

The background is a textured stained glass design. On the left, a large, glowing candle is depicted with a flame in shades of orange and yellow. The rest of the background is composed of various abstract, organic shapes in deep blue and teal tones, separated by dark, thick outlines.

*2020 Advent  
Devotional*

DUNWOODY UMC

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 29

# It's a Wonderful Life...of Hope

By Rev. Matt Stone

*“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.”*

**ISAIAH 43:18-21**

Is there a more hope-filled season than Christmas? Although this is a season full of nostalgia, decorations, family and warm feelings, these don't always point to the kind of Hope toward which Christmas is really directing us. Especially in the 2020 edition of Christmas, we need a Hope that endures, sustains and empowers us to move forward in faith (not backward in fear).

Therein lies the power of our Christmas celebration.

While we certainly look back to the birth of Christ our Savior, the Christmas season is more properly oriented toward the future. In remembering the birth of Christ, we remember that God is not yet finished with this world. Jesus began a new work of God but that work is not yet finished. God continues to 'do a new thing' in our midst; God continues to make paths for us where there are no paths; God continues to provide living water that quenches the thirst in our souls.

This Christmas, may we look forward to the day – and live in Hope – that Christ will return to complete the work of redemption and set the world right!

## **Prayer**

Loving God, As we start this season of Advent, give us Hope. Help us see the beauty of Christ's birth and be filled with the Hope you gave us through him. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

As you look toward Christmas, reflect on Romans 15:13: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30

# Standing on the Advent Rock

By Sharon Gilbert

*"I, the LORD, have called you for a good reason. I will grasp your hand and guard you,  
and give you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations,"*

**ISAIAH 42:6**

*"He said:...since you are my servant...I will also appoint you as light to the nations  
so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

**ISAIAH 49:6**

Christmas is a time to reflect on our wonderful life and the wonderful year. However, it is a challenge this year with COVID-19. I usually send a letter to friends and family highlighting the events of the year and of each family member. Yes, it's mostly a bragging/update letter because it really just has the good highlights. As I begin to write it, I hope there is something "good" to write.

As we enter Advent, we are reminded to consider the story of Jesus' birth and anticipate it. Isaiah mentions many times about the foretelling of the Servant (ch. 42-53). Isaiah is sending a message of hope to the people through the Servant.

God's covenant came to be as we read Luke and his words of the birth of Jesus. God is the One who keeps His promises. That is our hope. And on this rock, I will stand.

## **Prayer**

Dear Heavenly Father who always keeps His promise, Help us to remember that faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see. As we look back on life, we always can see your hand in everything. Thank you for being our rock, our salvation and our hope. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

On the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1

# Hope Overtakes

By Rev. Keith Lauder

*“...but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.”*

**ISAIAH 40:31**

Charles Wesley had a remarkable way of expressing in song what we feel deep in our hearts. In these days of COVID-19 and quarantine, it is easy to feel our hopes slipping away bit by bit. We can certainly identify with the Israelites frustrated by their seemingly interminable wait for rescue.

So we sing with Wesley “Come thou long expected Jesus. Free us from our fears and sins. Let us find our strength and consolation in you. You are the hope of all the earth!”

But how do we know for sure that salvation is coming when large gatherings to sing the old Advent hymns are not going to happen? For me assurance comes from reading, rereading and reading again God’s promises in Isaiah 40: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says the Lord. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”

When we close our eyes, take a deep breath and meditate on the promise of these verses, we too can feel hope overtaking despair and light breaking into the darkness.

## **Prayer**

Come, thou long expected Jesus. Come.

## **Today’s Thought**

Read, reread, and read again the words of your favorite Christmas hymn to find hope this Advent season.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2

# Hope IS a Strategy

By Randy Pilkenton

*“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**

You may have heard the saying “Hope is not a strategy.” Maybe you hear it in business or sports or in other areas of life. Perhaps this is good advice in an area or a time where certainty is possible and planning carefully can lead to the result you desire or practice can make perfect.

In 2020 those seem like very distant, hard to imagine circumstances. So much is disrupted, altered – or shut down.

Hope, in fact, is always a strategy – for now and for every day. Because if we reflect honestly on our time here in this world, we know that no plan or attempt at control provides a perfect guarantee.

The only guarantee we have now, have had in the past and will have for all tomorrows is God’s love for us and an eternal relationship with Him that we strengthen through our faith, through our love for others and through our prayers.

