

Advent Meditations



Preparing for the King

Friends,

We're so glad you've chosen to set aside space for reflection in this season of Advent. Over the next four weeks, your community is invited to re-enter the story of Jesus' birth and reflect together on his Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

In the biblical story, preparation for Jesus is synonymous with bringing our hearts and daily lives into alignment with his Kingdom. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by making "straight in the desert a highway for our God" — which, for him, meant receiving Kingdom-hungry people in the wilderness and calling them into a new way of life that prepared them for the Messiah.

As we wait in a kind of wilderness between Jesus' incarnation and his return, we, too, ready ourselves by letting the Spirit form us into people of patient hope, steadfast peace, deep joy, and courageous love.

Each week's reading includes conversation prompts for your community, a few curated resources for deeper reflection, and an optional practice that you may wish to incorporate in your life beyond Advent. May the Spirit be with you as you prepare for the King and celebrate the gift of his coming.

Peace,

Practicing the Way

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WEEK ONE

Preparing with Hope



Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.

—Luke 2v25-32

REFLECTION

Advent is a season for waiting. It's one of many reasons celebrating Advent feels like an anachronism in the modern West, where waiting a few extra seconds for our favorite show to stream can provoke exasperation (and perhaps a quick glance at our social feed, to ward off momentary boredom).

Our allergy to waiting crops up in a thousand small moments. And then there are the big things — the tests of patience that can make or break us. Waiting for the person we'd like to spend our lives with. Or for the test results from a medical screening. Or for the long-sought reconciliation with a family member.

As spiritual director Gemma Ryan says, waiting is hard because it reminds us that we're not in charge, we're not in control. It grates against our pride.

In Luke 2, Jesus' first weeks on earth intersect with a man named Simeon, an aging Jerusalem resident waiting for God's comfort and restoration in a period of political oppression and the darkness of a 400-year prophetic silence.

Waiting helps us slow down and become aware of what we're waiting for, and just as importantly, how we're waiting for it.

Until Simeon cradles the hope of Israel in his arms, both he and Israel are waiting. But small clues about the way Simeon inhabited this in-between space, a period that apparently spanned most of his life, are instructive. We read he was "righteous and devout" — a shorthand way of saying that he lived in right relationship with others and had intimacy with God. And twice we are reminded that he was highly attuned to the voice of the Spirit.

Simeon helps us see that waiting is actually a gift. It helps us slow down and become aware of what we're waiting for, and just as importantly, *how* we're waiting for it.

We have many questions when we wait, but it takes the Spirit to ask the ones that matter most: Who will you become as you wait? How will you be formed as you wait for God's consolation — in this time before he makes all things new and settles unanswered questions? Henri Nouwen describes a redemptive waiting, wherein we "live the situation out to the full, in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us."

In this season of anticipation, we prepare for our coming King by waiting like Simeon, with settled, tenacious trust, believing something hidden will be manifest. We let waiting form us into people who live in right relationship with God and others, and who sustain hope by listening to the Spirit.

Take heart. We can be patient, even in the most painful waiting. We have hope to hold, protect, and cradle, with the Spirit's help. And "if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (Romans 8v25).

Because, like Simeon, we too have a promise. We will live to see the promised one come, full of comfort and consolation.

QUESTIONS:

- Where do you feel a sense of being in an in-between space of waiting in your life? What emotions arise?
- How are you experiencing God in the waiting? How is God experiencing you?
- What do you want to be true of you as you wait? Where might the Spirit be inviting you into deeper hope?

FURTHER REFLECTION:



Podcast: Waiting Hope-fully with Simeon,
featuring Gemma Ryan



Reading Plan: YouVersion Advent Reading Plan:
Hope with Gemma Ryan

Song: “Watchman” by Josh Garrels

A PRACTICE:

Take 20 minutes to meditate on Psalm 130. Invite the Spirit’s presence and illumination, and then read through the Psalm slowly several times, taking special note of any words or phrases that stand out to you. Then pray a simple prayer, naming any desires, resistance, or emotions.

For more on reading Scripture prayerfully as an ongoing practice, visit practicingtheway.org/scripture.

WEEK TWO

Preparing with Peace



And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

—Luke 2v8-14

REFLECTION

What began as a terrifying night for a group of shepherds morphed into amazement and joy. But the peace proclaimed by the heavenly army in Luke's gospel doesn't seem to be having the same effect on us today. Anxiety is on the rise in the West. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (pronounced "Height") famously dubbed Gen Z "the anxious generation," and it seems all of us, to some degree, are experiencing less and less peace.

So we employ desperate, scattershot approaches to finding peace. Some are outright counterfeits: we numb our bodies and minds with substances, endless scrolling, and all other manner of escapism available in the digital age. Other forms of peace are healthier. There is serendipitous peace when the stars align and we just happen to be in a good mood, circumstances work out, and our roommates or our kids enter a mysterious stretch of harmonious benevolence. Or the chill-out form of peace, when we clear the day's over-booked schedule and settle in with a good book. Or social peace — the effort to end violence, injustice, and disorder.

