



ADVENT

DEVOTIONAL

- 2021 -



Oh come all ye faithful
Come let us adore Him
Oh come all ye faithful
Come let us adore Him



Introduction

I confess that I used to be an Advent snob. I used to roll my eyes if we sang Christmas carols too early in the season, judge when others rushed too quickly to celebrate Christ's birth, and remind anyone who would listen that the season of Advent is distinct from Christmas (technically, the season of Christmas begins on Christmas Day and ends on Epiphany). I'm even strict about keeping the baby Jesus out of the crèche until Christmas Eve.

I love the church calendar. Its seasons and holy days offer a gracious alternative to the restlessness of our crazy-busy lives. For its part, Advent is a holy season of longing and expectation during which we anticipate the arrival of a much-needed savior. And while it is important that we take time to name all that is not right in the world and in ourselves, I've changed my mind about delaying our joy until Christmas Day. Saint Augustine preached that Christ's birth is always happening, and if that is true, then there is always a cause for joy, even – perhaps *especially* – amid our holy longing for the world to be a better place. The work of God is often a mixture of longing and joy, anticipation and celebration.

So this Advent, let's embrace the "already/not yet" work of God. Decorate as early as you'd like. Sing Christmas carols all season long until your heart is content. By all means, put baby Jesus in the manger before Christmas Eve. It's never too early to celebrate and adore the one who has come, is come, and will come again.

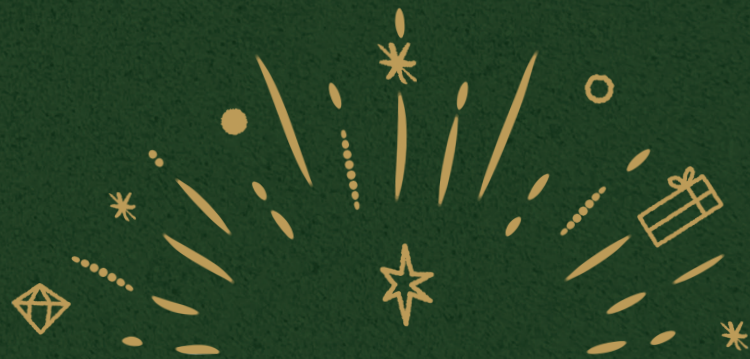
Jon Wasson
Associate Pastor for Discipleship

How To Use This Devotional

This devotional is intended to be a useful resource this Advent season. Inside you'll find reflections written by Covenant members reflecting on scripture, prayers, poems, recipes to try, and more. As we did last year, we also included some material for after Christmas Day. We hope it is a blessing to you. Our theme for this season is adoration. In Jesus Christ, God has made his way into our world and into our lives. The invitation to us is the same invitation extended to all those witnesses of the first Christmas: **Come, let us adore him.**

The daily scripture readings are drawn from the Two-Year Daily Lectionary from the Book of Common Worship. We encourage you to read the selected scripture for each day and invite you to pay attention to how God may be speaking to you through the scripture and the author's reflection. Covenant member Ed Seymour is a poet and accepted our invitation to write "occasional poems" for each week of Advent, reflecting on the weekly themes of hope, peace, joy, and love.

Special thanks to Danielle Walker for her beautiful photography that you'll find throughout this devotional.



ADVENT PLAYLIST

We've also created an Advent playlist for you to listen to during this season. You can find the playlist at covenant.org/playlist.

Blessing Of A Christmas Tree

Use this liturgy as you light your Christmas tree. If you are with others, read it responsively with a leader reading the regular text and reading the bold text together.

READ JOHN 1:1-9

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

As we prepare our house for the arrival of Christmas, we also prepare our hearts for the returning Christ.

You came once for your people, O Lord, and you will come again.

Though there was no room at the inn to receive you upon your first arrival,
We prepare you room here in our hearts and here in our home, Lord Christ.

As we decorate and celebrate, we do so to mark the memory of your redemptive movement into our broken world, O God.

Bless this tree, this sign of life and freshness and perseverance in our midst. It stands as a reminder that you are born anew in us each day.

Bless our family and friends as we celebrate this joyous season.

Keep us safe in our travels, kind in our conversations, and gracious in our giving and receiving.

Lord God,

**let your blessing come upon us
as we light this tree.**

May the light and cheer it gives

be a sign of the joy that fills our hearts.

May all who delight in this tree

come to the knowledge and joy of salvation.

We ask this through Christ our Lord, the light of life.

Amen.



HOPE

That which we
Freely offer
Each
Other

This is an
Innately human
Characteristic
That appears

As people
Gather
In person
Or in spirit

This flies in the face
Of fear
Spontaneously appears
When you lend a hand or simply listen

Hope offers
A leg up
When you feel
Down or overwhelmed

Hope
Inspires us
To do things
Proclaimed impossible

Hope
Casts a special light
To show
You are not alone

But
In the company
Of others
Who care

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise"
Jeremiah 33.14

SUNDAY 28
NOVEMBER

EVEN WHEN HE IS SILENT

LAURA TUMA

Psalm 25:1 “In you, Lord my God, I put my trust.”

It’s a question everyone eventually must answer: Where do I put my trust? Where do I turn for wisdom, encouragement, and hope when things get rough. Is it myself, friends and family, “experts,” the internet? They’ve all let me down, yet I keep going back for more. Perhaps it’s because I can summon them on command, which gives me a sense of control when I am in distress.

When I turn to God, I’m definitely not in control, and sometimes, I don’t feel a sense of connection. God doesn’t necessarily respond on my schedule or in a way I recognize. The temptation to doubt can be real. I’m not alone in this struggle; people throughout time have made the choice to trust God, often in more dire circumstances than I have ever experienced.

One of my role models is an unknown prisoner who carved a poem into the wall of a World War II concentration camp.

*I believe in the sun
even when it’s not shining.*

*I believe in love
even when I feel it not.*

*I believe in God
even when he is silent.*

Renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma calls the poem a masterwork of taking us “from the tragic to the transcendent” in just a few words. Composer Kim Andre Arnesen arranged it into a haunting song, *Even When He is Silent*, which became part of the Journey Youth Choir repertoire under the direction of our beloved Stacy Curtis. Many of us were brought to tears each time it was performed.

We enter this Advent season mourning the loss of Stacy and others who left us too soon. We face complicated challenges and uncertainties. We are affected by forces we cannot control. But we worship a God who is faithful and unchanging, who brings light into darkness and renews our strength day by day. This is the God I choose to trust, even when He is silent.

PRAYER:

Lord God Almighty, in you alone we put our trust. Our hope is in you all day long. Show us your ways and teach us your paths. Guide us in your truth and remember your great mercy and love. We praise you, Lord, for you are good. Amen.

Laura Tuma has been part of the Covenant family for 20 years and has formed many close and meaningful relationships here. Stuck at home during the long covid-19 era, she read scores of books, crocheted a mountain of blankets, learned to landscape with succulents, spent untold hours on business and social Zoom calls, and missed live interactions like crazy. Through it all, she never lost hope.

MONDAY 29
NOVEMBER

HOPE OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE

JOHN RUWWE

Matthew 21

Hope isn’t a word I give a lot of deep thought to on a regular basis. Sure, I have hoped for the TCU Horned Frogs to win a football game or hoped a well I was drilling wasn’t a dry hole, but that is different from *really, really* placing my hope in something bigger and larger than myself.

Matthew 21:12-22 tells the familiar story of Jesus entering the temple and throwing out the moneychangers, loan sharks and merchants. Tucked away in the text is the mention of the blind and lame who were there to see Jesus. They hoped to see or touch Him and be healed. Amid the chaos, Jesus saw and healed them. Their hope was deep and strong. Jesus recognized it and turned their lives around.

What do you hope for? Not the everyday hope for conveniences in our busy lives, but the deep and honest hopes and desires for ourselves, our families, our country and our world? Spending time reading the Bible during my quiet time or participating in our Covenant small group have been great ways for me to stay engaged in the Word and be more hopeful. Knowing Jesus is there to comfort, heal and encourage me provides the best hope.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your son Jesus Christ who came into this world to provide hope and salvation to those who believe in Him. Lord, you are my hope and I trust in you. Amen.

John and his wife, Lacy, have been part of the Covenant family for over 30 years and raised four children who live and work in Austin. They split time between Austin and a family ranch in the Cuero-Victoria area. John enjoys working as a geologist prospecting for oil and gas, cycling, ranch work and cooking meals for family dinners.

