

Hope

SEASON OF

Advent



BROOKSWOOD
CHURCH

Advent, *Adventus* (Latin): coming, arrival


For followers of Jesus, the Advent season is a time of waiting, of spiritual preparation, and of hopeful expectation for the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas. Advent is a reminder of our need for a Saviour and thanksgiving for what Christ brought us and promises us still. It is also a season of deep longing for His return, where we eagerly look forward to the day when our King will come again to set everything right.

The Advent season refers to the four weeks before Christmas, culminating in the celebration of Christ's birth. For centuries, the Advent wreath has been used to tell the Christmas story. Advent wreaths likely have pre-Christian Germanic and Scandinavian origins - people used evergreen and candles as hopeful reminders of returning light, warmth, and spring in the midst of the cold dark of winter. Christians adopted this practice by the 16th century, the lighting of the candles in the wreaths accompanied by Scripture readings that spoke of the Advent of Christ.

The Advent wreath is made from a circular garland of evergreen branches and traditionally includes four candles, which are lit on each Sunday leading up to Christmas (and sometimes a fifth, in the center, called the 'Christ candle' to be lit on Christmas Eve/Day). The circular evergreen wreath represents God, His eternity and endless mercy, which has neither beginning nor end. The greenery symbolizes the hope of recreation, renewal, and the everlasting life we have because of Christ. The candles symbolize the light of God coming into a world in darkness through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Each week, as the birth of Christ draws nearer, the light grows brighter and the darkness of fear and hopelessness dissipates... until all the candles are lit and we greet Christ with joy.

While the meaning associated with each candle can vary (save for the inclusion of the fifth candle, always representing the birth of Jesus), most often the candles represent the gifts Christ has brought to us: peace, hope, joy, and love. The candles can often be associated with key figures in the Nativity story, such as Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the angels. If you've spent Advent with Brookwood Church before, then you will likely remember our tradition of including Scripture readings and lighting the Advent candles in our Sunday morning services.

We are providing this Advent devotional and prayer guide for your own use - it doesn't have to be used with an Advent wreath and candles, but a little extra light and warmth pairs well with this guide's theme of *Hope*. There are four entries, each corresponding to a week of Advent. We encourage you to take your time reading through the devotional, accompanying Scripture, praying through the psalm and guided prayer that goes with each, at whatever



pace serves you best. The last entry includes a couple bonus practices to help us keep our eyes on God, the Source of our Hope, as we continue to wait for Him.

The main purpose of this season leading up to Christmas is to prepare our hearts to receive Christ and meditate on the meaning of the Incarnation, the Advent of Jesus Christ. The world changed when Christ came. And so, during this Advent season we fix our eyes on God and remember the hope we have in Christ, the love God has shown us, the peace He has established, and the joy that comes from knowing our beautiful Saviour.

Who came as a little baby.

Born in a stable and laid in a manger.

Announced to shepherds by angels.

Visited by wise men who followed a star.

Over two thousand years ago in the town of Bethlehem.

God came.

Between Two Advents (Nov. 30)

Begin by sitting quietly with God for a little while. Let yourself slow down and become still and present. Ask God to be with you and to speak to you through His Word.

Read Luke 1:1-2:40 and Luke 4:14-21.

Waiting is hard. We find ourselves between two Advents: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has already come in the Incarnation when He took on human flesh, miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit, born to the virgin Mary, grew and lived as a human being, sent by God to redeem us and rescue us from sin and death,

to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, but which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness, and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. (Luke 1:77-79)

Jesus brought the kingdom of God wherever He went – healing people, setting them free, restoring them, giving them real hope, doing miracles that testified to God’s provision and mercy and the in-breaking of something new.

And then Jesus, “the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world,” submitted to death on the cross (John 1:29). He gave His life “as a ransom for many,” to free us from captivity to sin and death (Matthew 20:28).

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

And after three days, Jesus was raised to life again. He ascended into heaven and is now at the right hand of God interceding for us (Romans 8:34). And one day, He will return, “with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30). He will set everything right and reign forever.

But we don’t live there yet.

And waiting is hard.

We who have placed our faith in Jesus Christ share in His death and resurrection:

For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Since we have been united with Him in His death, we will also be raised to life as He was (Romans 6:4-5).