We can become a sign and a foretaste of the future world right in the middle of the chaos of the present one.

These forms of peace are legitimate gifts of God. But none capture the full picture of the angelic announcement, nor what Jesus meant by "my peace I leave with you." Jesus' peace is deeper. It's not contingent on circumstances. It never leaves. And the ultimate aim of his peace, as it gently calms our inner lives, is to move outward into a world that hungers for peace. As the line from St. Seraphim of Sarov goes, "Acquire the Spirit of Peace, and thousands around you will be saved."

But how do we become people of peace? While there isn't a magic mantra to whisk away feelings of anxiety, we do have a part to play. We can learn, in

the words of Paul, to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. Meaning, let his peace call the shots — let it be the umpire — in our thoughts, desires, and interactions, instead of our fears. Even as anxiety takes hold, we seek the Spirit's wisdom and strength to think and act consistently with the peace of Christ. In the Way of Jesus, this matters not only because he cares about our inner world, but also because peace is the environment of Christlike love; we cannot love others with courage and clarity when fear is directing us.

Letting Christ's peace rule becomes more natural over time as we create space for the Spirit in our daily habits. Acquiring peace is a slow surrender that grows as we create margin in our lives to be with the Spirit of peace. We need to regularly sit quietly with God long enough to experience his soul-settling presence, even if for a fleeting moment. And in that space, we can intentionally offer ourselves in surrender.

We often lack peace because we're hanging on to control. We need to let it go. Easier said than done — but the Spirit is near to help us in our unbelief. We can ask the Spirit to help us see that our peace increases when we stop white-knuckling our self-directed strategies for finding it. We can ask him to reveal forms of peace we've elevated above the deeper peace Jesus offers. And when we take up control again, we can surrender again ... and again.

Fear and anxiety will come; there are difficult days ahead. But be encouraged: Jesus came to bring peace in the midst of it, and hope for the end of it. Remember the heavenly peace-army: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." May the reality of his favor rest on you. And may his peace rule in your heart.

QUESTIONS:

- How might we tell if we are leaning heavily on forms of peace, even good forms, that fall short of the peace of Christ?
- Where might the Spirit be inviting you to surrender self-directed strategies for peace?

FURTHER REFLECTION:



Podcast: Ocean of Peace, featuring John Mark



Reading Plan: YouVersion Advent Reading Plan:
Peace with John Mark

Song: “I See the Birds” by Jon Guerra

A PRACTICE:

Take an extended time of quiet with God and offer yourself in surrender.

Find a distraction-free place and wait in God’s presence. Ask, “Father, what do I need to surrender to you?” Write down anything that comes to mind, and ask the Spirit to help you release them into his gentle care.

For more on encountering areas in ourselves that need surrender, check out the Solitude Practice at practicingtheway.org/solitude.

WEEK THREE

Preparing with Joy



At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name."

—Luke 1v39-49

REFLECTION

The beloved fantasy author J.R.R. Tolkien invented the word *eucatastrophe* to describe the stunning, unexpected turn of good fortune that rescues Frodo, Sam, and all of Middle-earth at the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*.

For Tolkien, this “sudden, joyous turn” wasn’t an escapist literary device or a denial of sorrow or failure. It reflected what he saw as an underlying reality woven into the universe: when all seems lost, an inbreaking grace flips the script and causes, as he put it, “a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears.”

In the first century, a teenage girl from an overlooked town was approached by a terrifying, luminous being with an announcement: she is favored by God and will give birth to a son — Jesus, the Savior. Despite the very real sorrow and pain ahead, Mary knows her story has taken a sudden, joyous turn, and she breaks out into song.

Have you ever experienced this joyous turn? A watershed moment when you knew your future was radically altered for the good?

When we participate in his redemptive work, we invite into the present that endlessly joyful future that awaits us.

Maybe it was an acceptance letter from an elite school. Or landing the part in an audition. Or beginning a new friendship or romance. Or getting a positive pregnancy result after years of trying.

Have you felt this same joy in connection with the arrival of Jesus?

When Jesus was born, we read in Luke 2:19 that Mary “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” We can follow her lead. We can take

time to treasure and to ponder the gift God has given us. And we'll likely need a plan for it, because our bodies tend to resist treasuring what's good.

According to psychologist Rick Hanson, our brain's alarm system, the amygdala, is wired so that the majority of its neurons are focused on negative information — threats, bad news, danger — rather than on positive experiences. This tendency means that painful experiences take just a few seconds to lodge in our brains, but good experiences take 12 seconds — four times as long — to form in our consciousness and move to our long-term memory.

In discussing this phenomenon, the pastor Ken Shigematsu shares how a friend launched a Sabbath tradition to combat this negative bias: each member of the family takes 14 seconds (two extra seconds for good measure) to imagine a good gift from God in the previous week, and simply ponders it, letting it sink in and breed joy.