Our hope should be that as we act in these ways and pray the Holy Spirit fills us up with the joy and peace we need.

## **Prayer**

God of hope, Fill us with joy and peace, overflowing with the Holy Spirit, and guiding our minds and hearts to love others as fully as you love us. Amen.

## **Today’s Thought**

Hope is definitely your best strategy for today and always!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3

# Welcome Hope

By Jesse Fulmer

*“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in”*

**MATTHEW 25:35**

My parents loved the idea of welcoming strangers in. Maybe it’s why this verse in Matthew is one of my favorite passages from the Bible. I often think of how my parent’s idea also can be us welcoming in Jesus.

I researched the meaning of this verse even more this year as we all were forced to stay indoors and home. I took great comfort in this explanation from worldvision.org and the hope it gave me during these difficult times: “God wants our lives to overflow with mercy, love, and compassion — the marks of His kingdom. As followers of Jesus, we have a choice: respond to unsettling realities in fear and withdraw, or follow Him in responding to the greatest needs of our day with love and hope.”

With that, I hold on to hope and love in this challenging year and will keep my “candle on” to welcome Jesus into my home and heart.

## **Prayer**

Jesus, May the Hope of Advent open my eyes to the light and love you bring into my life every day. Amen.

## **Today’s Thought**

How will you welcome Jesus into your home today?

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4

# Hope Gives Strength

By Chris Faklaris

*“Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.”*

**ISAIAH 40: 28-31**

No matter what age or background you are, 2020 will go down as one of the most challenging and memorable years of our lives. For me, it recalls a number of vivid images only described in the Old Testament...plagues, killer insects, damaging storms...among others.

Countless times the Bible teaches us the concept of Hope through the prophets, scripture lessons and directly from Jesus. It is through the strength of the Lord that we can hope even in these most challenging times. We can gain strength and confidence for our lives.

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord, We know that you are always with us even though during tough times we may forget or think you are absent. Please help us be reminded of your presence and allow us to find strength in you. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

As you move through this Advent season, take a moment every day to focus on the Hope that God gives us.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5

# Talking to an Angel

By Rev. H. David Melton

*“When Zachariah saw him (the angel), he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.” (v.12-15a)*

**LUKE 1:5-25**

It's time for Christmas programs. Even in 2020, we will joyfully celebrate the coming of the Christ child. Traditionally, many churches have a living nativity with shepherds, wise guys and angels, angelic choirs of children and youth, Mary and Joseph, baby Jesus, live animals – everyone who wants one will have a part. Yet, I've never seen anyone play the parts of Zechariah, Elizabeth or the crowd praying outside the Temple gates.

The angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a son, whom they are to name John. Then Gabriel describes what that child will do. “He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him (the Messiah), to turn the hearts of parents to their children.” (v. 16-17) In every age of history, asking parents to do what is best for their children is a pretty good guide of what is best for all.

Luke is the only Gospel writer who foretells the birth of John the Baptist. Luke links for us the announcements, births and lives of John and Jesus. Both were announced in advance by the angel Gabriel; both births were unnatural or miraculous; and, the angel tells the parents what to name their sons. But, there also are contrasts. John was born to an aged and sterile woman, Jesus was born to a young virgin girl; John was given a name meaning “God is gracious,” Jesus was given a name meaning “Savior”; John was to prepare the way for the Lord, Jesus was the Lord who would come and then reign forever.

God's purpose in bringing John and Jesus into the world through humanly impossible births is to demonstrate vividly that nothing is too hard for God. God was and is in control and something stupendous and unexpected happened and continues to happen in God's world.

## **Prayer**

Dear loving God, Again and again you come to us, preparing our hearts for those moments when you once again become more real in our lives. Bless children and families who will lead us through the Christmas story this year. Turn us back around to what really matters – that our hearts are prepared to receive you. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

During this blessed season, may we remember that God promises each of us a miraculous gift. May we proclaim the coming of the Christ Child.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6

# It's a Wonderful Life...of Peace

By Allen Whitaker

*"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid."*

**JOHN 14:27**

This passage has always been one of my favorite scriptures. I've gone back to it time and time again during hard times in my life. When my mother passed over seven years ago, the minister quoted this verse. It was fitting, since "peace" was one of my mom's favorite words.