TUESDAY 30
NOVEMBER

LOVE IS THE REASON

NOOSHI SAADAT AND MOHSEN AHMADIAN

Peter 1:12-21

Hope starts with an uneasy feeling, a struggle, trouble, grief, or longing for a better situation than the one in which we often find ourselves. It is followed by a prayer or an action that we take in order to change our circumstances. This cycle is experienced by thousands of immigrants who seek refuge in America every year in order to find a better life than the one they had in their home countries they left behind.

When we were asked to reflect, pray, and write about hope for this year's Advent devotional, we thought of writing through the lens of an immigrant family: our fight to get to America from Iran during a bloody war in the '80s, the struggle to survive in a different culture, go to school, and attain the comforts of "the American dream." Growing up in the U.S. during one of the most tension-filled times in history, and the messy divorce between the Iranian and American governments, we often felt like we were not really welcome here.

Truthfully, it was not until we attended CPC small groups that we started to finally fit several of the missing pieces together. We learned that the Lord's love is universal and we are loved equally as creatures in the Kingdom of God. After witnessing the love of the Lord from the CPC congregation, we began trusting that the Lord protected us through our toughest moments. We have learned that when God's grace shows up, the biggest obstacles can be overcome, and His blessings are multiplied through the actions of His believers. Given our immigrant experience, we have been called to share our blessings by serving the numerous angels that volunteer on the CPC's refugee ministry team who are lovingly turning CPC into fertile soil for the HOPE that is required for the flourishing of new mustard seeds being planted in our community.

"He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches'" (Matthew 13:31-32).

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, Thank you for your unconditional love. Please grant us an open heart and willingness to serve your people regardless of their race, color, and religion so that your grace and peace are multiplied through our words and actions. Amen.

Nooshi Saadat, Mohsen Ahmadian, and their daughter, Marjon, have been attending Covenant since they moved to Austin in 1999.

WEDNESDAY 01
DECEMBER

TRANSCENDENT HOPE

MICHAEL KNISELY

2 Peter 3:1-10, Psalm 147:11

As we enter the season of Advent, it is possible that some of you are not feeling particularly hopeful. Maybe I shouldn't presume to speak for you; but for me, there are worries about finances, family, health and the state of society. Others may be grappling with serious illness, addiction, abuse, depression, or a different set of concerns.

Given the world in which we live—and our nature—it is easy to neglect hope and focus on the difficulties in front of us, which can seem all-consuming. The Apostle Peter writes of "scoffers" who focus on the ways of our world and their mindset that "everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:3-4). Sheepishly, I admit to sometimes finding myself among the scoffers. But even though we are in this world, and in fact are constructed from the elements of it, God has seeded in us the remarkable ability to sense the transcendent—to sense Him.

It is helpful for me, particularly during this season of patient expectation, to remember that literally everything comes down to one person: Jesus Christ. If Jesus of Nazareth was a real person who walked the Earth, did and said the things people claimed, rose from the dead, and appeared to others who were able to confirm that it was Him, then there has never been anyone or anything like Him. Jesus is the gamechanger. He is the transcendent hope that gives us peace when the world around us seems out of control.

If you are having a hard time being patiently expectant in your circumstances, remember that "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:8-9). Don't fall prey to the instincts of this world: don't deliberately forget all that God has done and is capable of. It is not that all our prayers will be answered in the way we want, or that we will be given everything we desire, but rather that we would and could have His life that transcends this world. We can experience that transcendent life if we believe and commit ourselves to the person of Christ and allow His Spirit to dwell within us. That is our transcendent hope.

PRAYER:

Lord of Heaven and Earth, increase my faith in your providence so that I may stand firm in my hope in you. May I learn from my trials and understand what you want me to understand in times of affliction. Help me to remember that you delight in those who put their hope in your unfailing love. Amen.

Michael has been attending Covenant since childhood. He is an attorney, and he enjoys books regardless of genre and all things soccer. He is awfully fond of his wife Shannon and their children, Ashton, Brammer, and Carolina.

Favorite Christmas Traditions

ONE OF GOD’S BEST GIFTS IS HOPE!

MISSY STRITTMATTER

Psalm 18:1-20

Hope is one of God’s mysteries. Christ is hope personified, and Christmas is hope incarnate. As I reflect on the Advent season, I realize that my life is hope personified. I have met some dark and challenging times and yet every step of my path, the triune God has been there, ever reaching toward me, ever saying “come dwell in the rock I have provided you,” ever offering hope!

I love the book of Psalms because it is so real. It has laughter, joy, anger, lament, and above all, hope. In Psalm 18:1-20, the author praises God’s strength and protection that is the source of hope. In other psalms the author rails against God, gives thanks, mourns and wails. The psalms encompass every emotion we humans have. My late father-in-law used to say that God expects us to argue and bring all of our emotions to him, including anger, frustration, and sadness. He made us and also made our emotions. He meets us in this place, with love, understanding, patience, and hope!

Every day—not just Easter and Christmas—Christ is our hope, forgiveness, and promise of eternal life. He is the hope that surpasses all understanding. Christ is our do-over, with new mercies every morning!

Christmas is a time to celebrate God’s mercy and love in his gift of hope to us through Christ. Martin Luther’s *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* (one of my favorites!) may not come from Psalm 18, but to me it fits perfectly. Scripture assures us that God is our fortress, deliverer, rock, refuge, salvation, and stronghold. No matter what befalls us, He is there. When we cry out, He hears us. He plucks us from the water and rescues us, because as it says, He delights in us. What a joyful call for us to hold on to hope!

PRAYER:

Dear God, as we step ever closer to the day when we celebrate your gift of hope coming to earth to dwell with us, Emmanuel, let us take a moment to be still, breathe in hope and exhale worry, discontent, fear, and all that strives to thwart us on our path. God, we call on your name to sustain us, lift us up, and allow us to feel your presence in our lives. Thank you for the gift of Jesus. Thank you for your Holy Spirit. Thank you for your gift of Hope! Amen.

Missy and her children, Dane (18) and Finn (15) have been attending Covenant for nearly a decade. Missy has volunteered in Children’s Ministry and most recently on the Love Letter Fund. Missy grew up in El Paso so Christmas always includes tamales and caldillo, and her guys still seek each Christmas morning to find the pickle hidden in the tree! If you don’t know what that means, ask her. You will want to start this tradition in your house!

Our family celebrates the beginning of Advent with a fresh Christmas tree. Each year we add new ornaments to our collection and enjoy remembering Christmases past as we decorate our tree.

- BETH FEGER

I am a South Texas girl, so no Christmas is complete without a tamale feast.

- LAURA TUMA

Christmas Eve is ushered in with three generations of Barbers in church lifting our candles high while singing *Silent Night*. Gigi always has tears running down her cheeks.

- SALLY BARBER

We usually celebrate Christmas with family and friends by attending services at Covenant on Christmas Eve afternoon and opening our presents under the tree after a tamale dinner. On Christmas Day, we sleep late, and then go on a hike so we can enjoy another family meal!

- JOHN RUWWE

A favorite tradition is to bring out the indoor and outdoor Christmas decorations right after Thanksgiving and enjoy a family get-together to decorate our Christmas tree.

- WENDELL BELL

Our family enjoys the ritual of an *Elf* movie quote-along as we put up our Christmas tree and watching *Christmas Vacation* on Christmas Eve, eggnog-filled moose mug in hand.

- KARI LAVELLE

The Knisely family enjoys piling in the car and driving around Austin’s various neighborhoods to marvel at Christmas decorations.

- MICHAEL KNISELY

Every year, our family enjoys inviting the neighbors over to create paper chains to countdown to Christmas.

- CORIE RODENBUSCH

I have come to find out that this is not a very original tradition, but I love it nonetheless—every Christmas Eve, everyone in my family gets to open one present and to everyone’s surprise, it’s always pajamas.

- CAMPBELL KEGERREIS

Cooking pies (chess and pumpkin) on Christmas Eve.

- JIM WEATHERBY

FRIDAY 03
DECEMBER

SEEK THE LORD AND LIVE

RON KESSLER

Amos 5:4, 6

Twice in today's scripture reading, Amos, referred to as the angry prophet, tries to reorient Judah and Israel in the times before the exile. In the midst of his angry rant, he shares these words: "Seek the Lord and live" (Amos 5:4, 6).

I feel anger for the times in which I live. There is so much acrimony, selfishness, asocial-individualism, and an internet gone vicious and viral. A society gone astray.

But wait Ron, this is Advent, the season of Hope, not of rants. Oh, how easy it is to be the worst Ron and not the Ron I want to be.

