



# The Longing

Longing for Hope, Joy, Peace  
and Love in these times.

2020 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

GREATER  PORTLAND  
BIBLE CHURCH



The Christmas season can bring many different sentiments to each of us. For some, it can bring excitement for the numerous traditions that we celebrate. For others the demands of the season can be stressful as you start to organize the shopping, family and friend events, and the many dinners you will have. Others may struggle in this season with bad memories that resurface from past hurts and pains.

No matter where we at, we long for Jesus to show up to bring Hope, Joy, Peace, and Love in our lives and our world.

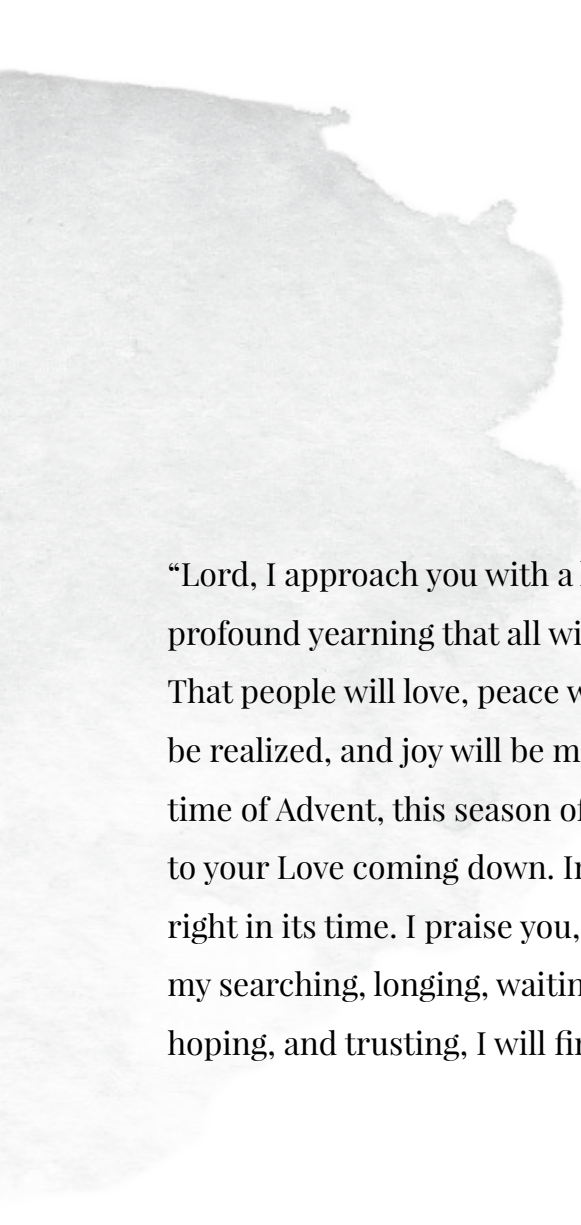
Alas! There is Good News! That good news is Jesus has come! During this Advent season we rejoice that Emmanuel has already come as the Christ child. The longing cries of “Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel” have been heard and have been answered.

Something special about this Advent Devotional is that it was put together by creatives within Greater Portland Bible Church. The hope is that we, as a church, would go through these daily devotionals with our families, small groups, or loved ones. Our desire is that we would come together to lean into the Hope, Joy, Peace and Love that Jesus has given each one of us.

So gather around your tables, your sofas, or your favored chair with your favorite warm drink, and be comforted that Christ has come and is with you always.

Blessings,

Pastor Greg



“Lord, I approach you with a heart of longing; a profound yearning that all will be made right. That people will love, peace will come, hope will be realized, and joy will be made complete. In this time of Advent, this season of preparation, we look to your Love coming down. In you, all will be made right in its time. I praise you, Lord, and know in my searching, longing, waiting, believing, knowing, hoping, and trusting, I will find you.”