And we have in us God Himself:

But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of Him who raised

Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of His Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:10-11)

Incredibly wonderful. God Himself has saved us and dwells in us forever, never leaving us, always loving us.

And yet, we live in a cursed world. We know that all is not well. We have so many unmet longings – not just wants and fancies, but soul-deep aches that are constantly disappointed in this world. We long for peace... and conflict rages all around the world, and pulls apart even our closest relationships. We long for joy... and it seems to be fleeting, pushed out by grief and hardship as we experience loss after loss. We long for love... and constantly run into the limitations of those around us to love us the way we need, and our own struggles and limitations can make it so hard to receive the love of others, including God.

Life here is often hard and painful. And it is not at all easy to cling to hope when so much around us is *not at all how it should be*.

In one of his sermons, Tim Keller noted that the reason we love the epic stories like *The Lord of the Rings* are because they connect with something deep inside us that is longing for God – all our unmet needs are, in fact, a longing after God. So in *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a King in the North. And if He would just come back to His kingdom in the South, everything would be alright. The King would save everyone and establish a kingdom of peace and prosperity, making everyone safe and whole. They could rejoice knowing all was truly well and a new and joyous age could begin.

But He hasn't come back yet. We are waiting for His return, between two Advents, longing for the King to come again. To bring His kingdom and everything our souls long for to bear on this earth, to take our broken and cursed world and make it whole again, a new creation.

God is not so cruel as to give us these deep longings and never intend to meet them. Or, to make us wait alone, stuck in this aching need we cannot escape until eventually Jesus returns. Rather, Jesus is Immanuel: God with us. He promised to be with us always (Matthew 28:20). He also promised the Holy Spirit would always be with us (John 14:16-17). And throughout Scripture God promises His presence and His faithfulness. In Philippians 4:19, Paul writes: "And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from His glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus."

This God who has loved us, saved us, made us His own, and has promised to always be with us invites us to bring our whole soul to Him. Every need. Every longing. Every desire. Every experience. Every disappointment. Every heartache. Every fear. Every joy. Everything.

Unburdening our hearts and bringing our whole self to God is the only way to survive in this time of waiting. We will, inevitably, reach the end of ourselves. Run out of ways to conjure up hope or try to meet our own needs, hit the limit of our strength and capacity. We need more. We need God to supply all our needs from His glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.

So instead of another year of trying to conjure up our own hope or muster enough strength to keep going, we are invited to instead lay everything down. Give it up. Surrender it to God. Drop it in the lap of your heavenly Father who adores you, who watches over you, who loves to care for you.

And let Him hold you.

Give Him your empty spaces and barren places, where you long since gave up hope of anything growing. Let Him take the burdens that are too heavy for you. Let Him restore and strengthen you for the journey. Let Him love you until you overflow. Let Him teach you how to find hope in Christ alone and receive what you need to keep waiting for His return.

John Calvin called the Psalms “an anatomy of all parts of the soul,” that “contain the whole range of human emotion – from grief to joy, from hatred to compassion, from doubt to praise. Meditating on the Psalms will help us... bring our whole selves before God.” To help us give everything to God (because that feels like an overwhelming task to just jump into on our own), each of these devotions includes a psalm to help us bring our deep needs to God in prayer and to focus our hearts on the hope of Christ.

Pray these as your own prayer; using the exact words as your prayer, trying different translations to find a rhythm you connect with (familiar translations can be comforting, while unfamiliar translations can help us see with fresh eyes), or begin by praying the psalm and interject our own words as you pray.

Our first is **Psalm 22**, written by David and inspired by the Holy Spirit. You may recognise it as the psalm Jesus started to pray aloud when He was being crucified – it is likely that He continued to pray the psalm silently, crying out to His Father and wrestling with the same agonies and suffering we do. Hebrews 4:15-16 (which we will meditate on more next week) tells us that Jesus is perfectly able to minister to us because He lived a fully human life, with the same suffering, so He knows firsthand what we need and can give it to us. Our prayers are safe with Him – our Saviour knows how to love us well.

Guided Prayer

Each entry of this devotional also includes a guided prayer, adapted from Sheila Walsh's writings. The prompts help us open ourselves fully to God and practice giving Him our whole selves in prayer, as the Holy Spirit helps us to pray.

