



ADVENT

HEAR THE STORY



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ADVENT

HEAR THE STORY



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WEEK ONE

HOPE

Hope

SUNDAY | 2 Samuel 7:4-17

A Hope Too Small

At the beginning of a new sport-season every team believes they are championship material. Training camp displays such hope. Rookie players are advertised as the next stars. They're focused, tenacious, and quick. New players promise to strengthen last year's glaring weaknesses.

However, a few months into the new season, the hope that existed during training camp is replaced with frustration. The promising young rookies prove to be distracted, sluggish, and undeveloped.

Sometimes hope dazzles and woos us, as we anticipate the future. But when reality hits, "all hope is lost," and our desires feel like delusions.

Settled into his palace and at rest from his enemies, King David entered a new season of his life and dreamed of building a house worthy of the LORD (7:17). What a banner to mark his legacy! God said "no." Instead, David is asked to remember the past actions of the LORD and His character. David is asked to remember God's promise of a never-ending dynasty. God provided *more* than David hoped.

Hope is similar to a seed in that it contains more than we can ever imagine. Thirteen times in 2 Samuel 7:9-17 the LORD says He *will act* on the hope of David to do more than the king envisioned. David imagines a building project; the LORD has an everlasting kingdom in mind. Advent is a time to celebrate with anticipation this expansive, explosive hope that has been revealed to us in and through Jesus Christ.

Phil Wagler is the Training and Team Health Team Leader at MB Mission and attends Gracepoint Community Church in Surrey, BC.

Question: What is your hope these days? Is it too small?

Hope

MONDAY | Psalm 90

A Prayer For A Permanent Place Of Refuge

Human consciousness is both a gift and a curse. The gift: a sense of self that is unique among all living things. The curse: a sense of time and the knowledge that one day we will be no more. Humans, throughout history, have tried to remedy the curse. The most common answers either suggest freedom from individuality, personality, and consciousness as taught in Eastern religions, or the promise of a slightly longer human life span by medical techniques; young blood transfusions and head transplants being the most recent suggestions. Not much reason to hope here.

The author of Psalm 90 is aware of the limitations of human existence. He also knows that there is nothing normal about it. Suffering and death find their source in the spiritual realm. Human rebellion against God is at the root of it all. It follows then that any real solution will necessarily reside in the spiritual realm. A permanent refuge from the ravages of time and sin is available: “Lord, through all the generations you have been our home” (90:1). Therefore, those who embrace the living God will in fact outlive the stars of heaven. Hope for this life and the life to come!

The ancient Israelites didn’t have a complete understanding of the one factor that makes forgiveness and human restoration possible, but *we* do. The holy and just God of all creation is in a position to freely welcome His rebellious creatures because of the sacrificial death and resurrection of the eternal Son of God.

“He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross” (Colossians 1:20).

Pierre Gilbert is the Associate Professor of Bible and Theology at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary/Canadian Mennonite University and attends Fort Garry MB Church in Winnipeg, MB.

Question: In a world that is desperate to defy the limits of human existence and live forever, how might you explain God’s offer as a real option to a friend?

Hope

TUESDAY | Malachi 3:1-7

Hope For Soap

Oops! Slosh, drip, tumble, splash—and there it is. You’ve decorated your favorite shirt with coffee, lasagna, and blueberry pie. Whatever your age, you can picture your mom shaking her head and saying, “I’m not sure we’ll be able to get that out, honey.” As you leave the table to change, all you can do is hope.

Malachi arrives at a moment in the history of God’s people when everything’s a mess. Marriage has decayed into a joke (2:10-16). Religion is practiced with a half-baked complacency (1:6-14; 2:4-9; 3:8-12). Ethics have become optional (2:17; 3:13-15). The all-too-familiar result of this breakdown is lonely, hurting, and alienated people. Yet Malachi doesn’t lose hope. He announces to the people that “suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple,” to His people, “like ... a launderer’s soap” (3:1, 3). So, what exactly is the good news? It’s the fact that God’s coming to clean up our mess!

Now whenever you clean a muddy vehicle, an untidy room, or that stained shirt, you first judge what’s not right. You identify the “dirt,” then you apply the “soap.” So we shouldn’t be surprised that God’s arrival means judgment. How else can He clean up the place? He has to deal with the “dirt,” whether that’s manipulative religion, sexual promiscuity, oppressive economics of Malachi’s day (3:5), or countless broken, sinful, unjust patterns of our lives. If we’re hoping for a cleaned-up world, our hope has to be for someone “like soap.”

A few centuries later, Jesus came as God’s “soap,” dealing with the mess of our sin in a most surprising way, without neglecting judgment. This Advent, allow God to expand your hope to include the hope for judgment. Grow your hunger and thirst for God to make everything clean, both in our world and underneath your own stained shirt.

Rod Schellenberg is the Lead Pastor of Hepburn MB Church in Hepburn, SK.

Question: When you look at the world (or your own life), where do you notice the mess? Where are things not right? Talk about what it would mean for you to hope for “soap.”

Hope

WEDNESDAY | 2 Samuel 7:18-29

Great Surprises

Have you ever been gobsmacked? I love the sound of that word—gobsmacked! The word explains itself: gob (mouth) + smacked (struck). It's to be utterly astonished.