By Lara Lunsford

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*If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. Psalm 139:11-12*

I’m a gal who likes a good plan. Sometimes my list-making and calendar-marking drives my husband, a self-described “jump and figure it out on the way down” kind of guy, a little crazy. But all that planning and preparing gives me something to hold onto, helps me feel secure.

When I graduated college, I had a plan that included two years of service in rural Zambia as a Peace Corps volunteer. I waited for seven months post-graduation until I flew halfway across the world to start my service, and I entered into a life that was at once both slow and unpredictable, simple and challenging. I absolutely loved it. Then, ten months into my service an incident occurred (the details of which are a story for another time), and I was on a plane back home, my time in Zambia cut short.

It might seem trivial, this change of plans, but all of a sudden I found myself without something to hold onto. I became bitter, jaded, and depressed. And I kept asking God over and over, “Why?”

This shift in life occurred at the beginning of the Advent season. As a child, I loved Advent for all the brightly lit candles and little presents my parents gave to my sister and me each Sunday. But as an adult, it took on very new meaning. At 23, I found myself being overcome by the darkness within myself.

**My joy was kaput.  
Then God broke into my world.**

And I stepped into His story. I lit the candles. I read the prophets. I walked with Mary and Elizabeth and Israel, and I waited for Emmanuel. I started believing that God is always at work beneath the surface, that God is coming to save me even before I can see Him. Through this practice of acknowledging my longing for something more, God shifted my thought process and my question became, “What?” What was God doing in the waiting? What was my new life trajectory? What new adventurous path was God leading me down?

The miracle I experienced through the loss and the darkness was the discovery that Jesus was with me even in Sheol, even in the depths of my distrust and despair. During that Advent season, God saved me and restored my joy with his unfailing faithfulness.

May your joy be ignited and rekindled even in the darkness as you move through the rhythm of this season, remembering that your God is near.

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**Monday, November 30, 2020**

By Sara Bettinger

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*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.*

Isaiah 60:1-2

Dust, rubble, debris. Languishing bodies and souls. Prosperity turned to poverty and favor turned to disgust.

There had been so many years of plenty. It seemed it would last forever. Other nations rightly thought twice before attacking, and when they did, they knew they needed to bring their full force for any chance at success. Many people came to shelter and to live, even as laborers, in the robustness of the Kingdom of David. God blessed his people and made them a light to the nations. An example in the midst of nations and peoples who worshipped many man-made gods, “This is what it looks like to serve the one, true God!” their blessed existence proclaimed. God promised to continue to care generously for them if they remained faithful to Him.

Now captivity. Exile. Ruin. The prophets had warned them that if they served other gods, there would be consequences. Not only the consequence of injustice flourishing in the land but the consequence of capture and losing that land. Their only souvenir was the last glance they caught, through tear-filled eyes, of their smoldering cities as they were led away, prisoners.

What did they think about as they looked around at their new surroundings? Were they cut to the heart, suddenly aware of how wayward they had truly become? Were they indignant? Were they surprised that God didn’t give them victory over their captors? Were they too devastated to do anything else than grieve what they lost? Had hope been completely extinguished?

There would come a time, however, when they would be restored. The light was coming, like the sun rising, turning night to day. And the very people who had been unfaithful, humiliated, struck-down, were going to be like the moon, reflecting the light of God’s glory to the world. God was going to make all things new. A rescuer was coming. There was and is still hope.

Open our eyes, Lord, to see how you’re shining and bolster our hearts, Lord, to expect to see your light.

hope

By Richard McElroy

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*Seek the LORD and his strength;  
seek his presence continually!*  
1 Chronicles 16:11

I remember the loneliness. Endless tasks completed and more things to do ahead of me. I yearned for significance. My heart ached, even as I knew my daily life helped and provided in small ways.

The land, the sky, the space where I sat and stood, the things yet to do were seemingly my only companions. My speaking, the conversations, only an answer to the chattering sound of raindrops falling. I cried out to you in my despair.

You heard my prayer and cry. You heard me from your holy temple! The clouds gave way to stars-bright and shining. A song of heart-praise lifted out of my soul, “I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; God hears me!”