Heavenly Father, I can relate to the psalmist's feelings of being caught in the tension between Your faithfulness and sovereignty and wonderful promises... and feeling abandoned, alone, afraid, and hurt, because _____

I sometimes feel confused, frustrated, and sad because _____

And it's hard to remember and feel You are near when _____

I want to move beyond my fear and frustration, but the thing that keeps holding me back is _____

In the same way that the psalmist very honestly gave You his fears and pain, I ask You to take _____

I hate this burden I've been carrying. I want to feel seen. I want to feel supported and held. I want to feel lighter. I want to feel _____

And yet even here in my pain I know that You are _____

I know that Your will for me is good and that Your ways are _____

I ask that if You will not remove my suffering, that You will help me to relinquish my will to Yours. Help me to _____

Give me the courage to trust You fully to _____

And please give me all I need to wait well for You. I ask You for _____

In Jesus' Name, I pray. Amen.

Rest in silence with God awhile. Enjoy His presence. Let Him love you.

A Deeper Advent (Dec. 7)

Begin by sitting quietly with God for a little while. Let yourself slow down and become still and present. Ask God to be with you and to speak to you through His Word.

There is a strange but seemingly inevitable phenomenon that happens with Christmas as we grow older. For many of us, Christmas was a time of wonder and magic in our childhood, of joy and excitement. It was easy to feel eager for Christmas Day, to look forward to all the good things, to feel that delightful pull that made it hard to wait even as the waiting made the Day all the better and sweeter.

But as we grow older, for many reasons, that Christmas feeling seems to fade. It becomes elusive and harder to find. The things that used to bring us joy don't work quite as well. We put up the same decorations. We listen to the same songs. We may even have the same traditions. But excitement turns to nostalgia. We start to notice losses. Missing people. Feeling the pressures of the season. And even apart from Christmas, joy is mixed with grief.

The same phenomenon happens in our relationship with God. Every believer, as they mature in Christ, reaches a wilderness period (and many will go through a few of them). This is often described as a season (the length of which seems to vary wildly) where the usual things that helped us connect with God and receive His grace and love... they stop working. At least some of them stop working, like there's been a shift and we cannot find God in the familiar places we used to always find Him. Bill & Kristi Gaultiere describe this in *Journey of the Soul* as The Wall, a stage in the Christian journey that God deliberately uses to lead us into deep intimacy with Him: "Due to overworking, spiritual dryness, a faith crisis, or suffering, we may find ourselves at The Wall... Getting stopped at the Wall evokes emotional distress. If we take courage to share our emotions, struggles, and sins with safe people and in prayer, then we come into a new intimacy with Jesus and Abba (God the Father)."

When we reach The Wall, what we *don't* need is more work, shoving down our faith crisis, trying to just muscle through our suffering, embellishing the promises of God so we still appear to be winning at Christianity, or trying harder with our spiritual practices to try to make them work the way they used to. I recently discovered this fantastic saying: "When the horse is dead, dismount" – meaning, if it isn't working for you anymore, if the horse is dead, you have permission to get off it and try another mode of transportation, darlings.

What we *do* need is Jesus Himself. And this is precisely the invitation God is giving us, to seek Him apart from our usual places, to go deeper into relationship with Him, to come away from self reliance and burdens we were not meant to bear, receive His easy yoke (Matthew 11:28-30), and be transformed by deep union with Christ.

We *don't* need more Christmas decorations and activities, to try harder to make it 'the perfect Christmas' or recapture the past, or to settle for merely surviving the holidays and hoping that next year isn't this hard.

We need more of Jesus. We need a deeper Advent, that can reach our deeper needs as we become increasingly aware of them. You, darling, are growing up. You are feeling those empty spaces in your soul more and more keenly, because you yearn to be filled with the love of God in tangible ways. To borrow from Kim Blackaby, you need Jesus to meet the deep needs of your soul.

In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, author J.R.R. Tolkien writes, "The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater." We live in a cursed world, and Tolkien's description is apt; we all have firsthand experiences of the darkness and peril. As our love becomes mingled with grief, we need something, *Someone*, greater than the curse around us. Someone who can help us see what is still fair, beautiful, and good, and who can give us a joy and a hope even as He is with us in our grief.