In 2 Samuel 7, King David is gobsmacked. He's overwhelmed by a combination of awe, wonder, speechlessness, shock, and surprise. It's because God made a covenant promise to establish an eternal kingdom through David's family tree. David's response is overwhelming gratitude and awe, which prompts him to pray (7:18, 20-22). Gobsmacked, David says to God, "How great you are, O Sovereign LORD! There is no one like you. We have never even heard of another God like you!" (7:22).

The birth of Jesus Christ is God's fulfillment of His promise to David. During Advent we are invited into the awe and wonder of God's kept promise! Such action reminds us that God cares deeply for His creation.

Take time this Advent season to thank God for His love, care, and faithfulness in keeping His promise! Thank Him for revealing Himself through Jesus Christ. Thank Him for leaving us gobsmacked when we look back at the promise He made to David and the way He kept His promise by sending Himself at Christmas!

Willy Reimer is the Executive Director of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches and attends SunWest Christian Fellowship in Calgary, AB.

Question: Are there other ways this past year that God has left you gobsmacked? In what ways has He been faithful to you or your family this past year?

Hope

THURSDAY | Luke 1:68-79

Zechariah's Prophecy Of Christ Our Hope

Having recently experienced the birth of a new grandchild, once again I have felt personally the powerful emotions that go along with the event: the long wait and concern beforehand, the extreme joy when the birth has gone well, the unspeakable love that floods the soul, and the tremendous wonder of life itself when the child is snuggled safely in your arms.

Zechariah's emotions with his newborn son may have been similar, but they were also unique. His son, named John by the angel Gabriel, was no ordinary baby. The Holy Spirit revealed to Zechariah that his child would usher in the long-awaited Messiah. His tiny baby represented the beginning of a whole new era of God's redemption plan. Appropriately, when Zechariah's tongue was loosed, he began speaking words of hope and praise, redemption and salvation, forgiveness and tender mercy.

For us today, Zechariah's hope has turned to reality. At Advent, as we remember Christ's coming, and anticipate His return, we do well to focus on praising God out of gratitude for the past and hope for the future.

Not long ago, I heard a friend quote Lewis B. Smedes, which expresses very well a truth for us to ponder and apply this Advent season: "As I have grown old, my feelings about God have tapered down to gratitude and hope. Gratitude is the pleasure of hope come true. Hope is the pain of gratitude postponed. Gratitude comes easy, on its own steam, whenever we know that someone has given us a real gift. Hope comes harder, sometimes with our backs against the wall, laden with doubts that what we hope for will ever come" *My God and I: A Spiritual Memoir*, 171.

Ben Wohlgenut is the Development Officer for SK, MB, and ON at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and attends Fairview MB Church in St. Catharines, ON.

Question: Which comes easier for you, gratitude or hope? Explain why. How can your understanding of Advent help you grow in both virtues?

Hope

FRIDAY | Revelation 22:12-16

Hope In Action

Often hope is said to be an attitude or a mindset, synonymous with confidence, optimism, and anticipation. Instead, Revelation 22:12-16 invites us to an understanding of hope that is more active. We are encouraged to move beyond an attitude to a way of life.

As the people of God, we are called to live in ways that are different from those around us. In the book of Revelation, John invites his readers to be like “those who wash their robes,” that is, to be like those who lead righteous lives that are modeled after the values Jesus taught (22:14). It is a distinct contrast to those who “love and practice falsehood,” who commit murder, idolatry, and other sins (22:15).

Because we have the assurance that Jesus, the bright morning star, the root and descendant of David, is coming soon, we demonstrate this hope by living in a way that acknowledges God’s rule. When we show kindness to a bully, when we give generously to those in need so that everyone might have enough, when we demonstrate faithfulness in our marriages even when times are difficult, we are living out our hope that Jesus Christ not only came to earth to dwell among us in human form, but that He will return to set the world right. He who was in the beginning is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega. This Advent season, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, let us also remember this hope. May our hope shine forth not only in our words, but also in our daily actions.

Kathy McCamis is the Community Pastor of House Blend Ministries and attends Fort Garry MB Church in Winnipeg, MB.

Question: What is one practical way you can demonstrate that your hope is in Christ?

Hope

SATURDAY | Philippians 1:12-26

Hope In A Not-So-Hopeful Situation

Did your parents ever order you to stay in your room as a consequence for something you had done? Most of us can identify with the feeling. Can you imagine being locked up for months in prison, maybe even years? What a hopeless and frustrating situation.

The Apostle Paul found himself in this kind of a situation. He was put into prison in Rome and Caesar's guard kept careful watch over his every move. From his prison cell he wrote a hope-filled letter to the Christian church in Philippi. You might be wondering how he was so hopeful in such a sticky situation. Paul tells us the answer to that question in Philippians 1:12-14. All the elites in the Roman Palace Guard were constantly hearing about the love of Jesus because Paul was telling them. It wasn't long before guards and others who served Caesar began to follow Jesus. Paul confirms this by sending greetings to the Philippians from the new brothers and sisters in the Lord in Caesars' household (4:22)!

Throughout the Bible, God has a habit of taking what looks to be a not-so-hopeful situation and pours hope into it, bringing something amazing and good from it. I'm reminded of MB Mission work near the border of Thailand and Laos. Mission workers met a pastor who had spent years in a horrible prison in Laos (a country where Christians are severely persecuted). Instead of despairing, the pastor shared the good news of Christ in the prison and led many to follow Jesus. The message spread and today, a few decades later, a vibrant church of thousands has been established in that nation!

We have a hope in Jesus that is greater than our troubles, toils, and fears. In this season, we celebrate God's hope sent into a hopeless world. Let's hold on to that hope this season and spread it around to everyone we know.