And now today, you’re placing me within the company of your people! The feelings of yearning to make a difference persist. Years have passed, but, today, I anticipate our gatherings. Old songs of the soul and new notes of praise pulse through my being. I anticipate declaring, “Sing to Him, sing praises to Him; tell of all His wondrous works! Glory in His holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice! Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually! Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles and the judgements he uttered, O offspring of Israel his servant, children of Jacob, his chosen ones!”  
(1 Chronicles 16:8-13)

*How does your yearning for significance play out in daily life? Do you talk to Jesus about your place in him and the song of your heart?*



By Jane Lewis

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*‘Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed.’ says the Lord, who has compassion on you.*  
Isaiah 54:10

Oh, most Holy and Righteous God, how faithful and good you have been and continue to be to me. I am so unworthy of your loving kindnesses and your blessings, and yet you bestow them upon me continually.

Even though I don’t always see or feel your presence in the midst of the moment I am in, especially when it’s a scary or painful time for me or for those I love, when I look back, I do see you. I see you carrying me and carrying those I love. I see you working and providing in ways that only you could have orchestrated.

Your ways are so far above my ways. And you are always faithful. Faithful in loving me in the very ways I need to be loved. You do not waiver in your promises. You are my constant. Your love transcends everything.

I’m humbled as I remember that you have given us everything we need. You have given us the ultimate gift. “For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6) Your love came down in a surprising, astonishing way. Your love knows no bounds. Your love surrounds always and everywhere. Your love saves and your love sustains. I can truly sing with all my heart, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King!”

love



By Wayne Williams

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*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace  
among those with whom he is pleased!*

Luke 2:14

The angels said that because a Savior had been born, there would be *shalom* on earth. *Shalom, salaam, aloha*, or peace, in whatever language you say it, means fullness of life, profound contentment regardless of circumstance. Peace is a rest of heart, mind, and will that comes from divine assurance that all things will turn out for our good, because God himself is pleased with us.

“Let there be peace on earth” we hear. No war, no terrorism, no violence, no conflict, and certainly we all long for that. But that’s not the peace the angels announced. We don’t have this kind of peace, *shalom*, by thinking peaceful thoughts or trying to avoid conflict.

Peace on earth is a consequence of the Christmas gift of peace. It came wrapped, not in colored paper and ribbons and bows, but in swaddling clothes. A Savior was born! You cannot have peace on earth until you have the peace of God. And you cannot have the peace of God until you have peace with God. And that’s what the Savior was born to do, to make peace between a righteous God and unrighteous you and me.

Jesus lived his life on this earth at peace, in *shalom*, always in full assurance that the pleasure of the Father rested on him. At the end of his life, ever the giver, Jesus said to his disciples, “My peace I give to you.” Never again need you worry about how God feels about you. Because the Savior was born and because of what he did, you can live your life at peace, in full assurance that the pleasure of the Father rests on you.

*Lord Jesus, God of shalom, teach me to trust in your pleasure with me and so to live my life at peace, even as you lived your life here. So very Amen I pray, in Jesus’ holy and loving name.*



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Friday, December 04, 2020



*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

John 3:16

Before the world was, before the foundations of the deep were laid, Love, Love rang out and broke the silence. His Spirit moved across the darkened void. Before the dry land appeared, Love longed to be shared and nothing, no nothing could stop its force.

Love moved across the face of the deep, then He called out for the dry land to appear. “Let us make mankind in our image,” He said as He knelt down at the newly formed soil.

Love’s perfect and scarless hands reached into the warm soil and formed man, with care and perfection He crafted His masterpiece. But before He breathed His first breath into His creation, He knew His masterpiece would one day take His breath away.

But Love could not be stopped, Love could not be hidden. Love could not forget us, Love could not reject us. When His masterpiece hid in fear after believing a lie that was meant to divide His creation from His Love, Love searched for us, found us, and covered our shame.