In Hebrews 4:12-16, we read:

For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable. So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

We get a glimpse of (some) of Jesus' suffering in Matthew 26:36-46, when in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night Jesus was betrayed by one of His own disciples and friends, knowing the suffering, pain, rejection, and weight of God's wrath that He would bear in our place as He went to the cross, Jesus prays and asks His Father to take the cup of suffering from Him. Three times He prays and asks. And three times He submits to the Father's will.

And God the Father does not remove the cup of suffering from His beloved Son, because it was necessary. And Jesus does submit to the will of the Father even amid unimaginable pain and grief.

Later in Hebrews 12:1-4, we read:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily

trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up. After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin.

Jesus knew there was joy before Him. He trusted the Father. He endured the cross and all the suffering that went with it. His work is finished. He is seated in glory. More than this, His strength is our strength when we go to Him, ask for it, and receive it. His wisdom is our wisdom, His peace is our peace, His joy is our joy. But, we must ask for what we need. We must receive what Jesus gives us. And we must follow our Brother who has gone before us, who walked through the human life and suffering to show us the way to the Father.

Jesus replied, "All who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them. Anyone who doesn't love me will not obey me. And remember, my words are not my own. What I am telling you is from the Father who sent me. I am telling you these things now while I am still with you. But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. Remember what I told you: I am going away, but I will come back to you again. If you really loved me, you would be happy that I am going to the Father, who is greater than I am. I have told you these things before they happen so that when they do happen, you will believe. "I don't have much more time to talk to you, because the ruler of this world approaches. He has no power over me, but I will do what the Father requires of me, so that the world will know that I love the Father. Come, let's be going. (John 14:23-31)

"I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. This is my command: Love each other. (John 15:9-16)

We can trust that Jesus knows what He's doing. He's been there. He knows firsthand the darkness of this world and how to move through it. He is right with us in our suffering now,

always, inviting us to come boldly before the throne of God and ask, as a child asks their loving parent without hesitation, censure, or fear. Simple trust in unconditional love.

Let us go and meet with the One who loves us more than we can comprehend. Let us ask for everything we need, the deep needs that nothing else can satisfy – let us hold nothing back in our asking. And let us practice trusting that God knows what He’s doing. That He is the Source of Joy, and He has not run out, He has not left us, and He can and will meet the deep needs of our soul this Advent and beyond.

This week, we are praying **Psalms 31** – another psalm of David, and one of the psalms Jesus would have grown up praying as a Jewish man in first century Israel. Let the Holy Spirit, through David, lead you in pouring out ‘the anguish of your soul.’ And even if aspects of this psalm do not resonate with your own experience, we have the opportunity to bring the needs of others before Jesus, including our brothers and sisters around the world who need His love and grace too.

Guided Prayer

Sheila Walsh reminds us, “God is near. He is among us. He is for us. His care runs deep. He will do all the things He has promised to do, in His own time and in His own way.”

Dear Jesus, please remind me of the matter, which is that You are near. You are Immanuel, the God who is with me, always working on my behalf. I’ve never been alone. I will never be alone. And I’m not alone now, for You are with me. As I consider that reality – that Your presence is with me wherever I go – the thought that comes to mind is _____

Lord, there are empty spaces inside of me, longings and needs aching to be filled. Please will You fill me with _____

From a posture of gratitude, I humbly ask You to _____

I pray that You will help me to remember that You are _____

Help me to draw near to You and receive _____

Thank You for _____

In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.

Rest in silence with God awhile. Enjoy His presence. Let Him love you.

In Christ Alone (Dec. 14)

Begin by sitting quietly with God for a little while. Let yourself slow down and become still and present. Ask God to be with you and to speak to you through His Word.

Tim Keller describes idolatry as our tendency to take a good thing, a good gift from God, and make it the ultimate thing. Human beings seem to have this stunning tendency to confuse the gift with the Giver – to become dependent on a good gift from the Father such that we fear losing it, we cling too tightly, we fall apart when we are without it. As though our lives are nothing, as though we are nothing, without that particular thing, situation, relationship, status, or role.

This does not tend to do good things to our souls, or the rest of our selves, when we expect something that is not God to meet needs it was never designed to meet. What was intended as a good gift becomes a coping mechanism, and then an addiction, and then an idol. A false god. A false source of comfort, safety, security. A false source of identity and love that not only leaves us lacking, but wreaks destruction in us.