In this busy time of year, we must tell ourselves to take time to ponder and to savor the good gifts of God, including the gift of a Savior who reconciles us and who will one day return for us.

But we can do more than ponder. We can embrace joy by regularly placing ourselves in God's hands as instruments of redemption, through the practice of service. Seeing God show up and work through us brings unique joy.

Have you experienced this? When we participate in his redemptive work — whether it's caring for children, a quiet conversation, or offering hospitality to a stranger — we invite into the present that endlessly joyful future that awaits us. This joy is assured because both the incarnation and the crucifixion of Jesus mark sudden, joyous turns; as Tolkien wrote, "this story begins and ends in joy."

As we ponder his goodness and step into his redemptive story this season, may we experience a lifting of the heart into "an inexpressible and glorious joy."



QUESTIONS:

- Have you experienced a sudden, joyous turn? Did you savor the joy, or did it get stolen? What helps you savor joy, and what tends to steal it?
- Are there ways you feel prompted to embrace joy in this season of your life, through meditation, acts of service, or in some other way?

FURTHER REFLECTION:



Podcast: Joy, featuring Ken Shigematsu



Reading Plan: YouVersion Advent Reading Plan:
Joy with Ken Shigematsu

Song: “Grateful” by Dante Bowe and Fridayy

A PRACTICE:

Take at least 12 seconds to ponder something good God has provided.

Set aside time in community — perhaps at your next Sabbath gathering, or your next meal with family — and simply ponder a gift from God, either big or small. After at least 12 seconds, spend time thanking God together.

For more on embracing joy, check out the Sabbath Practice at practicingtheway.org/sabbath.



WEEK FOUR

Preparing with Love



But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times ...

He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.

And he will be our peace ...

—Micah 5v2,4-5a

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said
through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give
birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which
means “God with us”).

—Matthew 1v22-23

REFLECTION

It's a well-trod theme in the retelling of the Christmas story: the way King Jesus arrives subverts all expectations. Attend enough Christmas services each year, and you may grow numb to it.

Jesus is the humble king, born in an unsanitary stable in Bethlehem, far from the centers of power and prestige. The angelic announcements, given to obscure shepherds and foreigners, are a prelude to God's invitational, upside-down kingdom. Bethlehem, Nazareth, the stable, the unwed teen — all of it is shocking and lowly, the marks of a different kind of King.

Except we're not shocked anymore. For many of us, the unexpectedness of the nativity story has become expected. The magic wears off, like one too many Christmas showings of *It's a Wonderful Life* (if such a thing were possible).

The Messiah comes to rule, to restore, to fight great battles, but the biggest thing he's after may be our shalom with him.

The prophet Micah describes the coming Messiah as a ruler, but also a shepherd. He would not only exercise power to make things right in Israel; he would draw close to their story and intimately know their troubles. Later in Micah's prophecy, we read that this Messiah will be our peace, or *shalom*. And this *shalom* is deeply connected to a restored ability to give and receive love from God.

If you're the type who enjoys a good BibleProject explainer video, you may already know that *shalom* is a rich Hebrew word that suggests the ideal state of flourishing and wholeness. The Messiah will make our relationship with God, the earth, and each other complete, restored from a place of brokenness.



This *shalom* is not just the absence of conflict between us and God. The Messiah brings back to completeness our ability to enjoy love with God, without all the static and doubt. It means loving him fully, and opening ourselves to let him lovingly inhabit all parts of us.

For some of us, it's easier to believe that God is coming to establish his rule and restore creation than it is to believe that he is coming to be near to us. But it's true. As Henri Nouwen said, "being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence." God is after more than behavior change or earnest activity for his kingdom. His name is *Immanuel*, God with us.

And so it may be that the most important thing we can do in preparing for the King is to open our hearts to him with vulnerability and trust. The King comes with unexpected kindness, healing, and affection. And we are invited to submit to this love.

This Advent Season, may we invite him into the deepest corners of our hearts, give him our full "yes," and never tire of his unexpected love.





QUESTIONS:

- When you imagine Jesus being near, what feelings come to mind? Joy? Fear? Shame? Rest? Love? Exposure? Why do you feel that way?
- Does being beloved feel like the core truth of your existence? What has helped or harmed your sense of being Jesus' beloved?

FURTHER REFLECTION:



Podcast: Let Love Find You, featuring Bethany Allen



Reading Plan: YouVersion Advent Reading Plan:
Love with Bethany Allen

Song: "Vow My Love" by Tiffany Hudson

A PRACTICE:

Open up with a trusted friend. Our struggles to give and receive God's love are often a symptom of shame. By naming areas of brokenness or woundedness with a trusted friend, we begin to heal and open ourselves to God's love.

For more on experiencing God's love in community, check out practicetheway.org/community.



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