inspire them to do the same. It's a contagion of the right sort.

For me, what gives this inspiration are the images of ultimate peace found throughout the Scriptures. The wolf will lie down with the lamb. Trees that don't lead to curses, but whose leaves are used for the healing of the nations. People living in such close proximity to God that God will wipe away every tear.

I don't need to understand every nuance of theology to be inspired by these metaphors and visions. I don't need to trust that everything will work out perfectly in every situation for me and my loved ones. I just

trust that, as Dr. King said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." God's spirit has been whispering inspiration for thousands of years of a future that sounds like peace, reconciliation, and shalom. In the light of that hope, that all will ultimately, eventually be well, I can find moments of playfulness, rest, peace, and hope.

~Tori Meeder

*Jesus, thank you that in a hard and complicated reality, you still lead my heart to hope and lightness.*

## **December 20**

*"So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another."*

-Romans 14:19

This autumn's sermon series at LifePath "Pathways: 11 Practices for Deeper Life with Jesus" has landed deeply for me.

I learned that worship happens whenever we gather and share: on Sundays, in triads, at meal communities, in service together, at the Freedom Fund Banquet, at the White Ally Workshop. even in the men's group playing sports. Mydudes!

I found the messages on prayer and on fasting to be practical and instructive. I learned that prayer and fasting can be directed and specific and have real if unexpected and unintended results, sometimes drawing us closer to people we need to connect with.

Other parts of it have lingered on my heart through the weeks. The message about submission really struck me, in that I don't always have to be right, to have the last word, and to persuade others to see things my way. I still do those things, of course, but I sometimes remember I don't have to. There is so much freedom and room to love others in that pathway. I remember to listen and find the parts of others' points of view that I do find to be true and we try to sort out the truth of things together. I have learned that simplicity and an undivided heart frees me when I can put God first.

I have learned much about scripture this autumn, through the message on the topic In late October, and Duane's teaching of the Bible overview (tl,dr), and Keith's Life Seminar on Women, Leadership, and the Bible.

When I was just out of high school and still finding my way as an adult, I remember longing for a group of friends who were honest and curious, humble in our ignorance and seeking the truth of this life through all the avenues and writings, the pathways, available to us. This was not the group I found in haunts of my youth.

Yet here in my later years I have found such a gathering of seekers in all of you reading this. I expect the last message in the series "Soul

Friendship" will address this, but we have been bid to not look ahead. Still for all of you seekers after the truth in soul friendship here, I am so grateful.

~Rob Seward

*Lord, help us keep learning all the ways you are drawing us toward wholeness together.*

## **December 21**

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

-John 14:27

Peace – needing it; searching for it; and feeling it – has been a theme for me for several years. The world may view peace as the lack of conflict, trials, or tribulations. I have come to understand that God's peace is something different – it passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

Jesus' words in John do not promise that we will not have hardships. I have certainly experienced those. I have experienced family illness, deaths, job concerns, etc., as have most of us at some time in our lives. Instead, He tells us to not let our hearts be troubled and to not be afraid, in spite of these hardships. The only times that I have not felt troubled or afraid during trials and tribulations has been when my eyes are on Jesus. I am spending time in Bible reading and prayer. At times that I have felt overwhelmed (and have taken time to reflect), I have realized that I have neglected my time with Jesus.

One of my favorite hymns is "It is Well With My Soul." This hymn was written by Horatio Gates Spafford after his children were killed in a shipwreck (after suffering the loss of another child due to illness and great financial loss in the Great Chicago Fire). He was able to write the words "it is well with my soul" despite all of these tragedies and hardships. My personal challenge is to have this kind of faith and to remember that the Lord gives us peace that passes all understanding.

*"Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with you" (2 Thessalonians 3:16).*

~Pam Connelly

*Jesus, thank you that your mysterious spirit meets us in a way that nothing else can.*

## **December 22**

*"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."*

-Matthew 5:4

The holidays can be a time of mourning for many. May this poem bring you comfort.

### WE REMEMBER THEM

At the rising sun and its going down;

We remember them.

At the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring;

We remember them.

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer;

We remember them.

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of the autumn;

We remember them.

At the beginning of the year and when it ends;

We remember them.

As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us as;

We remember them.

When we are weary and in need of strength;

We remember them.

When we are lost and sick at heart;

We remember them.

When we have decisions that are difficult to make;

We remember them.

When we have joy we crave to share;

We remember them.

When we have achievements that are based on theirs;

We remember them.

For as long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us as,

We remember them.

—Sylvan Kamens & Rabbi Jack Riemer

~Anne Marie Pedrick

*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.*

**December 23**

*"We do not know what we ought to pray for, the the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."*

-Romans 8:26



"Feel a Prayer"

~Artwork by Lori Kellogg

*Lord, I know that I don't need words to pray from my heart. Receive my heart's groanings today. Amen*

## **December 24**

*"Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments."*

-Deuteronomy 7:9

This summer I was blessed to go on a "bucket list" trip visiting a bunch of our National Parks in Utah. Several of them are designated as International Dark Sky Parks - particularly fabulous places to see amazing amounts of stars. Several nights my intrepid friend and I ventured to the darkest places we could find, sometimes freezing, sometimes hoping we wouldn't find a mountain lion or other uninvited guest, always expecting to see something extraordinary.

One night early in our trip we found ourselves at the brink of Bryce Canyon trying hard to avoid using the flashlights on our cellphones. We were also trying to get as close as we could to the edge without tumbling almost 800 feet to the ground. Once our eyes adjusted to the darkness and we felt secure on our feet, we looked up and saw more stars than I usually see at home in an entire year! Wow!!! I was awestruck!

After awhile, I found myself hearing God's promise to Abram to make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. I like to think I've always appreciated that promise, and the way God honored it, but seeing all of those stars, more than I could ever count, brought that promise to me in a whole new light. Or should I say dark?

It gave me such a sense of peace to know that our God, who created all of that and has been with those of us who choose to journey with Him from the beginning of time, knows me and cares about me. I am so grateful for that peace and wholeness that can only come from God.

~Kym Smythe

*Lord, the story of your faithfulness puts my heart at rest. Thank you for your ongoing care through the years.*





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