He could not forget us, so He became one of us. Silently, Love entered the world, in a manger He lay. Vulnerable and helpless He came to save the hopeless. Love became a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He took the darkness, the emptiness and became our brokenness.

But His creation, His masterpiece didn’t want Him, couldn’t care less to know Him and rejected Him. He became our human frailty and died like one of us.

But Love could not be stopped, Love could not reject us who rejected Him, Love could not forget us. Love could not be buried, Love could not remain hidden. So Love broke through and opened the grave and conquered hell once and for all. Love broke the curse of death so that Love could pursue us, find us and embrace us and remain with us.

For He so Loved us, so cherished us, so wanted to commune with us, that He sent His one and only Son to die for us and take our place. So that whoever believes that He is our Love, our Savior, and our sacred romance shall not perish, but have everlasting life, united with Love forever.

love

By Lee Ballard

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*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.*

Luke 2:29-32

The Bible doesn't tell us how long Simeon waited, but by tradition and implication, it was a very long time. It's easy to imagine that he received the Holy Spirit's revelation when Roman sandals first pounded through the streets of Jerusalem. If so, that would mean that Simeon chafed under a tumultuous occupation for some six full decades before seeing the fulfillment of God's promise.

I wonder if the promise of God was enough to keep him from doubt and inner turmoil during those long years of waiting. It's a safe bet that Simeon understood God's plan. After all, he heard it with his own ears. He learned the stories of the coming Messiah; he knew his theology. I expect there were times when he found little peace in such knowledge alone, when the cares of the world, the frailty of body, the endlessness of injustice pressed in on his soul. Yet, he served. He prayed and fasted, sacrificed and loved in a Jerusalem filled with troubles and groaning.

And then, he saw with natural eyes what only his spirit understood. That baptism moment—when Simeon rose from the turbulent waters of longing and rejoiced, the promised consolation in his arms—changed him. It was the beginning of the end. He then knew that Israel and the world at large were finally in safe hands, and, after his long term of service and devotion, it was finally time for him to rest in peace.

By Joyce Wachsmuth

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*Let your unfailing love surround us, Lord for our hope is in you alone.*

Psalm 33:22

What is hope? Living in times of uncertainty can leave us feeling hopeless. We can wake up with the hope that the weather will be better, our health will improve, our relationships renewed, or our life circumstances would change. We were on a trip recently on a plane, and I was hoping everything would be safe and the plane would land safely! Hope comes in many forms.

The definition of hope is, “a desire accompanied by confident expectation.” (American Heritage Dictionary) What are you hoping for today? In whom is your hope? We can hope for many things, but truly our hope is in Him *alone*. When we put our hope in Him *alone*, we can be at peace with Him, and, though our circumstances may change or never change, we can rest in His everlasting arms of love.

The phrase “surround us” with his unfailing love is like a blanket that wraps around each of us. We are cuddled and protected by His love physically, emotionally, and spiritually. His mercy and love are new every morning. His love never changes and is not conditional on how we behave or think; especially not dependent on the choices that we make. His love is unconditional, which means he loves us despite ourselves. And that kind of love produces a hope that does not disappoint.



hope

By Heidi Sellick

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*For the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2*

When you imagine joy do you picture the Pixar sprite from *Inside Out*? Or maybe Joyce Wachsmuth's Hawaiian ukulele band's twang? You probably don't imagine the gritty, bloodstained brow of our Savior the night before His murder.

The author of Hebrews claims that “for the JOY set before Him, Jesus endured the cross, despising its shame” (Heb. 12:2). Jesus was filled with many emotions the night of His arrest in Gethsemane: fear, anxiety, despair, *and joy*.

This reveals two truths about joy: 1) Joy and depression are not mutually exclusive emotions (Scripture describes Jesus feeling “sorrow unto death” Math. 26:38), and 2) Joy is *strong*.

Hope carries us through life. But joy, joy carries us through death into resurrection. Joy gave Jesus the strength to endure the cross even while He recoiled from the shame, sunk under the desertion of His friends and Father, and slumped under sin's weight.