Yet, the quest for Hope hangs over my emotional worst. Amos finding Hope in all his anger encourages me, lifts me out of my emotional swamp. Thank you, Amos, for these words of Hope and wisdom which set a standard that speaks to us whenever we get off course morally and otherwise.

What is the standard? The prophet Amos answers: "Seek the Lord and live."

The wonder and magnificence of Scripture. Amos was not a man of the court like Isaiah, or a priest like Jeremiah. Amos earned his living as a shepherd and tending fig trees in Tekoa, a small town outside Bethlehem. Yet God called him to speak to you and me at Advent this very year. "Seek the Lord and live."

I love Advent and have ever since I was a young boy growing up in Hutchinson, Kansas, learning that God is love at Trinity United Methodist Church. As I grew older and became more influenced by liturgical churches, this became as important a beginning as the start of a school year or the beginning of a new year. I get excited every year. The beginning of the church year; the preparation for the Christ child; the lighting of the candles of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love; and the Incarnation, God coming to live among us. Just writing this I am feeling excited, recalling memories of this season with family and friends. This is my favorite beginning season.

PRAYER:

Give me a child-like exuberance for this season, that I might tingle and giggle with the emotions represented by Advent colors, candles, and cookies. Enhance my senses of touch, sound, hearing, smell, and sight so that this Advent I will come more alive in Christ Jesus. Remind me that each candle is a symbol of Jesus coming into the world to be the light that drives out the darkness. Amen.

A recovering lawyer and called to executive leadership coaching in 2002, Ron is husband to Vicki (54 years); father to Kristin Schell, Matthew Kessler, and Emily Carter; and grandfather to Will, Anna, Ellie, Jack, Sarah, Ben, Susanna, Barrett, and Charlie. He and Vicki joined Covenant in 2018. Ministry: men's small group leader. Biblical name: Barnabas.

SATURDAY 04
DECEMBER

A TIME TO PERSEVERE

MARY BETH BOSWORTH

Jude 17-25

In March of 2020, I remember expecting that the shut-down of schools and society would be temporary. But weeks turned into months, and months turned into a year and a half, with many ups and downs and stops and starts. Over this season, I have reflected on other events that began suddenly and ended slowly: Israel wandering in the desert, The Great Depression, or World War II, to name a few. A significant amount of perseverance, as well as finding joy in the day-to-day, must have certainly helped them push through these tough times. I am sure they often wondered if there was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Similarly, in writing to believers almost 2,000 years ago, Jude focused on encouraging the reader to hang in there, to let them know that they are not alone, and that the Lord is with them. He encouraged them to finish strong by building themselves up through faith and praying to the Holy Spirit. Additionally, he instructed believers to build others up and to be loving and merciful to those they encounter.

I am struck at how relevant this passage is—not only in today's circumstances, but in many situations I have encountered over the years. Leaning on the Lord is a large part of what got me through those situations (although truthfully, many times I tried to deal with it on my own first).

Whether you are languishing through the pandemic, experiencing loss, navigating through an illness, experiencing stressful times at work, struggling with family dynamics, or wandering in the spiritual desert—you are not alone. The Lord is with you and sends his people to come alongside you. There is hope in the assurance that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

As we enter this Advent season, I hope you can reflect on His mercy and love and remember that the Lord cares about your heart and invites you to lean on Him.

PRAYER:

Lord, may we keep hope in your Word as the source of encouragement as we persevere through whatever season we may be in. I pray we find a closer relationship with you as our creator as we seek your wisdom for what you have in store. May we longingly hope for and experience the joy and peace that comes through you. Amen.

Mary Beth Bosworth was born to Texan parents but grew up in Washington State where her dad was a pastor and mom served as church pianist. She came down to Texas for college where she met her husband Tim. They lived in Seattle for 13 years after graduation and moved to Austin eight years ago with their sons Brendan (15) and Dylan (12). They have been attending Covenant for a little over four years.



PEACE

The elusive thing
Desired by all
In the context
Of family and friends

To get there
In the midst of mayhem
And
Mistruth

Requires dedication
To the idea
We are people
On both sides

Of any conflict
Each with
Mothers, fathers
Brothers, sisters

Who at the end
Of any day
Simply want
A safe place to stay

Food to eat
And really wish no harm
To other
Families and friends

It becomes complex
When other people
Become impersonal
Pronoun of them

Whereupon
The fact they are people
Like us
Blurs in the fog

Of propaganda
Of social media
Of fake news
Of fear generating junk

To snag peace
For our own
Simply
Requires faith in people

SUNDAY 05
DECEMBER

HOPEFUL WAITING

SHERYL AND HARRY EVANS

Psalm 27:14 “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!”

Psalm 130:5 “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.”

Advent is all about waiting with hopeful hearts. We are waiting for the Christ child. We are waiting for light and peace, for joy. We are waiting for family gatherings, for seeing loved ones both near and far. This year especially brings us a little more excitement as many of us did not gather with family and friends last year during the height of the pandemic.

Last Advent, we were joyfully waiting for the birth of a grandson in April—our third grandchild. That joy turned to worry and trepidation when our daughter-in-law was hospitalized in December with fears of an early delivery. On Christmas Eve, 15 weeks early, our grandson made his entrance to this world. Our hopeful, joyful waiting was replaced with fear. He was so tiny. Barely a pound. We were with the other two grandchildren on Christmas morning trying to make Christmas exciting and fun. Their parents joined us on FaceTime, sharing the news of an early Christmas gift at the end of all the gift opening. We tried so hard to keep the Christmas spirit of hope, joy and peace in that house. The littlest grandchild didn't notice, but the older one sure did. The next few months were hard. But little by little, the baby got better and stronger. There were setbacks and then gains. It was May before we saw any photos. Finally, in July, on his seven-month birthday, he came home! There's still a long road ahead, but he's healthy and very happy. What a difference a year makes!

The Lord is good. He hears us and answers our prayers. He gives us hope, peace and joy. His timing is perfect.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, we are grateful for your faithful presence. Give us patience to wait on your timing. We are blessed with your light, peace and joy. Most of all, we are blessed with your Son, Jesus Christ. In His name we pray. Amen.

Sheryl and Harry first began attending Covenant in 2016. They live in Austin, have been married since 1993 and have three adult children—a daughter in Temple, a son in Austin and another son in North Carolina. Although both have retired from their first careers, they stay busy volunteering, consulting and traveling.

MONDAY 06
DECEMBER

MAY THE LORD THINK OF US

CORIE RODENBUSCH

Psalm 40:17

“But as for me, I am poor and needy;

may the Lord think of me.

You are my help and my deliverer;

you are my God, do not delay.”

Growing up in Houston, I lived just down the street from the neighborhood church. I loved the freedom of running up for a last-minute youth event or walking home from service. If I was ever home by myself and needed help, my first stop was the church receptionist. My strongest memories of growing up in the church take place during the season of Advent when the cross was displayed in the front yard, draped in purple. As a young person, the season of Advent meant hopeful anticipation and surrender. It was a welcomed disruption and an annual reminder of my place in this world—the truth that God was King, and I am his watchful, ready servant.

Fast forward 20 years, as a working mom of four, Advent has become less a season of surrender and watchful servanthood and more a season of “control,” “orchestration,” and “duty.” Over time, I've allowed myself to believe that my life is within my control and that my heart is exempt from the “disruption” of God. God has not forgotten me during this time. He has faithfully brought me back to reality, through scripture and the imagery of humility—humbling myself “under the mighty hand of God” (1 Peter 5:6-8). I feel the weight of God's hand over me, I'm gently removed from the throne and returned to my place. His firm, knowing hand reminds me of my need, forgives me for my pride and restores me with the peace that He is in control.

May God find you this Advent season and disrupt you with peace.

PRAYER:

Lord, we are poor and needy, may you think of us. You are our help and our deliver; you are our God, do not delay. Amen.

Corie and her husband of 15 years, Will, moved to Austin to attend the University of Texas. Her family of six joined Covenant after moving to the neighborhood in 2019. They live within walking distance from the church in hopes of providing their kids the same childhood experience they had growing up in Houston.

TUESDAY 07
DECEMBER

PEACE THROUGH PURPOSE

DANIEL YURCO

Revelation 1

There's one book in the Bible I don't rely on when it comes to finding peace: Revelation. It's a pretty heavy book with a lot of scary imagery. It's far from peaceful. Yet somehow, I find a great deal of peace in Revelation 1.