And a truly awful, terrible, *miserable* master.

In *Knowing God by Name*, Mary Kassian explains that one of the most common names for God in Scripture is *Adonai*, a special form of the Hebrew word *Adon* which means ‘Master’ or ‘Lord’. She writes,

The Bible teaches that the relationship between a master and servant begins with the master. Jewish servants were considered members of their masters’ households; their masters extended them both protection and privilege. Masters were responsible for meeting their servants’ needs: food, shelter, clothing, and other necessities. Masters also provided training, instruction, guidance, and accountability for the work of their servants. They promoted faithful servants to positions of great authority and responsibility (Matt. 24:45). The psalmist mentions many things Adonai does for His servants, including:

- *He looses their bonds (Ps. 116:16)*
- *He daily bears their burdens (Ps. 68:19)*
- *He is good to them and forgives them (Ps. 86:4-5)*
- *He is merciful and gracious to them (Ps. 86:15)*
- *He is abounding in love and faithfulness toward them (Ps 86:15)*
- *He gives His strength to them (Ps. 86:16)*
- *He accomplishes for them (Isa. 26:12-13)*
- *He is their helper and upholds their lives (Ps. 54:4)*
- *He makes them glad (Ps. 86:4)*

No wonder David exclaimed to the Lord, “You are my [Adonai]; I have no good apart from You” (Ps. 16:2).

Last week, we meditated on the deep needs that Christ can meet; this week, we meditate on how *only* Christ can meet those needs in ways that will be life-giving and not destructive to us. Not only can it damage us when we confuse the gift with the Giver, becoming dependent on things that were never designed to handle such dependency, but it can damage our relationships too. How often are we disappointed, let down, and hurt when we run into the limitations of others? How much hope do we put in others to meet our needs, make us feel safe and loved and whole, to help us feel the peace, joy, and hope we so desperately need? What does that pressure of expectation and need do to those around us, and how does our own hurts and resulting fear cause ever-increasing rifts between us and others?

We encounter such disappointment and hurt when the circumstances of life fail us too. When the culture's assurances regarding what would keep us safe and make us secure and whole lets us down brutally. Perhaps you, too, have experienced those endlessly empty spaces inside that no matter how busy, how full, how cluttered our lives and homes become are never satisfied.

The Christmas season can highlight these disappointments like no other. It can feel like there is so much *riding* on the holidays. We hope for loving and peaceful family gatherings, fun with friends and enjoying company, an abundance of good food, excitement and joy in exchanging gifts, celebration and laughter, spending precious time together sharing the traditions we love and treasure so much, lifetime-worthy memories with glitter and sparkling lights in the background.

And many times, Christmas comes through stunningly. An abundance of blessing and joy. And inevitably, something changes. Sometimes it's incremental, the creeping realization that this is not enough anymore. The Christmas feeling dwindles until we find ourselves going through the motions for the sake of others. Sometimes it's sudden, like the rug being pulled out from under us. And the holidays look so different. We don't know where to find the joy and peace this time.

As we mentioned last week, this is not bug, but a feature. God does this deliberately, and He certainly can do it outside of the Christmas season (we just often notice it more intensely this time of year). God lovingly but firmly removes something from our lives or shifts our circumstances or nudges us toward change (which we often *did not ask for*), and He brings us to the end of our selves. Allows us to be disappointed. Shows us the anxiety we feel when being without that particular thing or relationship or circumstance that, sometimes without our even realizing it, we'd become dependent on. We must be reminded that everything is gift, and we must be taught the difference between the gift and the Giver.

The Lord gives. And the Lord takes away.

Yeah, I don't overly like that part either.

But every disappointment and hurt is an invitation to turn to God and know Him more. People are finite and will inevitably be unable to meet all of our needs. We ourselves are finite and will inevitably be unable to meet all of our own needs. We've already covered that the world is cursed and broken, and so much of life is not how it should be.

As Helen Niefer always reminds us, this is where the story turns with two precious words:

But God.

He does not abandon us. Instead, He gives us His own joy, His own peace, His own mind, His own inheritance, His very self.