PEACE. Just saying that word out loud gives me a sense of calm. Jesus understood the importance of peace. He promises his disciples that he will leave them with PEACE. And He is literally called the Prince of Peace! During this Advent season, I hope you will remember to focus on the PEACE of Christ.

May you remember this promise, "Peace I leave with you," during the craziness of everything going on around you. And may the Prince of Peace be the center of all you say and do this season!

## **Prayer**

God, Please give us a peace of mind and calm for our troubled hearts during this Advent season. We thank you for being our Prince of Peace in our lives and in our world! Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

Peace is a gift from God.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 7

# The Peace of the High Way

By Margaret Gallagher

*“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

**ISAIAH 9:6**

Isaiah foretold of The One with many titles, including “Prince of Peace.” By definition, a prince is the ruler’s heir, often overseeing a parcel until inheriting the entire kingdom. Peace, defined by the Hebrew shalom (a state of calm & tranquility) and the Greek eirene (unity & accord) is the fruit of being of one mind with Christ. The Prince of Peace rules over the tranquility brought about by our restoration to God, which goes hand in hand with restoration to one another.

The culture plays to our innate desire to win or “be right” by telling us to scream “MY way or the highway!” Scripture extends a different choice: “my” way or the High way of Christ. And, I can’t afford to be fooled; justifying my way with a verse doesn’t necessarily make it correct. Like the story of the Blind Men & the Elephant, there’s the probability that “my” understanding may be true but incomplete, meaning my way may not be the High way.

To bring about the Kingdom, I am called to constantly refine my understanding, including actively listening to others whose interpretations and perspectives may not match mine. The scriptural call is to travel the path that leads to where the Prince of Peace reigns.

## **Prayer**

Precious Prince of Peace, in a world of discord where so many clamor to prove “I’m right,” give me a humble, unassuming heart. Lead me along Your High way of peace. Amen.

## **Today’s Thought**

Am I living and interacting with others in a judgmental way or under the reign of Prince of Peace?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8

# A Time for Peace When There is Little Time for Peace

By Sean Taylor

*“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”*

**JOHN 16:33**

This time of the year is so busy. We seem to have so many things to get to. First, we have to win the decorating contest in the neighborhood, aka Clark W. Griswold! When that stress and arguing is over, it's time to decide who will come for a holiday visit and then prepare for the guests. Add the demands at work, getting things done by year end and looking at next year's budgets. Then consider the company Christmas party and the school Christmas pageant (which I am sure will somehow be done via Zoom this year). Once all of this is checked off, you need to find a way to do all the online shopping and time to bake.

You may want to go ahead and schedule time with your psychiatric friends in January because you will need it.

So with everything going on, how in the world will you find the time to experience what the Advent season is all about? We spend so much time and energy on getting things done and getting from place to place and thing to thing, there is little time or strength left to stop and simply think about and experience the season.

Is it any wonder that the shepherds were the first to hear about the birth of Jesus? They were “living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night.” It must have been quieter with their flocks than it was with the crowds in town who'd arrived for the census.

In the midst of our hectic schedule at Christmas, we need to take time for wonder, awe and peace.

So how will you spend your time this Advent season? Will you take time to go outside and look up into the sky? Will you pause, process and give thanks for all that God is doing in and for you?

How will you make room for peace this Christmas?

## **Prayer**

Father, Have us slow down so that we may experience the peace of knowing you. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

It is hard to find peace when we don't take the time to seek it.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9

# Peace on Earth

By Wendy Schmitt

*“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,  
‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’”*

**LUKE 2:13-14**

You know the song by heart, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me...” At DUMC, we’ve ended our services with that song for many years. We sing it a little quickly as we gather our things to head to Sunday School or breakfast, and often I could be seen swaying back and forth trying to make my kids laugh.

I did some searching and learned that the song was written in 1955 by Jill Jackson-Miller and Sy Miller for the International Children’s Choir out of Long Beach, CA. Jill was inspired to write the song after she discovered what she called “the life-saving joy of God’s peace and unconditional love.” The song has come to be considered a Christmas song, likely thanks to country singer Vince Gill. It’s worth a quick visit to YouTube!

I hope you are humming this song to yourself today and letting peace begin with you (as the song says) and in you as you appreciate this Advent season.

## **Prayer**

Loving God, Open our eyes to how we can find peace in the busyness of this Advent season. Help us to pause and realize that we are wrapped in your love. Amen.