Rob Thiessen is the Conference Minister for the British Columbia Mennonite Brethren Conference and attends North Langley Community Church in Langley, BC.

Question: Can you recall a time in your life, or in the life of another, when God sent hope into a not-so-hopeful situation?

WEEK TWO

PEACE

Peace

SUNDAY | Luke 3:1-18

Peace Is A Construction Project

Life is hectic, often traumatic. It should come as no surprise that many people seek a respite from the frenzied pace of the everyday routine during the Christmas season. Christians are not immune to life's pressures, and perhaps it is to be expected that the noisy din of our surroundings influence Christian understandings of Christmas.

Who has not heard the phrase "peace on earth" and thought of an idyllic setting, often represented by a nativity scene featuring easy-going parents and worshipful adorers? The problem with this depiction of Christmas is that it does not agree with what the Bible says about God's peace on earth, or about the arduous task of establishing it.

John the Baptist's proclamation of the coming Messiah shows the magnitude of the change brought as the kingdom of God invades this world. The peace of Christ is challenging to human interests, and progress towards it is hard-won. Filling valleys and leveling mountains takes time and effort. Biblical metaphors about peace elsewhere imply that peacemaking is a strenuous activity. Christ's peace creates harmony, but harmony implies movement, ongoing work done together that reveals a new way of living in Christ. Stillness and silence are not common to biblical models of peace; often, they allow conflict and violence to continue.

What does peace mean during the Advent season? Peace reminds Christians that the mission of the good news of Jesus Christ means embracing the work of proclaiming and living Jesus Christ to the world, everywhere we are and to all we encounter. It is a reminder that in a conflict-ridden world there is very much to do. Like John the Baptist, we will be frequently misunderstood and unappreciated in our work. We will challenge prevailing values and be criticized. But the peace we seek sustains and enables us, and we continue worshipfully as we fix our gaze on Christ.

Brian Cooper is the Associate Dean and Assistant Professor of Theology at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and attends Mountain Park Community Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: Can you recall a biblical metaphor about peace that implies peacemaking is a strenuous activity? Discuss how your example challenges prevailing attitudes about peace at Christmas.

Peace

MONDAY | Amos 9:1-6

Busted!

It was a few days before Christmas and I was a college student home for the holidays. As I drove home from the mall, I whizzed over one of those all-too-familiar rubber speed counters on the road and my heart sank. Busted! Instinctively, I removed my foot from the gas pedal and slowed down. Sure enough, the officer waved me over to the side of the road. My hands shook as I rolled down my window and waited for the verdict.

The Old Testament prophet Amos had a stern warning for the Israelites. Israel would be destroyed. Their failure to live according to God's commands and their underestimating of the consequences of their sin led to a false sense of security. Read the text again! "No one will get away, none will escape" (9:1b). Amos made it clear that there was no place to hide. From the grave to the heavens, from the mountaintop to the ocean floor, there was no escape. Even with the absolute best hiding place, judgment was unavoidable. God had the power to judge. There was no escape. Busted!

Our theme for this second week of advent is peace, not judgment. How do these relate? Our world is in chaos. People do what they want, often with little thought to the consequences. People suffer. Creation is damaged. There seems to be no peace. Yet, into this turmoil enters the Prince of Peace. You and I are living in a broken world, full of trouble. And unless we know that we too are busted, we likely will miss His gift of peace.

As the officer walked to my car, he informed me that my headlight was burned out. Nothing was mentioned about speeding. And then he handed me a gift certificate for a local restaurant. Busted? Peace!

Leonard Klassen is the Associate Pastor at King Road MB Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: When have you experienced a lack of peace in your life as a result of your actions? Pray that you would experience Jesus' peace this season.

Peace

TUESDAY | Isaiah 35:3-7

Anxious Hearts And The Bringer Of Peace

Christ is coming, He has come, and He will come again. Such is the message of Advent. The season is an annual reminder that the world is not as it should be. But it's also a reminder that the world will not always be as it is because Christ has come.

In Isaiah 35:3-7 God speaks to His people through the prophet Isaiah around 700 years before the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and he makes some specific, bold promises.

He says that there will come a day, in the presence of the Messiah, where the deaf will hear and the mute will sing.

In Mark 7 Jesus heals a man who is deaf and unable to speak, and after seeing this miracle, the people “were astonished beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak’” (Mark 7:37).

Mark is getting at something specific here: he’s telling his readers that this miracle isn’t just a miracle, but that it is a sign—a specific sign—that is pointing beyond itself to a greater reality, namely the reality that Jesus is the One that God promised to send! These people realized that Jesus was the Messiah, the Saviour who had been promised, and they realized that He had come.

The passage from Isaiah is good news to all of us who struggle with anxious hearts about the future. God speaks and encourages us: “Be strong; fear not! One day I will come, and I will save you! And when I do, the blind will see, the deaf with hear, the lame will walk, the mute will sing, and in the midst of the most desperate situations, I will bring peace and life!” (35:4-6).

And they did. And He did. And *that* peace and *that* life is ours when we come to Jesus.

Christ is coming, He has come, and He will come again. Such is the message of Advent.

Brett Landry is the Lead Pastor at Christ City Church in Vancouver, BC.

Question: Throughout the Advent season, what specifically reminds you of each of these truths: Christ is coming, Christ has come, Christ will come again?