The first chapter of Revelation is essentially a call to action for John. If you read from verse 9 through the end of the chapter, it plays out like a Marvel movie end credit scene. Some mysterious figure steps out of the shadows, demonstrates their power or authority, then looks at the protagonist and says something to the effect of, "I have a job for you."

This excerpt gives me peace because I associate purpose with peace, and John is given a huge purpose in chronicling the past, present, and even the future. The children of God all have an overarching purpose in their lives to worship God and share the good news with the people around them.

But as everyone is painfully aware, a lot of purpose has left people's lives in the last two years. A pandemic cut many people's purposes short. People lost friends and family, lost livelihoods, lost community. As a result, peace has gone out of many people's lives.

If you are facing this Advent season lacking a purpose or peace in your life, I ask you to do a few things:

- *Reflect on a time in your life where you felt you had purpose.*
- *Ask God to guide you back to your purpose or to a new purpose.*
- *Observe the peace that comes into your life from simply asking God for renewed purpose.*

PRAYER:

Lord, help me to find a purpose that honors You and Your Kingdom. Help me to find peace in that purpose and spread it to others, so that they may find the purpose and peace that I have found. Amen.

Daniel and his wife Kathleen have been attending Covenant for three years. Their dog Tank is available for snuggles should anyone require them. Daniel is a native Austinite who occasionally grumbles about how the skyline looks different than when he was in school.

WEDNESDAY 08
DECEMBER

SARA

CAMPBELL KEGERREIS

Psalm 17

I was with my family in a hospital room, surrounding my aunt who was losing her battle to breast cancer when I first heard this psalm. I remember it being eerie and feeling uncomfortable as the chaplain began to read it, my eyes fixated on the heart monitor that had been muted and partially turned away by a nurse who had since left the room. I was sixteen at the time and had never been present when someone passed.

We listened intently as the Chaplain recited the words of Psalm 17, replacing each "me," "my," or "I" with Sara's name, "she," or "her." The Chaplain read the final verse of the passage: "As for Sara, she will be vindicated and will see your face; when she awakes, she will be satisfied with seeing your likeness." As if this was her summoning home, Aunt Sara departed from us before the final verse concluded. I watched the small up ticks of her beating heart turn to a straight line on the monitor. A sense of peace washed over everyone as we all slowly came to the realization that she was gone.

As I've gotten older I have reflected on this moment countless times because it was the first time I had to face death head-on. As a sixteen-year-old watching life leave my aunt I remember thinking that death was this big scary thing. However, as I've grown in my faith I have realized that what I witnessed was so much more than a life ending; it was also the beginning of her eternal life with Christ.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, we come to you seeking a peace that only you can give us; a peace that we know we can only have in its entirety upon our reunion with you in Heaven. Quiet our hearts and our minds and let us come close to finding that peace here on earth, and when we can't, remind us that you are sovereign over all things and that your love will never fail. Amen.

Campbell has been at Covenant for four years now and has the privilege of co-leading the 11th grade ladies' D-Group. She enjoys hanging out with her Chorkie, and loves pad thai, UT football, and crocheting baby clothes for other people's babies.

Finding Comfort (and More) in Pie



Covenant member Stuart Young has a talent for making pies. What began as a cathartic exercise for himself quickly grew to a practice of generosity.

Pie was relatively easy for Stuart to make, and it had such a jaw-dropping, spellbinding effect upon those who received them, he began to see the power of this rather simple gesture. Stuart continued to make pies, often two at a time. Pie became a way for him to reach out to people, to connect with them, and it always elicited the same response: "You made a pie?! For me?!"

We asked Stuart for his favorite recipe. We encourage you to try this pie at home, and share your creation with someone you care about. (Read more about Stuart and his pies at covenant.org/pie)

APPLE PIE

FILLING:
4-5 medium Granny Smith apples 1 1/4 c. granulated sugar 1/2 tsp. cinnamon
4 T. flour 1/2 tsp. nutmeg

Put everything but apples into bowl and use a fork to mix together. Peel apples, slice thin and cut into bite size pieces. Add apples to flour/sugar mixture & mix well with large spoon. Set aside.

CRUST:
Put into a 7 cup Cuisinart:
1 5/8 sticks of COLD unsalted butter 2 c. flour
(cut into 6 quarters and 1/8) 1 tsp. salt

Place all ingredients in Cuisinart and mix well. With the Cuisinart on, slowly pour in 1/4 c. COLD water until a ball of pastry forms. Dump pastry onto cutting board & lightly flour. Make a ball & cut in half. Sprinkle flour over a pastry cloth, place 1/2 of the dough on the cloth. Using a rolling pin covered with a pastry sock, flatten the dough until you have about a 5" circle. Roll the dough until large enough to cover over the edges of the pie plate. Gently fit the dough into the plate. Stir the apple mixture & put into pie plate. Repeat process for top crust. Once top crust is on, put your fingers under the edge & cut off the excess, keeping enough to pinch dough together. As you pinch, bring the crust in toward the center of the pie to prevent it from falling over the edge as it bakes. Melt butter & use pastry brush to brush over the top. Make slices across the top to allow the steam to escape.

Bake at 425 degrees for 45 minutes or until crust is brown. Be vigilant! Start checking your pie at about 35 minutes. If you see juice coming up through the slits in top crust, & the color of the crust is to your liking, the pie is done!!

THURSDAY 09
DECEMBER

EXTENDING PEACE

WENDELL BELL

Matthew 23:23

I often think of peace as the absence of war or conflict or being in a state of tranquility. However, peace is more than a passive quality. It is the result of intentional acts of kindness and compassion that flow from a right relationship with God, self, and others.

This Advent season, I am reminded that God's ultimate "peace initiative" was to take on human form, live among us, and teach and demonstrate ways to promote reconciliation. Perhaps God did that because we failed to respond to other types of guidance in human affairs referenced in today's lectionary readings that are filled with harsh imagery of battles, storms, destruction, persecution, and misguided leaders. These are not very "peaceful" scriptures, at least on the surface.

But in Matthew 23:23, Jesus directs us away from trying to seek God's favor through superficial or ostentatious compliance with religious rules towards what really matters: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former." While these words were directed specifically at certain community leaders, they apply to me as well. How about you?

As we prepare spiritually in anticipation of Christmas, my prayer is that we will actively pursue peace by remembering what really matters in our treatment of others.

PRAYER:

Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of peace. Help us to live in ways that extend peace to others not only in this Advent Season but throughout the year. In Christ's name, Amen.

Wendell and his wife Lynn have been members of Covenant since 1986. They have two adult children, Andrew and Rebecca, who "grew up" at Covenant and live nearby. Andrew and wife Whitney (Covenant's Director of Mission) have two pre-school children, Calvin and Lucy, who keep Grandpa and Lola enormously entertained.

I GROAN ALOUD JEN GENOVESI

Psalm 102, Psalm 130, Psalm 16, Matthew 23:37-39

“God, listen! Listen to my prayer, listen to the pain in my cries. Don’t turn your back on me just when I need you so desperately. Pay attention! This is a cry for help! And hurry—this can’t wait” (Psalm 102). Not an Advent passage I’d anticipated, let alone for a week themed PEACE. No matter the translation—The Message, NIV, King James—the misery and urgency are raw:

I am withered like grass

I forget to eat my bread

I groan aloud

my jaws ache from gritting my teeth

my bones burn like glowing embers

This prayer beseeches with knee-buckling, fist-pounding, sweaty, exhausted wails. Disease, violence, emergencies—no lack of anguish or peril pervades the world. We can’t always grab the TV remote and switch the channel. Some trouble hits home. When those we love suffer, and we strain to protect them, it absolutely feels desperate. Even persistent, otherwise-trivial irritations can push us beyond our limit.

Honestly, I’ve been there. Have you? “Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord” (Psalm 130).

These voices reassure me: we are not alone in our grief; go ahead, bring everything we’re suffering to God; naming it out loud demonstrates not lack of faith, but confidence that God hears and cares. “You will not abandon me...therefore my heart is glad” (Psalm 16).

Might our longing be a glimpse of the depth and fervor of God’s longing to rescue us? In Matthew 23:37-39, Jesus expresses that yearning and protective tenderness: “How often I’ve ached to embrace your children, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings...” A shift in perspective can reveal that when things feel scariest and God seems distant or silent, God is actually right there, ready and waiting—a parent patiently reaching outstretched arms to beloved children blinded by their tears. Perhaps our experience of desolate urgency does prepare us for Christmas, helping us recognize our need for God to show up, in person. Not as we expect, but in the most disarmingly innocent form possible: a newborn.