## **Today’s Thought**

Find God’s peace and unconditional love as we celebrate this season.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10

# Peace and Love in a Small Gift

By Cheryl Dunbar

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*

**JOHN 3:16**

Advent is a special season. While in the Bible it is a time for waiting – waiting for a Savior – the Messiah. Today we do anticipate and wait for Christmas and recreate in our selves the tiny baby that was born on Christmas Day.

Each Advent and Christmas season we remember. We remember the birth of that tiny baby sent by God. The reason for God sending this gift was His deep and propounding love, and God’s intent was to show us the way for a rewarding and fulfilling life.

The gift of Baby Jesus brings peace, joy and love. It’s the love that sticks. Maybe it’s because my mother helped me learn today’s verse as a child. I’ve never forgotten it and it is my forever, favorite Bible verse.

During this holiday season, and especially this year, we need to remember this gift that was sent to us all. We can worship, sing carols, help those who are needy, send cards to the lonely and elderly. There are many joyful things and ways to praise God during this spiritual and glorious time.

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord, Praise to you for sending your gift as a tiny baby this Christmas. Love did come down at Christmas. It is in your name we pray. Amen

## **Today’s Thought**

Peace doesn’t have to be quiet or still. Shout for joy and clap your hands as we celebrate Christmas.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11

# Peace Might be a Challenge

By John Sivak

*“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance (patience when being provoked), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”*

**GALATIANS 5:22-23**

Where is Peace today with the worries of our lives taking center stage? Our jobs, our kids, our spouses, our health, our finances, our chores, the economy, climate change, and on and on.

If we focus on Christ, we are promised the fruits of the Spirit, and Peace is one of those fruits.

We need to quiet our minds. Simply recognize all the things stealing our Peace. Ask God to help with the struggles and then rest our minds.

Here is a challenge for you: Make a decision to experience peace now!

Take a walk, breathe the fresh air, listen to the birds, hug a family member, view a sunrise or a sunset, close your eyes and say “Thank you Jesus.” Explore the things that are simple and available right now for you to be closer to Christ.

If you feel blocked and cannot do this right now, ask God to show you what is preventing you from at least a moment of peace.

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord, Quiet my mind. Show me what it is that is stealing my Peace. Allow me right now to experience your “peace that surpasses all understanding.” I love you Lord and desire a closeness that offers a continuous peace that rests my heart, mind and soul. Amen.

## **Today’s Thought**

Conclude this Advent week of Peace by saying the Peace prayer of St. Francis of Assisi out loud: Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; Where there is injury, pardon; Where there is doubt, faith; Where there is despair, hope; Where there is darkness, light; and Where there is sadness, joy... Divine Master; Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12

# It's a Wonderful Life... of Joy

By Rev. Calissa Dauterman

*“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’”*

**MATTHEW 1:18-20**

My whole adult life, I've been told there's an important difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is shallow; joy is profound. Happiness is temporary; joy is more tenacious.

For me, the biggest difference between happiness and joy is that joy is complicated. Happiness needs things to be just so, but joy can break through even the messiest of situations. Joseph must have known this as he heard the voice of God's messenger speaking through his dream. Just when he saw his future crumbling, all of his plans going awry – he receives a good word, and his shame turns to hope. Joseph is able to find joy in the promise of a family, to find joy in the love of a partner, to find joy in God's favor.

## **Prayer**

God of abounding joy, Teach me to open my heart to all of the ways that you show your love. Help me to look in places I might not expect to find it, and encounter your presence with joy. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

My hope for each of us this Advent season is that we might allow joy to break through our chaos and our concern as we prepare to welcome the presence of Christ.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13

# A Gift from God

By Sid Linton

*"...for my eyes have seen your salvation..."*

**LUKE 2:30**

Joy comes in lots of flavors. From a 5-year-old's squeal when a package of sparkly stickers and magic colors is opened to the equal but quieter joy of her watching grandparents. And there's the joy of Simeon in Luke when he saw the long-awaited 8-day-old Jesus, "*...for my eyes have seen your salvation...*" More on him later.

Here's a joy you may not have thought of – a great joy of our church has been the parade of ministers and staff that have passed through its halls and into our lives. Recall just the senior ministers alone. Norman Manning sang from the pulpit as well as he preached from it. Melton McNeill followed and was recently eloquently eulogized like no one else because he had no equal. Hugh Cauthen challenged us for a time, and Wiley Stephens graced us for over 20 years. Wiley's colleagues paraded in to show their respect, an indication of the big shoes he left to fill. Determined and deeply devoted Dan Brown wore those shoes with dignity and grace.