Peace

WEDNESDAY | Isaiah 40:1-11

“Comfort, Comfort”

The sixteenth-century Heidelberg Catechism opens with this question: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” Think about that question for a moment. What is *your* only comfort in life and in death? Our comfort is based on those things that give us confidence that the future will be ok. For example, I am confident about my future because I am healthy and resourceful, because I have enough money in the bank and equity in my house, because I have a supportive family and an adequately competent government. The truth is, these reasons for confidence are fragile.

The nation of Israel knew that even the temple wasn’t a certain source of confidence, as they had believed. By the time we get to Isaiah 40, the nation is defeated, the temple is destroyed, and the future is uncertain.

It is at a moment like Israel’s where the source of true comfort is revealed. God instructs Isaiah to speak “comfort, comfort” to a people who have been ravaged by destruction, a destruction that was caused by their persistent resistance to trust YHWH and to find confidence for their future in Him alone. How does God comfort a people who are wired to turn away from Him?

The prophet affirms the desperate state of humanity: “All people are like grass, and their promises (*chesed*: covenant faithfulness) are like the flower of the field” (40:6). I identify with this assessment. My good intentions often fade before the evening comes. I can’t do it. I don’t have *chesed* strength in me. Comfort to people like myself comes in the statement: Yes, people are like grass, their good intentions fade before the evening comes, *but* the good news is that our well-being, our future, our salvation does not lie in our own faithfulness, but in the faithfulness of YHWH, whose word stands forever.

The good news is that God’s *chesed*, evidenced in the incarnated Christ-child, saves us and keeps us, in spite of ourselves.

Ingrid Reichard is the Pastor of Development at Glencairn Church in Kitchener, ON.

Question: What is your comfort? What confidence is it based on? How does your everyday life change when you place your confidence in God’s *chesed*?

Peace

THURSDAY | Luke 7:18-30

What Happens When Jesus Is Different Than We Expected?

My friend just returned from a Mission trip that turned out to be very different than she expected. She left Canada thinking that God had called her team to perform certain tasks, but discovered along the way that He had other plans.

In this passage, John the Baptist seems to be working through a similar experience. His ministry, which is described in Luke 3, could be described as “hellfire and brimstone.” He was on a mission to prepare people for the Day of the Lord, when God visits the earth in judgment (as prophesied in Malachi 3:1-5; 4:1; Isaiah 30:19-33). As Jesus begins His ministry, however, He is healing and forgiving people, so John asks for clarification: “Is Jesus really the One? This is different than I expected!”

Jesus responds in Luke 7:21-22 by expanding John’s understanding of God’s plan. As a diamond has many sides, so does the promised Messiah’s ministry. Yes, He will come to judge in the future (Revelation 14:14-20; 19:11-16), but right now He is healing blindness and deafness, raising people from the dead, bringing good news and binding up the brokenhearted (as prophesied in Isaiah 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-7; 61:1).

All of us, like John, have certain expectations of God and Jesus, which cloud our understanding of His mission and our mission. After correcting John’s perception, Jesus says, “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (7:23). We won’t be offended by Jesus if our expectations are shaped by His definition of reality, so let’s be committed to careful study of what He says in the Bible about who He is and what He came to do.

Kristal Toews is the Pastor of Women at Northview Community Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: How have your expectations of God and Jesus changed as you have studied the Bible? What do you most look forward to Jesus healing and restoring at the end of time?

Peace

FRIDAY | 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Jesus In Jail

As a young adult, I went on a Mission trip to the Philippines. A very memorable experience occurred at a jail outside Manila.

Life in this jail was tough. Family members or friends brought the only food that the prisoners received. Some looked like they hadn't had those kinds of visitors in a while.

At one point, we walked by one of the cells; it was bursting with people. We learned that those inside took turns sleeping as there was not enough room for everyone to sleep on the floor at the same time.

Despite the harsh conditions, I saw joy and peace everywhere I went. I asked one of the Filipino team members why this was the case. He explained that most of the prisoners had accepted Christ. Jesus had entered the chaos of desperate lives and brought His peace. Jesus was in jail with His people.

In today's passage, we see that the Macedonian church was going through severe trials. Yet, they still bubbled over with joy; the kind of joy that comes from a deep peace. They chose to be generous to others even though they didn't have much for themselves. Paul used their example to encourage the church in Corinth to be generous. God's grace was active in their lives. Jesus had entered the chaos of their trials and brought peace, joy, and a generous spirit.

Jesus gave up everything so that we might become rich. He endured the chaos of a sinful world for our sake. God's grace saves us as we respond in faith to His gift of salvation. His grace also enables us to face any challenge and to experience His peace and joy.

Randy Wolff is the Assistant Professor of Leadership and Practical Theology and Director of Extended Learning at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and attends South Langley MB Church in Langley, BC.

Question: How might you experience more of God's grace today in a difficult area of your life?

Peace

SATURDAY | 2 Peter 1:2-15

The Ministry Of Redundancy

Advent, a word coming from the Latin *adventus*, speaks of arrival and coming. It's a word associated with the time of year that the church remembers God first coming, wrapped in flesh, and called Jesus. Advent is also a time to look ahead to the second coming of Jesus. "Come, Lord Jesus!" is the shout of John as he ends the book of Revelation (Revelation 22:20). Advent is the yearly practice of looking back and looking ahead at the comings of Jesus.

But the question remains: Why? Why does the church remember the comings of Jesus again and again?

The simple answer is because we all have the tendency to forget that Jesus came and is coming again. We may not have forgotten intellectually, but the way we live our lives and the decisions we make suggest such forgetfulness.