PRAYER:

*Loving God, may we never hesitate to run to you with our grief, fears and worries, confident of your abiding love and eagerness to eliminate any distance between us. As the song **City of God** so beautifully expresses: “I was standing before a wall that had shut out the light, but your love, O God, restored my sight... I was standing before a wall that wasn’t there at all.” Amen.*

Jen Genovesi cherishes the friends who saw her through some big grief this year, and is grateful for many subsequent moments of joy—including hand-stitching a wearable garbage truck for her three-year-old nephew, assisting in making elephant ear pastries with a dear friend, and surprising her husband by hula-hooping (!) for 30 minutes without stopping.

EVERLASTING PEACE WHITNEY BELL

Psalm 90:1-2

I invite you to participate in a quick exercise. Close your eyes and imagine you are somewhere where your heart is completely at peace...

What does that place look like?

What’s the temperature?

What does it smell like?

Who is there?

Are you inside or outside?

What are you doing?

I was asked to do this once and was surprised where I imagined myself. I would have guessed that I would be in the mountains or on a beach or by a lake-somewhere beautiful. That I would be resting, lying down, quiet. Doesn’t that sound peaceful? I was surprised when my mind’s eye led me to sitting in the sanctuary of my home church in Lubbock, Texas. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense as to why my heart was led to this special place. It’s where my parents were married; where my brother and I were baptized; where I was confirmed; where services were held when all of my grandparents passed away; where my brother was married; where Andrew and I were married; where I first experienced the presence of God in worship. No wonder that is where I was led when thinking of a physical space where my heart was at peace—not a beach or a lake, but a sanctuary at a small Presbyterian church in Lubbock. Sometimes what we imagine might bring us peace looks differently than what we expected.

In our passage today, we are reminded of where we should find our peace. Part of that reminder is the truth that where we are in time is a blip. A vapor. This passage places us exactly where we need to be, at the feet of God, declaring “from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.” Friends, our worries, our sorrows, our broken hearts and our fears will not last. They will come and go, rise and fall. But ours is a God who from everlasting to everlasting is God and we are invited this day to make HIM our dwelling place. Our place of peace.

As you think about your place where your heart is at peace, may we be reminded that it doesn’t really matter *where* it is, as long as we are reminded that our everlasting God is with us and our peace can be found in Him—everlasting peace.

PRAYER:

Thank you, Lord, that you are our source of peace. We confess that our lives are often filled with chaos and worry and we easily look for peace in other sources. We are grateful for your everlasting peace and pray that our hearts would be drawn to you this day. Amen.

Whitney Bell serves as the Director of Mission and has been at Covenant for almost ten years. She and husband, Andrew have two precious children, Calvin and Lucy. They enjoy eating queso and watching Texas Tech sports.



Starts as we celebrate
The dawning
Of each
Day as we see it

As we take the time
To offer thanks
For all that
We do have

We celebrate
The blessings
We have been
Granted

We live in a challenging time
But this offers
Us opportunity
To see little things

Which have become
Doors we can enter
Where
Walls appeared before

Proclaim it
Sing it
And most of all
Live it

JOY

"Be not afraid; for I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people."
Luke 2:10

SUNDAY12
DECEMBER

I WANT WHAT SHE HAS

JAN SKAGGS

Psalm 24:1, 7-10; and Psalm 25:1,14-17

"I want what *she* has." The object of my covetous desire was the new puppy my best friend had received for her fifth birthday. The look my mother shot me across the room convinced me that uttering those words was not acceptable in polite company.

I never said them again...out loud. But that didn't stop me from wanting what others had—a cute dress, a cuter boyfriend, a good grade. Later I coveted the affirmation of teachers and professors, success in my first job, a happy marriage, perfect children.... Was I the only one with such a list? Probably not. Did the things on that list make me happy? For a while, but not entirely.

"But then"—two of my favorite words. During the darkest time of my life, when my own plans and dreams were shattered and I was scared and confused, I instinctively turned to a neighbor. Why? Her life had been full of difficulties and disappointments, suffering and failures. In many ways, she was just like me. I knew she would understand. But she also glowed; and I wanted what she had. What she had was joy: the inner peace that is not dependent on circumstances but remains, come what may, because it generates in a relationship that is steady and unchanging.

The Scripture passages for today are about joy. David, lonely, afflicted, pursued by enemies, troubled in heart, convicted of sin, remains joyful and full of praise. How? Why? Because of his relationship with the Lord. Despite all apparent evidence to the contrary, the King of glory is strong and mighty, trustworthy, faithful, loving, and good. "The Lord confides in those who fear Him." He promises to rebuild and restore; the earth is His and everything in it. God saves us through Jesus, sanctifies us through His Holy Spirit, and calls us to share in the glory of Jesus. He wants relationship with us!

This week, take some time to reflect on joy. Would anyone want what you have?

PRAYER:

Lord, draw us close that we may reflect Your light and love to a world that is in great need. Fill us with Your Spirit that the joy of the Lord will spill out of us and splash on to everyone around! May we have what they want, for Your glory. Amen.

Jan Skaggs: child of God, happily married, student of God's Word, member of Covenant for a really long time, doesn't like shopping (except at Christmas), loves all Christmas traditions and her 11 grandchildren, awash in God's grace and filled with His joy! Amen.

MONDAY13
DECEMBER

A YOUNG CHILD'S QUESTION AND ACCEPTANCE

DUDLEY McCLELLAN

Luke 18:15-17, Philippians 4:4-9

Many years ago at another church, while I was helping guide a large group of 4th graders through a Sunday school lesson, one child who was usually very quiet politely raised a hand and asked, "Who made God?"

After pausing, in part to wonder about the profoundness of the question and in larger part at a loss for an answer, I realized the entire room was surprisingly quiet. As I looked down, the pre-printed lesson helped me as I said, "The lesson says God was there." "Okay, thank you," was the reply. In that immediate moment, I was gratefully relieved the answer was accepted and perhaps more so that there was no follow-up question.

I regularly reflect on that moment and the connection to the words of Jesus that we should be like children to receive the kingdom of God and that we do not need to know the answers but just accept the Gift. In our lives beyond childhood, we learn to judge ourselves and others based on many worldly expectations, measurements, and goals. The worldly stuff that Jesus taught us is not the important stuff, the worldly stuff that pulls us away from the joyfulness of a young child just being in the moment. That joyfulness of being in the moment helps with understanding that each and all of us are children of God—one gigantic diverse and most unique family.

PRAYER:

Over the years, so many wonderful people of our family of God continue to help (often unknowingly) remind me of the important stuff. God brought Joy to God's family of children through Jesus coming to us as a child. My prayer this Christmas (and each day of the year) is for each of us to just keep trying to let our little lights shine in each and every moment with the Joy of the everlasting love and grace that we have been given through Jesus. Amen.

Dudley and his wife, Julie, and their daughters Audrey and Anna have been blessed and are grateful to be part of the wonderful family at Covenant for almost two decades. He has been personally blessed with wonderful reminders of wisdom, joy, and love from the many children, volunteers, and staff over the years from shared activities from Pre-School Place, ZoneK-4, Upward Basketball, Club56, and the Middle School and High School youth ministries.

TUESDAY 14
DECEMBER

FINDING JOY IN TIMES OF TROUBLE

CINDY MARTIN

Psalm 94:18-19

My husband Dan and I were part of the first online Explore Membership Class after finding Covenant during the COVID-19 lockdown. Once we heard Thomas speak about the importance of small groups, we were hooked! We were seeking to be in community with other Christians.

The passage in Psalm 94:18-19 tells us: "When I said, 'My foot is slipping,' your unfailing love, LORD, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy."

Upon sitting down to write this devotion, I had been through a rough couple of weeks. I had multiple health issues arise, we mourned the passing of a family friend to a motorcycle accident, and everything seemed so very heavy. When these circumstances arise, I think about the branches of a vine being pruned.

Jesus says that being spiritually connected is like being attached to a vine. You're not going to have any fruitfulness or productivity in your life if you're out there on your own. You've got to stay connected to the body of Christ. I can reflect on my life, and realize there isn't a trial or a pain, that he hasn't recycled to bring me gain.

My husband Dan has a mantra that he repeats daily at least a dozen times. It's a phrase from the cartoon Ren & Stimpy: "Happy Happy Joy Joy." It's his way of reminding himself that he can choose Happiness and Joy amid anything, and one of the things I admire most about him.