The parade continues. We are overjoyed with Phil Schroeder, and we joyfully give him the loyalty we gave to his predecessors.

The associate ministers and staff also make the church greater than the sum of its parts. They're too numerous to name, but take a moment to remember the many who served you well and brought you joy. For me, it's two joy-filled people: David Melton and Mary Ruth Solem. For years, through good times and trying transitions, they have been the glue that held the parts together and the rock on which it all stands. Many others created joy in our lives and in our church home which was so pervasive that we...well, that we often took for granted. Shame on us. Joy is a gift from God.

Remember Simeon? He wins. His joy *was* God.

## **Prayer**

Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, Lord, and thank you for those who brought and continue to bring joy to our church home. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

No matter how it appears or what it sounds like, never take joy for granted.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 14

# Who's your Best Man?

By Andy Drexler

*"He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled."*

**JOHN 3:29**

Best man. The guy who organizes the bachelor party, keeps the ring safe, gets the groom to the altar on time and toasts the newlyweds. The groom's best friend. Many of us have had one or been one.

Who's your best man?

Thirty-five years ago I would have answered "Jack." We met as college freshmen, and he walked with me through four years of joy and pain at Georgia Tech. I remember my fiancée saying "Jack, this is my wedding. If you think it's fun, don't do it." But he kept the ring safe, got me to the church on time, gave an outstanding toast, and did all that anyone could ask of a best man. He was my best friend, and I could always count on him.

Today my answer is "Jesus." I met Him my senior year in college on my personal "Damascus Road" and He has walked with me through 37 years of joy and pain. My wife has only kind words about Him. He keeps my treasure safe, says encouraging words, will get me where I hope to go, and has done all that anyone could ever ask of a savior. He is my best friend, and I can always count on Him.

I spend time with my best man every Tuesday morning at BEST MAN Bible Fellowship. Thanks to Pastors Phil, Matt and David, we get a great lesson and small group discussion during which we find JOY:

- J – Knowing Jesus we know the joy of a savior who loves us and walks with us, motivating us to think of ourselves less and others more.
- O – Serving Others in mission and ministry to give life meaning and fulfill our purpose.
- Y – Growing Yourself in the grace and knowledge of Jesus through worship and small group study.

We can all find JOY through worship, spiritual growth, mission and ministry when we make the effort! BEST MAN Bible Fellowship is a great place for men to start.

## **Prayer**

Lord God, It's not easy leaving the house early, rearranging our hectic holiday schedules, participating in service projects and doing things we know we should do to intentionally grow in our walk with you. But we know you're worth the effort. Encourage us that we may be filled with your JOY this Advent! Then give us the courage to tell our friends about the JOY we have found! Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

Where will you find your JOY?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15

# I Know Joy

By John Rhea

*“My fellow believers, when it seems a thought you are facing nothing but difficulties, see it as invaluable opportunity to experience the greatest joy that you can!. For you know that when your faith is tested it stirs up power within you to endure all things.”*

**JAMES 1:2-3**

John Ritenbaugh, in his book *The Fruit of the Spirit: Joy*, wrote: “Biblical joy is inseparable from our relationship with God and springs from our knowledge and understanding of the purpose of life and the hope of living with God for eternity when there will be joy evermore.” This definition is supported in today’s passage from James.

Who better exemplifies this definition of joy than a beloved member of our DUMC family whose name is, in fact, Joy – Joy Culbreath. Have you ever met anyone whose name applies so well to their personality?

Joy has experienced difficulties and trials over the past several years with the affliction of her husband, Jack, and his recent passing to be with the Lord. I’ve been amazed at her constant faithfulness and testimony of God’s love and goodness throughout these challenging years and at her encouragement to other members in their time of distress. She is indeed more powerful in her faith.

We don’t need a wordy definition of joy when you have the personification of that particular Fruit of the Spirit within our church family.

Thank you, Joy.

## **Prayer**

Loving God, As Advent progresses, we turn our attention to the joy Mary must have felt as she anticipated the birth of Jesus. We realize that Mary – like our friend, Joy – had difficulties, but she stayed focused on her faith and on your love. Help us to do the same and be more joyful in all that we do. Amen.