Recognizing this tendency, Peter gives himself to what I heard one pastor from Australia call the "ministry of redundancy." After reminding his readers of the qualities that are theirs through their knowledge of Jesus (1:3), Peter states, "I intend always to remind you of these qualities, *though you know them* and are established in the truth that you have" (1:12). Peter's chief aim is seen in the following verse: "I think it right, as long as I am in this body, *to stir you up* by way of reminder" (1:13).

Peter's goal in reminding his readers of what was theirs in Christ was to stir them up. Don't you love that? In other words, this wasn't only a cerebral exercise for Peter, but an emotional and ministerial one too. This is to be the task of every gospel worker. Our call, as we speak into the lives of others—and to ourselves—is to be essentially and effectively repetitive.

Norm Funk is the Lead Pastor at Westside Church in Vancouver, BC.

Question: Read 1 Corinthians 11:24-26. How is the practice of the Lord's Supper a ministry of redundancy? How might it play a role during the Advent season?

WEEK THREE

JOY

Joy

SUNDAY | Zephaniah 3:14-20

Good News For The Wayward And The Beaten Down

Have you ever been watching the last five or ten minutes of a television show and wondering: *What just happened?* I feel that way when I read the prophet Zephaniah. The first three chapters of the book are filled with judgment and doom. But then in the last six verses the prophet piles on the exhortations: exult, rejoice, sing, and shout! Did I miss something?

Imagine for a moment that you are among Zephaniah's original audience and you're wayward. His words are both a reality check and a good-news announcement. God's judgment is good news for those who repent and return to Him. It's a word of truth and of grace. Zephaniah was telling the audience that God is *for* them—what good news!

Imagine for a moment that you are among Zephaniah's original audience and you're oppressed, beaten down. You have been faithful to God, but it has only brought you trouble. As Zephaniah preaches on your street corner, his words of judgment from the LORD shout "vindication" in your ears! God is making things right. God is and continues to be for you—what good news!

Zephaniah tells us that God acts for us. The God of the universe acts for us. As a result, it is a time of joy: for the wayward it is an offer of grace from a God who speaks truth, and for the beaten down it is an offer of rescue from a God who brings justice. Is this a timid joy?

And so it is when Jesus enters our circumstances. His Spirit calls us to do an about-face and receive His healing, which restores broken spirits and bodies and sets us free from judgment on the one hand and from oppression on the other. Surely, this is good news of great joy!

John Neufeld is the Lead Pastor at The Meeting Place in Winnipeg, MB.

Question: Tell of a time when you have experienced release from guilt and shame. Tell of a time when you have seen God take the side of someone (maybe yourself) who was oppressed. Our God is a God of action! Celebrate!

Joy

MONDAY | Micah 4:8-13

Not According To Plan

There is a rhythmic theme that maintains a steady beat throughout the Old Testament stories: things are not always as they seem. God's people see roadblocks such as famine, barrenness, captivity, and doubt repeatedly overcome by the power and plan of God. The prophets, who often combine their words of judgment with a seemingly strange call to be hopeful, extend the cycle.

Consider Micah, who follows his words of doom (3:12) with a peaceful picture of weapons being dismantled and the reassurance that no one will be afraid (4:3-4). How can despair and joy walk so closely together?

According to Micah, a day is coming when the LORD's promise will be fulfilled. The people of God will see their former dominion realized once again, but the promise and its fulfillment will not fully eliminate their pain or their suffering. Instead, the promise will point through it.

It is fitting that Micah uses the image of childbirth to tie the contrast of agony and redemption together (4:9-10). For in childbirth, the promise of what awaits is what propels the mother to keep labouring. For the people who Micah addresses, their salvation will come once their vulnerability is at its greatest point; their homes will be no more, they will camp in the open field, and they will be taken captive by their enemies. But things are not always as they seem. For it is while they are in Babylon that they will be rescued.

Why does God choose to act in this way? It might be the recipe that the nations need in order to recognize the sovereignty of God. But it might also be the surprise that we need in order to remember that things are not always as they seem.

Keith Reed is the Associate Director of Extended Learning at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and attends North Langley Community Church in Langley, BC.

Question: Over the past year, when have you had an experience that was not what you expected? How has God shown His faithfulness through that experience?

Joy

TUESDAY | Psalm 80:1-7

An Urgent Plea: “Turn Us Again!”

“**R**estore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!” (80:3, 7).

The Psalm begins with a petition that hinges on two descriptions of God: “Shepherd of Israel,” and “lead Joseph like a flock” (80:1). These phrases stress the caring closeness of God to His people. It really brings us hope and comfort.

Yes, the LORD is our shepherd. He is willing to lead us. However, many times we love the world and don’t want to follow Him whole-heartedly. Many people question and complain: “Why are there times when God seems silent or absent in a believer’s life?” Actually, not God, but we have turned our backs on Him. Therefore, the psalmist, who like a prophet, keeps praying and asking for the people’s conversion: “Restore us, O God” (80:3), “Restore us, O God of hosts” (80:7), “Turn again, O God of hosts!” (80:14), “Restore us, O LORD God of hosts!” (80:19).

As the prayer is also expressed in terms of the Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6:25), we should have this urgent plea for ourselves and bless the people in our community and family.