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you. How I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me again. I know you have always been concerned for me, but you didn't have the chance to help me. Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:4-13)

Every single time we run into the insufficiency of everything else, we can turn our longing into seeking after God Himself. When He deliberately and lovingly removes something from our life for a season, perhaps to show us a dependency that is not good for our soul, we can cling to Him and know a deeper trust and love in the Giver of good gifts. We can learn through practice to trust in the God who loves us and made us His own. We seek, we press in, we know Him more, until every single heartache sends us running to our Father.

To the One who gave manna (bread) in the wilderness (Exodus 16) and water from a rock (Exodus 17), who meets us in the wilderness with sustenance and rest for our body and soul, and who gives us Himself as our hope (1 Kings 19).

But even more than this, we run to Jesus who *is better* than the manna in the wilderness:

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, Moses didn't give you bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "give us that bread every day." Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:32-35)

And He gives us Living Water that genuinely satiates our thirsty souls:

On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, "Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.'" (When he said "living water," he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him. But the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet entered into his glory.) (John 7:37-39)

All the gifts are meant to point us to the Giver Himself; we were created to long for and need God... so *of course* nothing else can satisfy us and meet our needs. Which means, it's quite alright when we have seasons without the gifts we love, because the Father has still given us His Son, Jesus is still the Bread of Life, He still gives us the Holy Spirit who dwells in us always. Our Hope is safe – we only need to learn to cling to it and hope in Christ alone.

It's okay to grieve and lament when we miss certain gifts or when we are disappointed and let down by what we hoped could meet our needs and desires. We continue to bring our entire selves before God honestly and completely, *especially* when losses shake and hurt us and when what is finite disappoints us. But we never need to despair as though our God cannot love, sustain, comfort, and bless us well without those gifts. He gives us His very self. The disappointments and griefs are part of creation testifying to our need for a Saviour who is better than any other, a God who is true, and a Father who loves us perfectly.

It takes practice to trust God and to learn *how* to have our needs met in Him; it takes time and experience to know He truly is a good Master for us. So let us accept Christ's invitation:

Come to Me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you. Let Me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

And trust Him to teach us to find our hope in Him. Not in the things He gives us and does for us, not in the blessings poured out, or the suffering spared – all good things for which we can be grateful. But our hope belongs in Him, Jesus Christ, the one and only Son of God, who lived as a human being, died for us, and rose again, all to bring us to the Father.

Jesus told him, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through Me. If you had really known Me, you would know who My Father is. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him!" (John 14:6-7)

This week, we are praying two psalms (because I couldn't choose) **Psalm 16 & Psalm 27** – more psalms of David. May these prayers help you bring all your anxieties, needs, and longings to the God who loves you, and help your heart seek hope in Christ alone.

Guided Prayer

Our hopes are far safer located in Christ Himself than anything else. Only He can provide for us as we wander in the wilderness and wait on God. Only He can bring life in barren places, where we have been so disappointed and hurt we have long since given up hope of anything growing. Christ alone can declare:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon Me,
for the Lord has anointed Me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent Me to comfort the brokenhearted
and to proclaim that captives will be released
and prisoners will be freed.
He has sent Me to tell those who mourn
that the time of the Lord's favor has come,
and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies.
To all who mourn in Israel,
He will give a crown of beauty for ashes,
a joyous blessing instead of mourning,
festive praise instead of despair.
In their righteousness, they will be like great oaks
that the Lord has planted for His own glory.
They will rebuild the ancient ruins,
repairing cities destroyed long ago.
They will revive them,
though they have been deserted for many generations. (Isaiah 61:1-4)*

Lord Jesus, You alone are the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I worship You for _____

I have tried to find my hope in _____

Please help me know You better as _____

I give You my barren places, the wilderness where I have given up hope of anything good and life-giving ever growing: _____

And I ask You to bring beauty out of ashes, joy out of mourning, and gladness out of despair. Help me to trust You are _____

In Jesus' Name, I pray. Amen.

Rest in silence with God awhile. Enjoy His presence. Let Him love you.

Waiting on God (Dec. 21)

Begin by sitting quietly with God for a little while. Let yourself slow down and become still and present. Ask God to be with you and to speak to you through His Word.