## **Today’s Thought**

Make a special effort to spread joy and encouragement today.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16

# Finding God's Joy in Your Life

By Sherry Waugh

*"Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them."*

**PSALM 111:2**

One September afternoon, I watched an autumn leaf caught in a spider web 'dance' in our front yard. It first caught my attention as I saw it completely still, suspended in midair. When finally it fell to ground, it blew across the yard, caught in the wind, and was carried up above me. Again, it floated to the ground only to be 'scurried' across the grass and whipped up in the air. Upon the third fall to ground, it came to rest.

During this event I talked with God, thanking Him for our beautiful world and this unexpected gift.

At Christmas we celebrate The Greatest Joy in the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ. From that wondrous gift to the smallest blessing, God is loving us.

## **Prayer**

Father, We thank you for all the blessings of Christmas. Help us to recognize your love and joy. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

Watch for even the smallest ways you can find God's joy in your life.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17

# Define and Share Joy

By Glenda Joiner

*“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness”*

**GALATIANS 5:22**

Joy is an intoxicating emotion that may urge you to jump, shout or cry happy tears. When something joyous happens, the emotional and physical response occurs right away because all sorts of things are happening simultaneously in the body.

I asked friends to tell me their definition of joy. Their answers were: a colorful explosion of emotion, a celebration, a feeling of euphoria, happiness. Joy is Jesus. Joy comes from God's creations.

In COVID life, joy is Zoom. I'm joyful to see my Sunday School class and prayer group, waiting until the last second to say goodbye.

Pet owners know joy. What amazing joy exudes from a wiggly, tail wagging doggie when you enter into his presence. For me, it's the excitement of a kitten that runs, leaps and flips when seeing me after I've only been away for minutes.

What if we greeted friends with the joy our pets greet us? Even if we didn't wiggle, leap or flip to strangers, maybe a smile, a kind word or a wave could be a moment of joy to share.

## **Prayer**

Father, I am grateful for the times that I stored in my heart as joy-filled treasures that came from you. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

Treasure the joys that God gives you in your life today and every day.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18

# There's JOY and There's J. O. Y., the Acronym

By Paul Rozeman

*"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."*

**JOHN 15:11**

Did you know there is a website with all the world's acronyms? Zillions of them. It's AcronymFinder.com in case you want to fact check me. Consider these J.O.Y acronyms:

1. Jamaica Organization for Youth
2. Japanese Open Yellow pages
3. Journalist of the Year Awards
4. Journal of Youth Development
5. Just Organize Yourself
6. Jokes on You
7. Jesus Only You
8. Jesus Oriented Youth
9. Jesus Others You
10. Jesus Over You
11. Jesus Owns You
12. Jesus First, Others Second, Yourself Last

Of course acronyms are designed to abbreviate. The real definition of joy, not happiness, can be abbreviated into an acronym. I'll prove it.

There are 12 J. O. Y. acronyms above and guess what? Six of them contain the proper noun, Jesus. I'd love to know more about the Jamaica Organization for Youth (J.O.Y). I wish I could say that I just organize yourself (J.O.Y) daily, but I don't. One day I hope to read the Journal of Youth Development. (J.O.Y). No, I never want to hear the jokes on you (J.O.Y).

The reality is that the first five of the Jesus-oriented acronyms could create interesting discussions in Bible studies. The sixth one, though, really defines the joy that makes our faith walk very easy. Can the core of our spiritual journey be summed up in an acronym?

I know you all know it, and I know you all get it.

Jesus first, others second, yourself last. Real J.O.Y.

## **Prayer**

God, Please guide us to greatest acronym of all, J.O.Y. We can only find it if we understand how powerful your love is. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

Jesus offers us the perfect roadmap in a simple acronym.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19

# It's a Wonderful Life... of Love

By Rev. Kathy Brockman

*"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him."*

**JOHN 4:7-9**

The 19th century poet, Christina Rossetti, wrote a beautiful poem entitled "Love Came Down at Christmas." Her poem was later set to music and is in the United Methodist Hymnal. Perhaps the words are familiar to you:

Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, Love divine;  
Love was born at Christmas;  
Star and angels gave the sign.

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of Love. We are within a week of Christmas and, hopefully, we can settle down and be intentional about the real meaning of this beautiful season. Even if all your plans aren't working out as you imagined and your list of things to accomplish is still long, pause for a few minutes or longer if you can.