In addition, verse 1 speaks of the LORD as “enthroned upon the cherubim,” it is describing His place at the Ark, in the Jerusalem temple. It means the appeal is to the God of power who sits enthroned above the mercy seat. However, many times we focus only on His mercy, ignoring His holiness. What was inside the Ark of the Covenant? It contained the two tablets of law, known as the Ten Commandments, which God gave to Moses (Hebrews 9:4). It may be the reason we hear the lament in verses 4-6. It centres on unanswered prayer, unanswered because of God’s anger. Our God is both holy and merciful. From there He is asked to come and execute judgment and lead His people as of old, restoring them to their former position (80:2).

Let’s also ask God to restore us, following Genesis 1:26-28, humanity being made in God’s image and God’s commission for humankind on the earth!

Xavier Law is the Senior Pastor of Pacific Grace MB Church in Vancouver, BC.

Question: There are three descriptions of God in Psalm 80:1: shepherding, leading, and enthroned. Which one do you want to know and experience more deeply in the coming year?

Joy

WEDNESDAY | Jeremiah 31:31-34

New And Better

Frustration. Disappointment. Futility. We've all known these at some point. These are part of our human experience: the job that doesn't fit, the relationship that doesn't work, the plans that go south, and with that, the yearning for something different, better, new.

Israel was in need of something new. Yes they were privileged. Yes they had a covenant with God whereby God had graciously bound Himself in relationship with them. But they could not keep their part of the relationship. The failure, disappointment, and futility they experienced was of their own making. Disobedience. Disobedience. Disobedience. And now, because of that, they are exiled in a foreign land.

To them, the prophet Jeremiah proclaims that God will do something new. "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant" (31:31). Hebrews tells us it was not only a new way of relating with God, but also a better way. And it was not only for them, but for us too. These words are fulfilled in Christ (Hebrews 8, 10).

If you have ever been frustrated by trying to live in relationship with God by keeping an external set of rules, yet you're unable to do so, be reminded that we celebrate Jesus' advent not just because Jesus came, but because of what He accomplished by His coming. It means the end of our self-effort: "I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts" (31:33). It means a deep, personal relationship through His Spirit: "they shall all know me" (31:34). It means freedom from guilt and shame: "I will remember their sins no more" (31:34). New and better.

No wonder the angel announced His coming as "good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10). Now let's live like that's true!

Tim Klassen is the Lead Pastor at Central Heights Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: How does it look differently for us to live like we are under the "new way" rather than the "old way" of relating to God?

Joy

THURSDAY | Hebrews 10:10-39

Perfected And Made Holy By Jesus

Have you ever felt as though you were drowning in guilt? One of two instincts usually kicks in as a coping mechanism when guilt threatens to send us to the bottom of the ocean.

The first reaction is to resist. We fight against guilt by doing good deeds. By choosing this reaction, we just try to swim harder and faster. We might think that more effort will bring us safely to shore, but that's a lie. The ocean is way too vast. As we tire we embrace self-righteousness. We tell ourselves that we aren't drowning, we're good swimmers. It's the bad swimmers who are drowning. As our hearts become hard and our heads swell, the increased weight of pride takes us straight to the bottom.

A second instinct is to be wrecked by guilt. Guilt washes over us like a tsunami and in the misery of self-hatred we spiral down, reaching for whatever fleeting pleasures we can find to dull and distract us from the inevitable sinking.

Instead of resisting guilt or being wrecked by it, Jesus offers to rescue us completely. "For God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ.... For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who are being made holy" (10:10). It's not our strong strokes that deliver us. We are perfected and made holy by Jesus. We can't swim ourselves out of an ocean of guilt because Jesus' sacrifice drained that ocean dry. "I will never again remember their sins and lawless deeds" (10:17), promised God. This ancient promise is fulfilled in Jesus. God doesn't hold our sins against us, and we shouldn't either.

Because of Jesus, the ocean of guilt is replaced with one of gratitude and joy, and we can swim in that all day!

Dennis Wilkinson is the Urban Missionary at Meta Communities in Vancouver, BC.

Question: Discuss how you have responded to your own guilt in wrong ways and how, because of Jesus, this is no longer the case.

Joy

FRIDAY | Hebrews 13:7-17

A Sacrifice Of Praise

“**W**hat would you do if the enemy attacked?” barked the lieutenant.

Seventeen-year-old César responded, “Pray.” Whack. The wooden mallet cracked over his head.

The question was flung at him a second time. Again, César responded, “Pray.” And again the mallet rained a beating onto his skull.

Midway through this story to an audience of almost 8,000 at Mennonite World Conference (MWC), César Garcia, executive director of MWC and Mennonite Brethren church leader from Colombia, stopped. He turned to us and asked, “Why did that 17-year-old give such a costly answer to the lieutenant?”

César went on to describe how, at that point in his life, he was on a path away from the church. At that point in his life he was confused, not sure if he even believed in God. At that point in his life he was not particularly courageous. So where did the strength to stand up to the bellowing lieutenant come from?

Conviction is contagious! César described the four other teens already groaning on the floor, having given similar answers to the lieutenant. Like the words of Hebrews, those four had gone “outside, where Jesus is, where the action is—not trying to be privileged insiders, but taking [their] share in the abuse of Jesus” (13:13).

That day, those four Jesus-followers taught César about “a sacrifice of praise.” They offered to God, and to each other, the attitude, words, and actions of courage and thanksgiving, even when the situation was grueling.

A sacrifice, by definition, is costly. A sacrifice of praise is an investment in joy far more powerful than the happiness of our circumstances. For César, the sacrifice of praise of those four boys made a joyful difference in the rest of his life.

Mary Anne Isaak is the Pastor at River East Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg, MB.