The blessing of participating in a small group is that we don't have to walk these difficult seasons alone. We have brothers and sisters in Christ who are there for us in the good times and the bad. If you haven't considered it, I highly recommend it.

PRAYER:

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the body of Christ, who walks with us, loves, and supports us through challenging times in our lives. Lord help us to be more loving, more joyful, and more at peace, whatever happens. Amen.

Cindy and her husband Dan joined Covenant online during Covid-19. They have four children and seven grandchildren, all of whom they adore. One of their shared loves is taking long walks on the beach near turquoise water and feeling connected to God.

WEDNESDAY 15
DECEMBER

COMFORT AND JOY

KARI LAVELLE

Psalm 50

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come..."

We are halfway through December. Is your Christmas spirit half full or half empty?

In this morning's verse, God says, "I am God, your God." Yes, He is for *us* and we are for *Him*. God shares that He has no physical need for the sacrifices His people made. What then does God need us to sacrifice? What does God really want from us? At Christmas time, it's our joy, our spirit, our love that we give away in His Glory. It is our devotional time with God (yes, right now!) that allows for sacred peace—yet I find myself caught up in the hustle and bustle, prioritizing the unimportant things (like coveting those adorable matching pajamas for the family!). Unfortunately for Clark Griswold, there is no prize in heaven for the most dramatic outdoor light display.

The pandemic has adjusted my perspective of what's *really* important. Last year's holiday season was quieter and more peaceful, but also so lonely without people to share it with at gatherings. Like many, I experienced my share of losses this year, attending three funerals this summer. These beloved souls will be in my heart if not at our dining room table or around our Christmas tree. The end of Psalm 50 reads, "Sacrifice thank offerings to God." I endeavor to fill the empty space with my own gratitude for more time with the people I love.

This holiday season I will be challenging myself with a Marie Kondo-esque quest by asking what actions spark joy for me. Can I search for joy and gratitude for how God's love has manifested in my life? Can I embrace the Heavenly Spirit while I wrap the umpteenth gift at some late night hour? And as I undoubtedly will find myself on a last minute errand, standing in long lines, can I revel in the true reason for the season? I invite you to join me and discover where God's Spirit gifts you with abundant comfort and joy.

"...Let earth receive her King
let every heart prepare Him room."

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, we are grateful for each joy of the season. Please guide us as we cultivate a joyful spirit and gather to share the joy with each other. Amen.

Kari Lavelle and her family officially joined Covenant in 2018, though they have enjoyed being a part of the community since 2012 through Covenant Preschool and VBS. She is a speech pathologist and author of *WE MOVE THE WORLD*. Kari finds joy by listening to Christmas music throughout the entire year.

THURSDAY 16
DECEMBER

LEAVE THE DOOR OPEN FOR JOY

HEATHER DEICHER

Psalm 126:3 "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy."

Joy is a gift from God. When we focus on God and his plan for our lives we will feel joy. But what about in the extremely trying times?

Psalm 126:5 says, "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy."

When I underwent treatment for cancer in March of 2020 I would frequently lie on my bed with my eyes closed for hours, my body too weak or painful to move. Many noises filtered in through my open bedroom door during those months—the sounds of virtual school from my three young children, my husband's work phone calls, the banging of pots and pans, an argument between children.

During especially loud moments, someone would sneak up quietly and close the bedroom door. But I would always protest saying, "No, keep the door open, I want to hear the noise." I couldn't participate in my life the way I wanted to but I could hear the noises of life. I couldn't sing my song of joy, but I could hear others sing theirs.

If you are sitting in an especially painful moment, it might be okay to say that you can't sing your song of joy yet. But keep the door open, so that God's joy can find you when you are ready. Our God seeks us out to fill us with hopeful joy.

PRAYER:

Romans 15:13: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Heather is a wife and mom to three kids aged 12,10, and 7. She was a professional ballet dancer. She last performed professionally in 2019.



Blessing the Door

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The search committee that brought me to Covenant in 2015 gave my wife and me a cookbook that was put together by Covenant members on the occasion of Covenant's 40th anniversary. It was a small gift, but it told me a lot about the kind of community I would soon pastor. Beyond the many delicious recipes, I learned how central food has been to drawing the Covenant community closer. We picked a few of our favorites for you to enjoy this season as you gather with others to share meals. - JON WASSON



SUSAN HOLMAN: "The cranberries give this recipe a beautiful holiday color, and it's great for a large gathering!"

Holiday Cheese Mold with Cranberries

INGREDIENTS:

3 (8 oz.) pkgs. cream cheese at room temperature
 3-6 oz. crumbled blue cheese
 Dash garlic powder
 2 tsp. Tabasco sauce
 1 ½ to 2 c. chopped pecans
 1 lb. Velveeta cheese, finely chopped
 2 lbs. sharp cheddar cheese, grated
 ½ onion, grated
 2 dashes cayenne pepper
 1 T. Worcestershire sauce

Baked Cranberries

INGREDIENTS:

1 lb. fresh or frozen cranberries, thawed
 1 16 oz. jar strawberry preserves
 1 c. sugar
 ½ c. brandy, optional

DIRECTIONS:

Place berries in baking dish, spread sugar evenly on top. Cover tightly with foil and bake at 350° for one hour. Stir brandy and strawberry preserves into berries. Refrigerate several hours before serving.

DIRECTIONS:

In a large bowl, combine Velveeta, cheddar, Bleu cheese, and cream cheese. Add onion, garlic powder, cayenne, Tabasco, Worcestershire, and pecans and mix well. Line a bundt pan with Saran Wrap. Fill pan with cheese mixture, packing it down. Cover and refrigerate until ready to serve, preferably overnight. To serve, place on a tray, unmold, peel off Saran. Fill center with baked cranberries and serve with crackers or veggies. Serves 75.



SUE ROBERTS: "I took two of my favorite dips—artichoke and spinach—and combined them to create this side dish!"

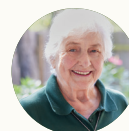
Spinach-Artichoke Casserole

INGREDIENTS:

2 (10 oz.) packages frozen chopped spinach, defrosted and water squeezed out
 10 oz. can artichoke hearts, drained, quartered
 1/2 c. finely chopped onion
 1/2 tsp. salt
 1 pint sour cream
 1/4 tsp. pepper
 1/2 - 1 c. coarsely chopped water chestnuts
 1 c. parmesan cheese
 1 c. buttered bread crumbs

DIRECTIONS:

Sauté onions, add remaining ingredients except bread crumbs. Pour into 2-quart casserole and cover with bread crumbs. Sprinkle 1/4 cup parmesan on top. Bake at 350° for 25 to 30 minutes.



NOLA ROSS: "I was on the committee that published the cookbook, and I handled the sales. This recipe came to me from Sara LeTourneau, a Friend from First Presbyterian Church in Longview, Texas. Sara's family was prominent in Longview, as they started LeTourneau University and also had a unique fabricating business which produced 70% of the earthmoving equipment for the Allies during World War II."

Chocolate Pecan Torte

INGREDIENTS:

BOTTOM LAYER

1/3 c. unsalted butter
 4 oz. unsweetened chocolate
 ½ c. semi-sweet chocolate chips
 2 large eggs, at room temperature
 1 c. dark brown sugar, packed
 1 T. instant coffee
 1/2 c. all-purpose flour
 1/8 tsp. salt

CHOCOLATE LAYER

1/2 c. unsalted butter
 1 oz. semi-sweet chocolate
 1/2 c. dark brown sugar, packed
 3 large eggs, at room temperature
 2/3 c. light corn syrup
 1/3 c. dark coffee-flavored liqueur, dark rum, or coffee
 1/4 tsp. salt
 2 c. chopped pecans
 whipped cream and pecans for garnish

DIRECTIONS:

BOTTOM LAYER: Butter 9-inch spring form pan, and line with wax paper and butter. Set aside. In saucepan, melt butter and chocolate. In separate bowl, beat eggs, sugar and instant coffee until fluffy. Stir in chocolate mixture. Blend in flour and salt until well combined, then stir in chips. Spread mixture into bottom of pan. Chill while preparing next layer.

CHOCOLATE LAYER: In saucepan, melt butter and chocolate. Cream in sugar, Beat in eggs one at a time. Blend in corn syrup, liqueur (or rum or coffee) and salt. Stir in pecans by hand. Pour mixture over bottom layer.