Jesus' joy was *us*.

Jesus knew that every second He let His blood pool at His feet our redemption would become possible. Every drop of blood was a tear of gratitude. Every splinter, a shout of thanks from the lips of His beloveds. Relationship with us infused Jesus with a joy which conquered death.

You are Jesus' joy. But is Jesus your joy?

Nehemiah writes, “The joy of the LORD is your strength” (8:10). Many theologians have wondered at the wording. Does it mean God's joy is our strength, or our joy in God is our strength? Both are grammatically possible in the ancient Hebrew. Perhaps God left it that way because both are literally true. Most likely, our joy in Him is our strength.

I wasn't blessed with exuberant joy. But I have learned by experience that Scripture is true, *being* with God is the greatest joy we can experience. King David declares, “In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps.16:11).

May we seek to *be* in the presence of Joy this Advent. We don't have to search far; He is Emmanuel, “God with us.” In Him we can find the joy we long to attain.



By Greg Lunsford

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*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Philippians 2:4-8

My wife, Lara, loves a quote by Mother Teresa, “Love, to be real, it must cost-it must hurt-it must empty us of self.” When I hear this quote, I often do a quick self-assessment and measure whether I am living in this way. I go through some sort of self-made check list as to justify myself and feel good about who I am.

However, thinking on this quote considering the Advent season and Emmanuel, God with us, coming into our world brings me to a screeching halt. Jesus stepped off his Kingly throne to pursue the lost, the unloved, the rebel, the sinner, you and me.

This is Love. This is the arrival of Love. That King Jesus would not look to his own interests but rather the interest of God the Father and us the sinner. Jesus displayed us a love that ultimately emptied himself. A King that became a servant. A King that fought for us and died for us.

This is Love.

Jesus loved us in such a way that he gave himself up to death on the cross. Jesus loved us in a way that hurt. Jesus loved us in a way that emptied himself.

In many ways we still long for this love. The wonderful thing about the Advent season is that we now celebrate what has already come. So today, rejoice in the Love of Jesus, which has already come and will remain forever.



love

By Wayne Williams

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

Romans 15:13

Hope, a living and sure hope, is the heartbeat of Advent—and the God of hope wants us to *abound* in hope, not cross our fingers, not settle for Plan B, or merely hold on for a better day.

Hope is knowing that since God came to earth in the birth of Jesus, fulfilling *all* the promises about the coming Messiah, he will certainly fulfill *all* the promises he has made about this life and the life to come.

He is the God of *hope*, not the God of *hype*. His promises are not political vote-getting. He doesn't do spin. His words are substance, not image. What he says, he means. What he says he will do, he will do.

He promises us all the grace we need for today, tomorrow, and for the rest of our days in this world—until the Second Advent, the Day Jesus returns.

And on that Day, those who know Jesus will experience the fulfillment of the *Ultimate Hope*, the Hope that makes every other hope and every disappointment, discouragement, and frustration pale in comparison: to see Jesus, to be with him in-person, face-to-face, and so to be like him, transformed finally into all that he created us to be.

*Lord Jesus, thank you for being so very patient and generous and hope-instilling. We choose to set our hope on you and your promise of sufficient grace for today, and the fullness of grace we'll know at your Second Advent. So very Amen we pray, in Jesus' holy and loving name.*



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Monday, December 14, 2020

*“As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!” For thus says the LORD of hosts, “Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. I will shake all the nations...and in this place I will give peace.”*

Haggai 2:5-7a, 9b

During the Christmas season, there is a particular spot in my house that evokes a feeling of utter peace. In all the hubbub and to-do lists of the holidays, this spot beckons me to sit, to quiet myself, and to be still. Whichever space the Christmas tree resides in, with its twinkling lights and yellow glow, feels calm and peaceful. I always find myself inclined to sit on the couch near its glimmer, curled up with a book or cup of tea in my own little place of refuge.