We began our devotions with a meditation on being between two Advents: Christ has already come in the Incarnation, and now we look forward eagerly to His return. In this last week of Advent before Christmas, before the celebration of when God took on human flesh in order to come to us and save us, we look forward to the second Advent when Jesus Christ returns in glory as Lord.

Revelation might seem like an odd book to include in Advent devotions as many find it... distressing. Which is fair – it's an intense read that requires a *lot* of context to receive the message of encouragement wrapped in layers of Old Testament references and... honestly a lot of weird and dramatic stuff. So before we continue, let's remember some key truths that Revelation communicates regarding God:

- 1) God is sovereign over all. So much so, that He can and will bend everything toward His good and perfect will, even the most evil and destructive attempts of the enemy to steal, kill, and destroy. At no point is anything outside of God's sovereignty. We have nothing to be afraid of.
- 2) God is faithful. Everything He has promised will come to pass. Someday, everything will be well and truly finished, the fulfillment and culmination of God's eternal plan of salvation and deliverance.
- 3) We do not need to understand everything, and we in fact cannot – this is not a problem, because our safety and security does not lie in our understanding. It is in Christ Himself. Thus, we only need to know Him and trust in His character. There is much that is confusing and distressing in the book of Revelation... and there is much in our own lives that is confusing and distressing. God is still God. And God is still good. He is still loving. He is still wise, almighty, generous, gracious, merciful, holy, kind, patient, just, all-knowing, ever-present, and He does not change.

Let us look, then, at what God reveals of Himself and His good and perfect will, and the hope He has set before us. In Revelation 21, after the defeat of the enemy, all sin and death and destruction finally gone forever, John writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself

will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.” And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!” And then he said to me, “Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.” And he also said, “It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.
(Revelation 21:1-7)

It is finished. The same words Jesus spoke on the cross before He died. He knew the work had been accomplished, the ending was guaranteed. He knew that all things would be made new, a new heaven and new earth, with heaven coming down to earth as God Himself would dwell among His people. This has always been the heart of God. In Genesis 2-3, we read of how God was in the Garden of Eden with the first human beings – and because of sin they had to be banished from that Garden of Eden and that perfect fellowship with God.

But now, in Revelation, the Garden has not only been restored... it has become a City, a dwelling place of God with His people whom He has never stopped loving. He gives them the water of life. He gives them Himself as their God, makes them His children, and ensures there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain, forever. There is so much stunning symbolism in the descriptions here that we don't have time to get into right now, but we want to focus on a few key passages:

I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the world will enter the city in all their glory. Its gates will never be closed at the end of day because there is no night there. And all the nations will bring their glory and honor into the city. Nothing evil will be allowed to enter, nor anyone who practices shameful idolatry and dishonesty—but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. (Revelation 21:22-27)

Just as Jesus identified Himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, He also is the Light of the World. This is the glory of God fully displayed – normally, Scripture is quite clear that human beings cannot handle God's full glory. But this is different. This is when everything is set right, and anything that would keep us from God is gone. We are safe. We belong to the Lamb who was slain before the foundations of the world, the Lamb who is worthy to carry out the plans of God, worthy of all praise and glory, worthy to be called Lord and King (Revelation 5, 13:8).

John continues describing this vision of the future God has in store for us:

Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations. No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever. Then the angel said to me, “Everything you have heard and seen is trustworthy and true. The Lord God, who inspires his prophets, has sent his angel to tell his servants what will happen soon.” “Look, I am coming soon! Blessed are those who obey the words of prophecy written in this book.”

The river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the lamb. Trees of life, always bearing fruit. Healing for all nations. No more curse. God with us.

And we actually get to see *His face*. Someday, we will get to see God and live with Him forever. All will be set right, all things made new. The King will reign forever, the Lamb who was slain is worthy. We belong to Him and He has made our future hope secure.

We look forward to this with eager hope. Sometimes desperate hope. ‘Soon’ often does not feel soon enough. But we continue to fix our eyes on Jesus. On the Lamb. It is finished. It will be finished.

Waiting through Advent is hard. But the joy of Christmas morning is coming.

Waiting in a cursed world is hard. But Jesus is coming. And every single one of your most wonderful Christmas moments combined are still the merest glimpses of the pure joy of finally seeing Him face to face.