TO BAKE: Place pan on baking sheet and bake at 450° for 10 minutes. Reduce heat to 350° and bake 40 to 50 minutes. Cool on rack for 15 minutes. Release sides of pan. Allow to cool at room temperature, then remove pan's bottom and wax paper. Garnish with whipped cream and pecans.



JAN SKAGGS: "WARNING: Do not try this recipe unless you enjoy seeing people drool as they carve the tenderloin."

West Texas Tenderloin

INGREDIENTS:

2 1/2 - 3 pounds beef tenderloin
 2 large garlic cloves
 pepper to taste

Combine into marinade:

1 c. red wine
 1/2 c. soy sauce
 1 T. brown sugar

DIRECTIONS:

Rub meat with peeled garlic and cracked pepper. Place in Ziploc bag, add marinade, refrigerate 2 to 24 hours. Remove meat from marinade. Place in oven preheated to 450°, immediately reduce to 325°. Cook until rare, approximately one hour. Do not overcook! The meat will continue to cook as it rests. It will reach medium rare in 10-15 minutes.

FRIDAY 17
DECEMBER

LET HEAVEN AND NATURE SING

SALLY BARBER

Psalm 148

Joy to the World is one of my favorite Christmas carols. The last line of the first verse—"let heaven and nature sing"—takes my breath away every single time. The mountains, the stars, the grass, the donkeys, the ladybugs, the rocks, all are singing with the angels on high of the Christmas miracle that we are preparing our hearts to receive. The last lines of the next verses also leave me with tears in my eyes—"repeat the sounding joy" and "wonders of His love."

The mornings on the front porch with a fresh cup of hot coffee in hand also take my breath away. Just God and me together as the world is awakening. It starts with the darkness and gradually the light takes over. It's a new beginning every day heralded in by finches tweeting as they flit around the bird feeder with a backdrop of pink sky. Every morning God reminds us of the wonders of His love. "Let heaven and nature sing."

Psalm 148 is subtitled "The cosmic rhythm of praise." That's it! God is greater than our world. He is found in the whole universe and the tiniest grain of wheat. Verse 9 states, "Mountains and hills, fruitful trees and cedars." Wait, even the dreaded cedar that causes me to flee from Austin every January? Isn't it perfect that we don't understand the love and greatness of the God of the cosmos? Oh, the wonders of his love. "Let heaven and nature sing."

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, help us to pause to ponder the wonders of Your Love and always give You thanks. Help us to hear heaven and nature singing "joy to the world, the Lord has come." Help us to share the Joy and Your wonder with others. Amen

Sally and Tim Barber met in college. Sally came from a long line of strong Baptists with many ministers. Tim grew up in a devout Episcopal home where his dad went to seminary. Meeting in the middle and becoming Presbyterian seemed logical and the right thing to do. Well, it didn't happen for the first 45 years of marriage but here we are now loving worshiping at Covenant.

SATURDAY 18
DECEMBER

PRACTICE "CHOOSING JOY"

LESLIE HARRELL

Psalm 90:12

You hear people say "Choose Joy" all the time, which can make it sound as simple as choosing between a cookie or a piece of cake for dessert. But that's not the case. *Choosing joy* is an active, participatory phrase that requires intentional and thoughtful actions.

I use an app called *Marco Polo* to keep up with some family members I don't see very often. The app allows you to record and send a video message. The recipient can watch it and reply at their convenience. It has been a great way to stay connected because it is hard to find a time to call when we both have time for a long visit. I have gotten very close to my cousin's daughter, who is a sophomore at Georgia State. We "MP" several times a week. Most conversations are funny ones about a new person she met or a class she is taking for her interior design degree. She will show me designs that she is working on so I can see how she is progressing.

When she enrolled as a freshman at Georgia State during COVID, I started ending each message by saying, "I hope you do everything today with Joy and Gratitude," and now she repeats it back to me every time she sends me a message. Each time we send a message we acknowledge the things that we are grateful for and the things that brought us joy that day. Doing this has made me realize that in fact, "Choosing Joy" is both a decision and an action.

"Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12) is a reminder to give a voice to the joy and purpose in every single day. Are you giving joy a voice every day?

PRAYER:

Lord, help us to practice acknowledging the joy and having gratitude in our lives each day. Lord, we tend to neglect seeing your hand in our days and the busy days don't allow us that time to slow down and reflect. We know that you want us to see the joy and beauty around us in not only the big things, but the little things as well. Today Lord, we will stop, give you thanks, and take the time to be joyful. Amen.

Leslie Harrell has been a member of Covenant since 2015. Married for 25 years, Leslie and Marshall have two children, Virginia and Marshall IV. Virginia is a sophomore at UT, and Marshall IV is a junior at St. Andrew's Episcopal School.



LOVE

"God's love was revealed among us in this way:
God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him."
1 John 4.9

We as people
Share love
With those
Around us

Love begins
With loving ones self
With that as step 1
It becomes possible

To extend
Love
To those
Around you

Love
Can reinforce you
Offer affirmation
Feel really good

Loving life
Loving that spirit
Which is uniquely
Human

Helps us
To
Help
Others in outreach

SUNDAY
DECEMBER **19**

A GIFT WE DON'T DESERVE

JON SMITH

Luke 1:1-25

When I was a teenager, I'd drive my Granny to get groceries. A shopping trip with Granny was a master class in frugality. By the time I picked her up she'd know exactly what she would purchase and exactly how much it would cost. At checkout, Granny would pay in cash and with exact change. There were no impulse buys. She only bought exactly what she needed.

And yet, she'd always pay me. I'd refuse because I thought I didn't deserve it. She'd hand me a five-dollar bill and I'd try to hand it back or leave it behind. On several occasions I'd actually get out the door and down the steps only to hear her front door open. I'd look back to see it cracked just a bit and the wadded-up money would come flying out, the door would slam shut and then lock!

The scriptures for today reminded me of Granny and other people who loved me "just because." I think about how undeserving I am of that love.

In Luke, when Gabriel tells Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a son, Zechariah's immediate response is to doubt and question how it could be possible. Gabriel's response is essentially, "it is because God said so, now be quiet for a few months."

This was Gabriel's way of wadding up the \$5 bill, throwing it out the door, and then closing and locking it. "I have a gift for you that makes no sense and there's nothing more to talk about. Be quiet and think about that for a while." Maybe it would be good if Gabriel caused me to be silent for a significant period of time—both verbally and mentally—whenever I doubt the possibility of God's love for me.

None of us deserve the gift of Jesus that we celebrate every Christmas. But it is given to all of us anyway. Sometimes we just need to accept it and then be quiet and think about it for a while.

PRAYER:

God, help me to accept the gift of Jesus this year without doubt. Amen.

Jon Smith and his wife Jennifer have been members of Covenant for more than 15 years. They have two adult children—Jonah and Julia Kay. Jon is a lawyer who loves sports and is especially obsessive about uniforms and other aesthetics of the games.

MONDAY
DECEMBER **20**

PRAISE AND TRUST IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

ALEX DOODY

1 Samuel 2:1b-10; Luke 1:26-36 and 46-55; Psalm 145

In reading the scriptures and learning the context around today's passages from 1 Samuel and Luke, I could not help but notice the similarities between Hannah and Mary in how they bring effusive praise to God in response to their conception of a baby boy. Only after becoming a mother myself have I truly come to understand the ineffable joy and love that I have been given through my children—their praise is justified! However, two more things jump out at me when I think about Hannah and Mary's stories together.

First, the events leading to their praise were very different. Hannah prayed fervently for a son, and God answered her prayers through the birth of her son Samuel. On the other hand, Mary was a teenage girl who was more than happy to go about living her life (which did not involve having a baby before marriage!) until suddenly the Holy Spirit came to her as the angel Gabriel to inform her that she would bear the Son of God. I understand Hannah's praise for her prayers being answered. But Mary? She was scared upon hearing this news of her conception. And yet her reaction of praise shows her devotion and trust that God had her back and had chosen her for a special calling.

Secondly, their praise for God is so mature and deeply felt. It is not a shallow praise simply thanking God for "having done great things for me" and thanking Him for the blessing of children. They go further to call Him "the Mighty One," remarking "there is no Rock like our God" and noting "he will exalt the power of his anointed." They praise his mercy just like David does in Psalm 145:8, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." And particularly meaningful in these pandemic times: Hannah speaks plainly that "not by might does one prevail." No matter how hard we try, we humans are not in control of our circumstances. But glory be to God that He's got our back—God is listening to all who pray, for all who pray and mean it.