That kind of fabricated peace goes poof as soon as I step away and see all my dirty dishes or unfolded laundry; it dissipates when I get cut off in traffic or deal with an irritable person; it is dashed when I face a conflict or loss or disappointment. The kind of peace that is a product of décor or atmosphere or circumstance is like mist—it disappears as quickly as it is formed.

In this passage from Haggai, God warns the people of Israel that all they know will once again become topsy-turvy. In the same breath, God says to have courage because his abiding presence will create peace. Similarly, Isaiah the prophet foretold of one who would come and establish a new kingdom for the people of God and one of his names would be Prince of Peace. He would be a person who would embody peace and rule with peace, who would institute *shalom* and wholeness and harmony as a way of being and living.

***When peace is found in a person—one who is faithful and steady—no amount of chaos can compete.***

And when that person is Jesus—the One who has the power to calm the wind and waves with his voice—all the mess of my life cannot overcome me. Jesus has the power to speak peace beyond all understanding into any circumstance I face—any storm that is wrecking me, any mountain that can’t be moved, any ground that is unsteady and quaking. Peace, truly lasting peace, is ushered in with the reign of the Prince who comes in glory.

May we stay attentive in wait for the Prince of Peace. May we keep our ears attuned to hear Jesus’ voice in our lives speak, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.” May we surrender our worries to the one who cares for our every need. And may we keep our eyes open for the Babe who comes in the still of night to overcome the darkness.

By Jessica Heimbegner

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*When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.*

Matthew 2:10

I remember at Christmas time every year my family would unbox the nativity scene. As a child growing up in suburban, West Linn, Oregon some 6,941 miles from Bethlehem, I saw those three beautiful, majestic wise men as the most relatable figures.

The wise men were blessed by God with a longing to find the King of the Jews and worship Him. I admire that these *wise*, powerful foreigners didn't send messengers. Their longing could only be fulfilled by making the journey themselves. God gave them the sign of the star, and they pursued it.

I wonder what they felt when they arrived in Jerusalem, to a people that had the Savior of the world in their midst and had no idea. Arriving before King Herod, they asked, *“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him”* (Matthew 2:2). King Herod and all of Jerusalem were disturbed by them. Yes, it was prophesized Bethlehem would be the birthplace of their savior, but why would these travelers know? The wise men didn't give up. They poured over what they knew and where to look.

Then it happened, the star led them right to Jesus! *“And, behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. **When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy**”* (Matthew 2:9-10).

They went crazy over our amazing God communicating with them and leading them right to Jesus. I long for that crazy joy in being a part of what God is doing today through Jesus, too. Let us be active and in line with His purpose so that we too may “rejoice exceedingly with great joy” together!



By Evangeline Christian

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*But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity...And He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And they will remain in safety, because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth. This One will be our peace. Micah 5:2, 4-5*

Backwater Bethlehem. “Too little” to be included. But at least it had a “useful” function, despite its littleness. It was the place that raised the temple sacrificial lambs.

How fitting, then, that it would be the cradle place for God’s Lamb. A little place for a supposed little Lamb Whose “goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”

Also, how fitting of God to announce the advent of the final sacrificial lamb to, of all people, shepherds; the very ones in charge of temple sacrificial lambs.

And how so like God to weave all these threads of prophecy into a paradox called the wisdom of God. The sacrificial Lamb, proclaimed to those in charge of temple sacrificial lambs, will die to become a Chief Shepherd over all, giving life, peace, security. The Lamb who is a Lion reigning forever.

I’m a bit of a geek when it comes to tracing the thread of Jesus in Scripture. Like a kid in a candy store, I’m excited to read verses that point to Him, even in “obscure” places like the Minor Prophets.

It’s the same reaction I have when something in science (like quantum mechanics – told you I’m a geek!) shows something of His glory. When I see it, there’s a childlike piece inside of me that jumps up and down with joy shouting, “He’s REAL! I knew it! I knew it all along!”

These Jesus threads, spanning centuries are markers to help us identify the Messiah, and their rich symbolism points back to a sovereign God behind it all. No human mind could have conjured up all of this.