Pause and reflect on what really happened over 2,000 years ago. Our God, who loves us more than we can wrap our minds around, came to earth as a baby. A baby who grew to be a man who experienced in his life all that we also experience. A baby who grew to be a man who would, out of love, be put to death for us. Love came down at Christmas for you and for me, and that is truly something to celebrate.

## **Prayer**

Loving God, In these final days before Christmas, encourage us to pause and reflect on the greatest gift you have ever given to us, the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to remember that it is because of your love for us that Jesus experienced life like we know it with all the trials, tribulations, joys and celebrations. And help us to remember that you, O God, are love, and help us to share that love with everyone we know and meet. We are grateful for your love that knows no bounds and is offered to each of us without expectation of anything in return. May we also offer that love to the world. In your name we pray. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

God is Love and love came down at Christmas. For a beautiful arrangement of the song, *Love Came Down at Christmas*, listen to Jars of Clay here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIr5th0d44Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIr5th0d44Y)

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20

# A Love Story

By Tambyn Freund

*“Dear children, don’t just talk about love. Put your love into action. Then it will truly be love.”*

**1 JOHN 3:18**

In the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey is particularly bad at telling people he loves them. He’s not just slow to say it, he often yells specifically at those he loves when he’s stressed. You would expect him to be an unlikable and unloved character. But he spends the whole movie doing things for those he loves: defending their honor, building houses, striving to build a good business to support his family and even standing up to take the fall when they make a mistake.

This time of year, we spend a lot of time thinking about those we love as we gather or buy gifts. It’s easy to feel loving toward someone who gives you a gift or with whom you spend an extended amount of time building a relationship. However, the Bible often reminds us that our friends and family are not the only people we are commanded to love.

We are people who love strangers, orphans, widows and even those with whom we have argued. Just as it is easy to love someone who does a kindness for you, it is heart-healing on both sides to do a kindness for someone with whom you’ve quarreled this year. At the end of the movie, George’s neighbors and would-be jailers rally around George and lift him up. His awe still makes my eyes tear up.

Christ tells us that by following his example of love, we will find unending life and joy. Since finding joy and hope are what Christmas is all about, this is a perfect time of year to take action!

## **Prayer**

Dear God, Surround us with your love and lead us to the joy and hope you sent through your son, Jesus. Amen.

## **Today’s Thought**

As part of closing out the calendar year, can you find something to do for someone who has irritated or even flat-out fought with you this year? Can you use your actions to show someone that you can love beyond the pitfalls of daily life?

MONDAY, DECEMBER 21

# The Love of Family and Friends

By Teresa Dietz

*“Love is patient, love is kind, it does not boast, it is not proud...  
It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”*

**1 CORINTHIANS 13:4 & 7**

When we moved to Atlanta some 30 years ago, we ended up hundreds of miles away from our parents and siblings. During that time, although we kept in touch with our parents, we took our siblings for granted. We did not visit with them or communicate with them, except at Thanksgiving or Christmas.

When we experienced the difficult death of my brother several years ago, my family was there for him through his illness, and we ended up becoming closer to each other in a way that continues to this day. When my husband's brother was in the hospital and passed away last Christmas, his family began to communicate more frequently. When we had a health issue this spring, both my family and his were there for us with daily phone calls and texts to make sure we were doing OK. Through all these experiences, our church family also was there to support us and showed their love and support with frequent phone calls, prayer, food and time spent with us.

Even though we took our families for granted for all those years, in times of crises we were reminded how much we care for each other and how important it is to show that love, perhaps before it is too late. So, out of the ashes of death and illness, for us came the unexpected joy of the love of family and friends who supported and cared for us in our times of need. Despite the difficult time we are living in, we found it is still a wonderful life because we discovered the love of family and friends.

## **Prayer**

Father God, Help us to never take the love of friends and family for granted and teach us how to treat them as we would like to be treated – with love, affection, and respect. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

Never take love for granted. It is a gift from God to be treasured, nurtured and shared with others.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22

# Naming Jesus

By Jerry Carnes

*“And this is his command: to believe in the name of his son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.”*

**1 JOHN 3:23**

It’s all in His name.

A book written by former professional football player Alex Karris explores the significance behind a name. One of the game’s greatest players was two-time Super Bowl MVP Bart Starr. How could anyone fail, Karris asks, with a name like Starr? On the other hand, Karris’ Detroit Lions once employed a quarterback named Milt Plum. In his book, Karris insists that no one with a milquetoast name like Milt Plum will ever win the Super Bowl.