The Spirit and the bride [of Christ, the church] say, “Come.” Let anyone who hears this say, “Come.” Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life... He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon!” Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s holy people. (Revelation 22:17, 20-21)

This is how the book of Revelation ends. With another invitation to come to Jesus and drink the waters of life, and another reassurance and blessing of His grace and presence with us. Waiting is hard - He is still with us. This world is cursed – He has overcome it. There is so

much that is not as it should be – His grace is more. We yearn and ache and need – and anyone who is thirsty can drink freely from the water of life.

As we finish our Advent devotions, I encourage you to keep a few practices tucked you're your belt to remember Who we are waiting for and keep your eyes fixed on Him. So I offer you two such practices:

First, below is a list of some of the names of Christ and verse references. Set aside some time to read each Scripture aloud to meditate on who Jesus Christ is. Ask Him to help you know Him more. God will reveal Himself to you through His Word.

- Immanuel: God with us – Matthew 1:23
- Lamb of God – John 1:29
- Alpha and Omega – Revelation 22:13
- Author & Finisher of Our Faith – Hebrews 12:2
- The Bread of Life – John 6:35
- The Redeemer – Isaiah 59:20
- Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace – Isaiah 9:6
- Chief Shepherd – 1 Peter 5:4
- Christ – Matthew 16:20
- Deliverer – Romans 11:26
- Faithful & True Witness – Revelation 1:5
- Good Shepherd – John 10:11, 14
- Head of the Church – Colossians 1:18
- Holy One of God – Mark 1:24
- Hope – 1 Timothy 1:1
- Indescribable Gift – 2 Corinthians 9:15
- Jesus – Matthew 1:21
- King of Kings – 1 Timothy 6:15
- Life – Colossians 3:4
- Light – John 1:9
- Lion of the tribe of Judah – Revelation 5:5
- My Lord, My God – John 20:28
- Lord of Peace – 2 Thessalonians 3:16
- Messiah – John 4:25
- Resurrection & Life – John 11:25
- Son of God – Luke 1:25
- Son of Man – John 5:27
- Teacher – Matthew 8:19
- The Way, the Truth, and the Life – John 14:6
- Word of God – Revelation 19:13

The second practice is one Louise Treleaven shared with me last year. When she cannot sleep, she meditates on who God is by naming aspects of character alphabetically. There are *many* options, but below is a list to get you started:

- Almighty
- Beautiful
- Compassionate
- Dependable
- Eternal
- Faithful
- Good
- Holy

- Immortal
- Just
- Kind
- Love
- Merciful
- Never-Failing
- Omnipresent
- Righteous
- Sovereign
- True
- Unchanging
- Victorious
- Worthy
- X-traordinary (I'm open to suggestions for this one)
- Yahweh
- Zealous

Our final psalm for prayer is **Psalm 33**. I hope that now, in the context of these four weeks of meditations on Christ and the hope we have in Him, this prayer will be particularly rich.

*We put our hope in the Lord.
 He is our help and our shield.
 In Him our hearts rejoice,
 for we trust in His holy name.
 Let Your unfailing love surround us, Lord,
 for our hope is in You alone.*

Guided Prayer

Sheila Walsh writes, “Whenever you need God’s life-giving power today, God is eager to supply it for you. Go boldly before His throne now, believing that in His strength, as Philippians 4:13 asserts, you really can do all things.” That includes waiting for His return, darlings. We cannot do this. But God...

Dear Jesus, while I know it’s true that new reality is unfolding, the burdens of this reality can seem very hard to bear. Today, I’m especially aware of the burdens of _____

The weight of these concerns leaves me feeling _____

And yet when I consider the new heaven and new earth You are ushering in, I take heart, believing that _____

I worship You for Your promise to _____

And for Your commitment to _____

And for Your faithfulness to _____

I eagerly wait for the day when You return and _____

Until then, I trust You to raise up these things in my life: _____

Come, Lord. I know You are with me. Still, I long for You to come, to dwell with Your people, to make all things new, to show us Your glory. Help me to wait with my hope firmly fixed in You. In Jesus' Name, I pray. Amen.

Sit in silence with God awhile. Enjoy His presence. Let Him love you.

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior – yes, the Messiah, the Lord – has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize Him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others – the armies of heaven – praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

- Luke 2:8-12

For to 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. Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over His kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this...

- Isaiah 9:6-7