Question: What attitude, word, or action of thanksgiving in a difficult situation have you seen or experienced recently?

Joy

SATURDAY | Philippians 4:4-7

Joy To The World

When I was a little girl, there was a young adult who would spend time singing hymns with me. She would play the piano and I would sing along as best I could. I loved it! Years later, she told me that one of her favorite memories was singing “Joy to the World.” I would get the words mixed up and sing: “Joy to the world, the Lord is come; Let earth receive her King: Let every heart, prepare *His* room...” (instead of *Him* room). I thought we needed to literally prepare a room for Jesus to sleep in! It seemed quite obvious to me that if Jesus was coming, we needed to get ready.

In fact, that *is* what the song “Joy to the World” is about. Often we sing it at Christmastime as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, but it was written more about preparing ourselves for Jesus’ second coming. The song reminds us that we must continue to share the hope, peace, joy, and love of the Gospel with the world as we patiently and expectantly wait for Jesus to come again.

Paul taught the same message when he wrote to the Philippian church: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near” (4:4-5). Paul wanted the Philippians to be joyful people and for it to be obvious to everyone they knew. Jesus had come and was coming again. They needed to be ready and share that message with those around them.

How do we become joyful people, especially when we don’t feel joyful? Take time to stop and say thank you! When we cultivate an attitude of thanks, it softens our hearts and makes room for gentleness and joy. What a great gift to share with those around us!

Sherri Guenther Trautwein is the Assistant Pastor at Lendrum MB Church in Edmonton, AB.

Question: What is one thing you are thankful for this Advent season?

WEEK FOUR

LOVE

Love

SUNDAY | Micah 5:2-5a

Brace Yourself!

During the 2011 Christmas holidays my parents took our family—3 sons, 3 daughters-in-law, and 7 grandchildren—to Disneyland. Members of my family who were tall enough went on “Splash Mountain,” a ride that ends with a 50-foot drop and leaves everyone soaked. As you begin to fall, a photo is snapped. When you exit the ride, you can see the pictures of people’s expressions on the final plunge. The looks of fear, surprise, and delight are as amusing as the rollercoaster itself. Some folks think ahead: they deliberately make goofy faces, strike weird poses, or brandish props! (Google “rollercoaster faces” for funny examples.) No matter what, people brace themselves.

Much of life involves bracing ourselves. My parents prepared themselves for Disneyland by working and saving up money for a year. We adults readied ourselves for long drives, long line-ups, and long faces by packing stories, strollers, and snacks. The grandkids primed themselves with visions of fun with cousins and Mickey Mouse dancing in their heads.

Micah’s 2700 year-old oracle is its own emotional rollercoaster of brace yourself messages. To the city of Jerusalem besieged by Assyria—fright: “Prepare for the last stand! You will be abandoned!” (5:1, 3). To the village of Bethlehem—surprise: “Get ready! From you will come a shepherd who rules in the strength of the Lord!” (5:2, 4). To the nations—joy: “Pack up! All exiles will return home to security and peace!” (5:3-5).

God’s love can be tough. It feels like you’re free falling. But God’s love can surprise. It leaves your heart racing, eyes blurred. And sometimes God’s love appears just beyond the curve. It makes you raise your hands and release yourself into the thrill ride unlike anything else.

Here comes the last week of Advent. It’s a ride that soaks you in God’s love, a love that is deep and wide and remains even when we’re uncertain about it. Brace yourself!

Jonathan Janzen is the Pastoral Elder at Highland Community Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: Imagine you’re riding the “God’s Love” rollercoaster at West Edmonton Mall. An on-board camera snaps your picture. How does your appearance reflect your feelings about God’s love?

Love

MONDAY | Psalm 113

The God Who Stoops Down

When I was a kid, I loved basketball. I was also very short for my age. When I was going into Grade 8, I went to a summer basketball camp where some of the counselors were professional players. To me, they were giants—both in stature and accomplishment. I remember one player in particular who took an interest in me. He was six foot ten! To say that I looked up to him is a great understatement. But during that week he stooped down into my life and blessed me with encouragement and inspiration. He showed me love, and I was thrilled.

The God of Psalm 113 is high and exalted and worthy of our praise, but He has shown us His great love by stooping down into our lives. “Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?” (113:5-6).

At Christmas, we are reminded that God in Christ has not only taken interest in us but has come down to lift us up. For those who identify themselves as poor, needy, and barren before God (113:7-9), He comes with hope and promises change. No matter how low we feel and how desperate we are, God cares deeply for us today. From poverty to riches, from barrenness to abundance, from disappointment to joy, God is eager to stoop down into our lives and bring transformation.

Mark J. H. Klassen is the Creative Director at MB Mission and attends Yarrow MB Church in Yarrow, BC.

Question: Can you remember someone in your life that acted like God and stooped down in order to give you hope and encouragement? Will you do the same for others?

Love

TUESDAY | 2 Peter 1:16-21

The Power In God's Fulfillment

When I asked my twelve-year-old daughter what word comes to mind when I say “power,” she answered, “electricity!” No doubt she has heard me talk about paying the power bill while complaining that the lights were left on in the house (again)! It’s not the flow of electricity she had in mind, but the force. It’s natural to think of power as a dynamic force, or even a combustible or explosive energy. It’s also common to have these images in mind while imagining the way God works.

Yet the Christmas story seems to be just the opposite: God and His angels announcing peace, giving comfort, instructing through dreams, and guiding to safety, all the while dodging and avoiding the schemes of those *in power*.