Parents often stress over naming a child. Mary didn’t have that issue.

*“You will conceive and give birth to a son,”* the angel Gabriel told her. *“And you are to call him Jesus.”* (Luke 1:31)

The name Jesus means “God is salvation” or “God saves.” His very name comes wrapped in compassion and love.

Jesus arrived to rescue us from sin. His reward was a crown of thorns and nails through his flesh. He wasn’t motivated by glory. He rescued us because he loves us.

## **Prayer**

Lord, As we celebrate the birth of your son, let’s love on one another so that our name represents faithful service to you and one another. Amen.

## **Today’s Thought**

As we approach Christmas, think about Jesus and his many names in Isaiah 9:6 *“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* What do you call him?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23

# Better, Not Bitter

By Anne W. West

*“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”*

**LUKE 1:26-29**

Think about Mary’s predicament. She was engaged and probably looking forward to the perfect wedding. Suddenly, she was pregnant and likely scared to death. How could she explain this to her parents? Would Joseph leave her? What would the people in Nazareth think of her? What would she do?

She could have become bitter, resentful and withdrawn. She could have lashed out at God and even at Joseph. Instead, as we learn in Luke 1:38, she said, *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”*

Mary teaches us all a lesson. She listened to the angel Gabriel, giving her a message from God. She didn’t understand and, in fact, was stunned, baffled and confused by his words.” Still, Mary listened and thought about it. She went to see her cousin Elizabeth who welcomed Mary with unconditional love and helped Mary understand how blessed she was.

During that visit, Mary praised God, *“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”* (Luke 1:46-48) She felt God’s love as never before. She chose to be better, not bitter.

## **Prayer**

Loving God, May we feel your unconditional love and presence more than ever in these final days leading up to Christmas. Look on us with favor, as you did Mary, as we celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## **Today’s Thought**

Be grateful that Mary chose better over bitter. Look for opportunities to follow her lead.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24

# God Always Love Us

By Sally Murphy

*“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”*

**1 CORINTHIANS 13: 4-7**

When I was growing up, my sister and I always watched the numerous holiday specials on television. Although many of these programs were silly and lacked any relation to the true meaning of Christmas, there was one notable exception. “A Charlie Brown Christmas” reminds me of God’s genuine love for all of us, regardless of who we are, how we are feeling or our circumstances.

Like many people, Charlie Brown feels discouraged by the festive season. He envies the joy and happiness others seem to enjoy and strives to become involved with the Christmas play. His enthusiasm and determination fail to impress his peers, and he becomes discouraged by the frivolity and lack of meaning associated with the event. He becomes despondent when he finds a tree, only to witness the branches droop under the weight of his attention.

Even his carefree dog Snoopy, also afflicted by the materialistic nature of the festivities, flaunts his decorated dog house.

Yet, Linus reminds Charlie Brown of why we celebrate Christmas when he shares the story of Christ’s birth in Luke 2:8-14, and concludes, “That’s what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”

## **Prayer**

Dear Heavenly Father, Please help us to remember your love for us. During these challenging times, grant us peace in this world and help us to love one another. In Jesus’s name, Amen.

## **Today’s Thought**

God loves us always. When we hurt, He feels our pain. His love knows no bounds.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25

# It's Still a Wonderful Life...in Christ!

By Dr. Phil Schroeder

*"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."*

**LUKE 2:1-20**

Clarence, the angel trying to get his wings in *It's a Wonderful Life*, says, "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"

George Bailey makes this realization in the movie and runs down the main street of Bedford Falls yelling "Merry Christmas!" He continues, "Merry Christmas, movie house! Merry Christmas, Emporium! Merry Christmas, you wonderful old Building and Loan!"

We, too, shout Merry Christmas today!

Our Christmas celebration this year breaks from the patterns we have established in the past, for we have been forced to simplify and refocus on that which is most important.

Even with our voices muffled behind a mask, we shout Merry Christmas! We rejoice in the birth of Jesus, bringing hope to a troubled world. We hear the echo of the angels saying, "*Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*" (Luke 2:10-12)

## **Prayer**

Oh God, Thank you for this day and the love you sent us in your son. Amen.

## **Today's Thought**

May we rejoice in this gift today! It's STILL a wonderful life.