I invite you to ponder these three verses in Micah. Look at how Micah describes this One who comes to rule and to shepherd. Can you see it? Can you see *Him*?

This Christmas, may the One who shepherds us in the strength of the LORD and in the majesty of the name of the LORD, this One who is our Peace, be more real to us than ever. May our hearts jump up with joy, shouting, “He’s REAL! I knew it! I knew it all along!”

By Richard McElroy

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*...Christ Jesus has made me his own.*

Philippians 3:12

Thank you for loving me! I love you so.

When I wander, unknowing, confused, angry and so lost, you call to me. You know my name! You see me in my darkness. I don't know my right from my left. I choose so many things and wander so many dead-end paths. But then you come and take me on your way!

You call me...you know my name. I love you so.

I long for your forever hold. All my struggle and fight within myself recedes like the morning dew, banished in the warmth of your sun. I love you for holding back the thoughts and ways that keep me from yourself. And in their place, their loss, I get you, Jesus.

I get to know you as my rescuer. I gain you!

I love you today, anew.

I love your invitation to live out of your resurrection power. I love your arm's embrace, holding me safe and still, above the swirling struggling world. I want "to show you my love" as I deny the calls for anything less than you!

You are my prize. I love that you treasure me. That we will meet face to face one day!

*What are all the ways you see Paul's love for Jesus and what he gained in this text?*

"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...that I may know the power of his resurrection. That I may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:8-11).

*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*

Philippians 4:6-7

I must admit, there are times those verses annoy me terribly. It sounds too simple, “don’t be anxious. Just pray, and all be well.” Uh huh. Sure.

For someone who struggles with anxiety, this passage presents the most incredible hope. My being longs for peace with every literal shallow breath, nervous and upset gut, and taut muscle of my body. My spirit yearns to be at rest, perfectly at ease with God, myself, my work, my family and friends, and the world.

Often, though, I feel like this promise of God’s is a tease, because I’ve pleaded with God in prayer over the worries and anxiety of my life countless times and yet remain in what feels like bondage to them. So, where’s the promised peace, Jesus?!

Oh, but I miss the point. God isn’t a genie in some magic lamp that I can rub, declare my insufficiencies to, and “poof” they are gone forever. I want a fix...I forget the relationship. And it is the relationship that brings the life of peace.

How long does a branch survive once you’ve cut it off the tree? Its “veins” immediately start to close up to conserve water. It knows it does not have enough within itself to prosper. It’s source of life was tied to the tree. Wood separated from a tree is considered dead because it is removed from the source of its nutrients.

So it is with me. I am dead, apart from the tree, which is Jesus. I am not capable of living anxiety-free without being constantly connected to my Savior. My sin-nature, and all the forces of this world, conspire against me to bring only death. Jesus alone brings life.

And therein lies the great hope. Peace IS available to me, and so is every other good thing found in Jesus when I stay connected to him. It is that continual union that makes it possible.

I’ll likely always wrestle with anxiety. However, it is my caution light, my warning bell, alerting me that I need to reconnect to the trunk of that beautiful Tree of God’s right away. It is something I can also bring to God in *thanksgiving*, for, through it, he uses it to bring me back to Himself. Praise God and amen!

*peace*

By Rithu Lowry

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*This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

1 John 4:9-10

I have lived most of my life desiring to be loved.

Let me explain: I was born to Hindu parents in India. My dad... an angry and bitter man. My mom... a submissive and lonely woman. I grew up in a world full of hatred, shame, fear, and loneliness. Over time, my desperation led me down a very dangerous path of self-destruction and self-loathing. During my eight years of drinking, I would cry out to God, “Why do you hate me?!”

He heard my cry.

And I fell in love!

Jesus saved me from death to life; from fear to faith; from hate to love; from unforgiveness to forgiveness; from fear to boldness; from loneliness to companionship.

Thank you, Jesus, that you came to save me. Never again do I have to feel angry and lonely. Never again do I have to live in fear. Jesus is the One who pours out his love for me, satisfying my longing to be loved. Jesus meets my needs and fulfils my deepest desires. His love never fails!