We have all seen power that dominates. We might describe it as overpowering, and use words such as control, rule, or manipulate. But have you also seen power that enables? We might describe it as empowering, and use words such as support, assist, or sustain.

The irony in Peter’s second letter is that he is describing the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ *in power* (1:16). The fragility of Jesus, coming as a baby, fulfilling all that the prophets spoke as they were carried along by the Spirit was Christ coming in power—*God’s power*.

Jesus in the manger is not the exception in God’s way of loving the world and fulfilling all things; Jesus *is* God’s way. The prophets and apostles told us long ago that we would stumble over this way and think it foolish, but Christmas Day is fast approaching, and it will remind us, once again, of the way God works, and of the way God asks us to live.

Jeff Peters is the Director of Advancement at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and attends Highland Community Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: Do you imagine God mostly using power that dominates (overpower) or power that enables (empower)? Which do you prefer? Describe your experience of power to one another today.

Love

WEDNESDAY | Titus 3:4-7

Gift Of Love

Gifts are wrapped differently; some are wrapped in shiny paper with matching bows, others are covered in brown paper with twine, others still are in gift bags of all shapes and sizes. Special gifts may come in a tiny box or with a sign stating: “some assembly required!” The outside wrapping or size of the gift does not always reflect the value of what is inside. After all, a ring, promising a commitment of love and faithfulness comes in a box that fits in your pocket!

God’s amazing gift came to us wrapped in the person of Jesus. The essence of this gift was love, mercy, grace, and sacrifice, which gave us freedom from our sin. We did nothing to receive this gift. “But when God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done but because of his mercy” (3:4-5). There was nothing we could have done to deserve or earn His love and the gift of Himself. He declared us righteous for the purpose of living with Him in eternity one day!

Many people all over the world are looking for just such a gift. They are searching for it, but they may have never heard the name of Jesus or had an opportunity to unwrap this gift of love that was freely given for them.

Maryanne Berge is the Missions Pastor at Forest Grove Community Church in Saskatoon, SK.

Question: Spend time thanking God for His unending grace and kindness towards you through Jesus. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you share God’s gift of love, mercy, and kindness towards others this week as you celebrate Jesus’ coming to earth.

Love

THURSDAY | Luke 2:1-20

Glory To God And On Earth Peace!

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree....” These opening words of Luke 2 are among the most familiar passages in the Bible largely due to the tradition of hearing them read aloud in thousands of candle-lit services and homes at this time each year. The story, as told by the doctor Luke, is a finely crafted example of economical storytelling. In seven succinct verses he provides just enough detail to situate the nativity story within the grand sweep of the ancient Roman Empire, and to signal the aggravating and disruptive impact of often despotic imperial decisions on the lives of thousands of ordinary Jewish people, and on one young couple, Joseph and Mary, in their distressingly scandalous circumstances in particular.

There are several angles one could follow in this tantalizing introduction, but like the lighting in a theatre production, Luke focuses our attention with yet another angel story (his third) on how the intersection of these two worlds now dovetail with a divine calendar. A group of nearby shepherds, occupied with the dreary task of caring for their sheep, receives an unexpected and terrifying visit by a messenger from God. Their mundane world is suddenly juxtaposed with the most mysteriously spectacular and shocking announcement the world has ever heard: the newborn baby is the long-awaited Messiah!!

Unlike the other two previous angelic visitations described by Luke, this time an entire company of celestial beings appear, offering the ultimate exclamation mark to emphasize the cosmic significance of this epic moment. We are not to miss the point that the coming of Emmanuel (God with us) is all about bringing “Glory to God” and “on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests” (2:14).

Bruce L. Guenther is the President and Associate Professor of Church History and Mennonite Studies at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and attends Bakerview Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: As you celebrate Christmas, how might your encounter with the Christ-child be, like the shepherds, first and foremost about glorifying God and bringing His reconciling peace to those around you?

Love

FRIDAY | John 1:14; Hebrews 1:1-4

God Came Near

One year, our family spent Christmas in Manila, Philippines. By far, the most beloved icon found in every taxi, marketplace, and park was a replica of the Santo Niño, an image of the infant Jesus, gifted to the Filipino people over 500 years ago. The original statue stands 12 inches high, and is clothed in elaborate royal robes, complete with golden crown and sceptre. We saw ornate images of the Santo Niño being carried in Christmas festivals and street celebrations throughout the city, but the real Santo Niño resides in a cathedral behind bulletproof glass.

Is this the Christ-child we welcome today?

Incredibly, the God of the universe did not choose to enter this world wrapped in riches and shielded from humanity. Rather, as a fragile, crying newborn, Jesus “came into the very world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him” (John 1:10). The world was expecting a Santo Niño, but instead God chose to become poor for our sake. His first lodging was the womb of a teenage girl and then the feeding trough of animals. Why? Motivated by love, God wanted to be near us, to walk with us, to befriend us and to save us—ultimately, to be known by us. So as a humble baby He became one of us. The Apostle John expresses such a reality: “So the Word became human, and made his home among us” (John 1:14). Not in some remote, walled cathedral or behind bulletproof glass, but remarkably, up close and personal, the eternal God chose to come near to each one of us through His Son, Jesus. He is Emmanuel, God with us.

Janet Thiessen is the Associate Pastor at North Langley Community Church in Langley, BC.

Question: Take the time today to ponder what it means for you that God chose to be with you in Jesus. What in your life changes as a result?



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