**Reflection:** How has Jesus saved you? What does His love look like in your life?



By Wayne Williams

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*And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold,  
I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.  
For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,  
who is Christ the Lord.  
Luke 2:10-11*

Someone has said that joy is an extreme case of happy. But it’s even better than that.

Happy is what a child feels when they open their Christmas gift. Joy is what the child’s parent feels as they watch the delight of their child.

Happy is what you feel when you open a gift and it’s just exactly what you wanted. Joy is what you feel when you think about the love and thoughtfulness of the person who gave it to you.

*Joy is not the mere sensation of pleasure — it is a pervasive, constant, and unending sense of well-being that flows from vision, peace, righteousness, and hope. True joy is robust — even including outright hilarity! We can experience the joy of being in God’s kingdom even in the midst of suffering and loss. (Dallas Willard)*

Joy is a gift. The angels said it was given by God. It is not generated or manufactured by us. We don’t experience this kind of joy by putting on a happy face or thinking happy thoughts or pursuing pleasure.

The angels said you will have joy because now there is a Savior, and because of who that Savior is; he is Christ the Lord. Jesus is the true Christmas gift and the only gift that gives true joy.

*Lord Jesus, you knew of the misery and pain of human existence from the very beginning. And yet you came to experience it for yourself. But not just to experience it, you came to remove it and to replace it with the joy you have with the Father and the Spirit. Thank you for the joy we can have now and the hope of the fullness of joy in your presence one day. So very Amen we pray, in Jesus’ holy and loving name.*

A large, stylized, cursive word "joy" in a light gray color, positioned in the bottom right corner of the page.

By Janet Nordlund

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*God's Spirit is on me.  
He's chosen me to preach the good news to the poor,  
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set the burdened and battered free,  
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"*  
Luke 4:18

Jesus' words give me HOPE because of what they say about the kind of God he was born to be, and because they express some of the deep longings of my heart.

I value action and long to be a passionate catalyst of God's power and protection to move for the vulnerable, oppressed, or bound. Jesus' words here are nothing but action on behalf of all who need it, which is a source of great HOPE expectant and realized!

The Christmas story is about GOD SHOWING UP to get the job done and to do all the relational action in person. This is "work" that only He can do, and our great HOPE is that he is doing it now and forever!

Consider prayerfully listening a few times to the Christmas carol, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" and, "Mighty is the Power of the Cross" this week.

How do you hear the hope of Jesus' words from Luke 4 in these songs? How does Jesus want to bring hope to you and through you this week to those who are waiting for good news, pardon, sight or freedom from their bonds?

**Hark, the Herald Angels Sing** (I LOVE verse three in light of Luke 4)

<https://tinyurl.com/yy4rglnc>

**Mighty is the Power of the Cross, Chris Tomlin**

<https://tinyurl.com/yxe33q9h>

## “THE LONGING”

By Jane Lewis

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*For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given...And he will be called Wonderful  
Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Isaiah 9:6

Oh Lord, please show me you love me, show me a sign.

*“For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given.”*

Oh Lord, I don't know what to do. Please lead me, guide me, show me.

*“Wonderful Counselor”*

Oh Lord, I feel so weak, I have no strength left within me, the world is falling apart.  
Help me, help us.

*“Mighty God”*

Oh Lord, can I truly put my trust in you? Will you leave? Will your love end?

*“Everlasting Father”*

Oh Lord, who will bring calm to my mind, and wholeness to my heart and soul?

*“Prince of Peace”*

Oh Lord, you have shown me over and over that you provide in every way. My heart leaps and my soul rejoices as we prepare and celebrate this season remembering the greatest gift ever given. With hands held high, my voice rings out, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King!”

**Merry Christmas!**

*joy*

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**Friday, December 25, 2020**



For he satisfies  
the longing soul,  
and the hungry  
soul he fills with  
good things.

Psalm 107:9

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