PRAYER:

Thank you for the examples of Hannah and Mary, showing us how to bring to praise you in all circumstances and to trust in you. Thank you for the love you brought the world in Jesus' birth and death. Amen.

Alex and her family (husband Pat, eight-year-old twins Patrick and Samantha and one-year-old Maeve) became Covenant members in February 2020 just a few short weeks before the pandemic. Alex is an environmental engineer, a career that she loves for its technical challenges as well as for the positive difference it makes for people and for God's creation. She is grateful to have found the Covenant community and how it is fostering spiritual formation for her and her family.

TUESDAY 21
DECEMBER

JESUS IN MY REARVIEW MIRROR

JIM WEATHERBY

Psalm 146

At Advent we look forward to the coming of Jesus.

However, I'm going to look backward at how Jesus has influenced my life at work. I don't know about you, but I have difficulty recognizing the daily impact Jesus has on my life. I can see His hands on my life over the years and this is what the story is about.

It begins in 1970 when my wife, Alice, and I arrived in Austin for a position at UT as an Assistant Professor of Economics. Years later I realized that this was the first time I saw Jesus in my rearview mirror (JMRR #1). We had seen Covenant as we drove on Northland Drive. We decided to give it a try. We were warmly welcomed, met and fell in love with Carl and Esther Eaton (JMRR #2).

At UT I met a visiting professor, GD, and we formed a strong intellectual bond (JMRR #3). Next, I found myself without a job as I did not make tenure (JMRR #4). Alice and I loved Austin so we decided to stay here and find something to do! Turns out that GD was interested in moving back to Austin, and to make a long story short, we started a consulting firm which was very successful (JMRR #5). The consulting firm obtained several contracts with Hart Graphics and eventually I obtained a permanent job with Hart (JMRR #6). I progressed with Hart until I became President of one of their companies. I was at Hart for nearly ten years when one day I was called in to the boss' office and, to my surprise, let go (JMRR #7). I was 54 years old, and while I received a severance package, it certainly wasn't enough to retire!

I began to look for a job-for the first time in my life! At the same time, I joined a small group at Covenant called Monday Morning Bagel Bunch that I still attend today (JMRR #8). The job search went on for 15 months until a neighbor told me of a job at the Texas Legislature (JMRR #9). I told her that I would not work for the state (old consulting memories) and she quickly replied, "It is not the state, it is the Legislature!" I applied and after several interviews was offered (and quickly accepted) the job (JMRR #10). It was a great fit utilizing all of the skills I had accumulated over the years. I was there for 15 years until I retired in 2013 and saw Jesus in my rearview mirror again.

PRAYER:

Jesus, we thank you for placing events in our lives that lead us in your way even when we doubt your wisdom. Amen.

Jim had polio as a child but still managed to carry a 37.5 lb. Sousaphone for four years in the Texas Aggie Band!

WEDNESDAY 22
DECEMBER

A LOVE BIGGER THAN THIS WORLD

JAKE PLUENNEKE

Psalm 18

"Little baby, Pa rum pum pum pum
...I am a poor boy too
...I have no gift to bring
...that's fit to give our king
...I played my drum for him
...I played my best for him
Then he smiled at me, Pa rum pum pum pum"

This morning, I am reminded of the Pentatonix version of *Little Drummer Boy* as I reflect on Psalm 18. As we near close to Christmas (YAYYY) and continue to reflect on God's love this week, I love the words of David.

David allowed his view of the world to be shaped by who God is rather than what he would face. And who God is, is love. God is unchanging. David's understanding of God shapes how he responds to his circumstances rather than allowing his circumstances to set the tone for how he views God. He loves God. He declares that God is his strength, rock, fortress, and deliverer.

I pray that as we approach Christmas, we will have the same call and view of God. Even when everything in the world around us is crumbling, and we can't make sense of the tragedies that are going on around us, we can call out to the Lord because he is our rock. Just like the little drummer boy, we might not have a lot to offer, but we can call out to God in love because he is our strength. We can bring whatever talents and gifts we have and set them at the feet of Jesus because God is love. I want to leave you with one question: Where can you let go and let God's love in?

PRAYER:

Dear Heavenly Father, You are the light of the world. We love You and thank You for your love! Please help us be lights in this world to share your good news of Jesus Christ with everyone. I pray all this in your name, AMEN, and MERRY CHRISTMAS!!!

Jake has been at Covenant for five years, since he started as the Middle School Youth Intern his sophomore year at UT. He quickly fell in love with the people, and they haven't been able to get rid of him since. He now works with the Middle School and High School kids as the Youth Director. When he is not hanging out with his incredible volunteers or kids, you can find him playing sports, enjoying the outdoors, or wrangling his nine roommates.

FINDING THE COURAGE TO PRAY

BETH FEGER

2 Samuel 7:27, Psalm 147:1-5, Psalm 17:6-8

It has never occurred to me that I might need courage to pray. I have not had a great deal of courage lately. Like most folks, I've had a year filled with uncertainty, disappointment, and change. Trips have been cancelled, parties rescheduled and rescheduled again. Masks have been purchased, tossed out, and purchased again. I have waited for normal to return and life as we knew it to continue. During all this time, it has been difficult to find the courage to pray. I find myself in a holding pattern with God waiting for him to do something, change something, fix it. Reading about David and his desire to build a house for God, I am reminded that he, too, was waiting and needed courage to pray. David didn't get to build the house, and yet he prayed. He prayed amazing words of praise and hope. He prayed expectantly and honestly. He remembered God's goodness and his mercy.

God heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds. While I do not know when (or if) we will return to "normal," I can be certain that God in his mighty power has my life well in hand. He understands my disappointment and frustration and turns his ear to me and hears my prayers and answers them. He gathers me in the shadow of his wings; I am the apple of his eye. As we prepare for Christmas, let us remember the gift of prayer and the Love of the father who gave it to us.

PRAYER:

Holy God, as we prepare for Christmas give us courage to pray and your mercy as we accept with joy what You have prepared for us. In the midst of change and uncertainty, remind us that You the God who numbers the stars, loves us with your great love, and offers us refuge from all the tumult of this world. Amen.

Beth Feger has attended Covenant with her family for 16 years. She loves hanging out with the 9th grade girls D*group, reading, swimming and paint-by-number art.



Those Who Walked in Darkness

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FRIDAY
DECEMBER 24

GOD WITH US KRISTIN SCHELL

Matthew 1:23 “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means ‘God with us.’”

Christmas Eve 1983 did not go as planned. The Kessler Family was supposed to be at home in Dallas celebrating with grandparents, singing familiar carols at midnight church service, and honoring the tradition of opening one gift, usually pajamas or a new ornament to place on the Christmas tree.

Instead, cancelled flights and an impending snowstorm meant our family of five was 750 miles from the comforts of home on the most anticipated night of the year. We were unprepared, stranded in a town without friends or extended family and frustrated by the unexpected turn of events. We just wanted to be home.

You can see where this story is headed, the obvious comparison to the holy night two millennia ago. The frustration and doubt as a prophecy unfolded. A young couple enshrouded in scandal, traveling an unplanned journey when the virgin gives birth in a barn far from the comforts of home. Surely this isn't how God intended to send the Prince of Peace and King of Kings to his people. And yet?

Love came down.

Jesus met my family that Christmas Eve decades ago. He found us in a faraway place and interrupted our preconceived notions of how the night should unfold and offered something far more meaningful—himself.

God was with us.

Henri Nouwen reminds us, “Christmas is the renewed invitation not to be afraid and let him—whose love is greater than our own hearts and minds can comprehend—be our companion.” The God of love sent his son to be with us then, now, and always. To be our constant companion wherever we go. Perhaps the miracle is not just that love came down, but that he stays.

PRAYER:

Father, on this holy night may we be present enough to see and bold enough to seek the glorious invitation into the miracle of Christ, God with Us. Amen.

Kristin Schell is the author of *The Turquoise Table: Finding Community and Connection in Your Own Front Yard*. She and her husband Tony have been members of the Covenant Family since the late 1990s, have four children, and bleed burnt orange for the Longhorns.

SATURDAY
DECEMBER 25

THE SILLINESS OF SALVATION JON WASSON

I John 4:7-12

It's finally here! Christmas morning has arrived and there are presents to open and food to prepare. Ready or not, the long Advent wait is over and now all that is left is to celebrate what Robert Capon calls the “silliness” of salvation. “God has fudged everything in our favor: without shame or fear we rejoice to behold his appearing.” John tells us that even though no one has seen God, we don't have to guess what He is like. We only have to look. “God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world.” Like the witnesses of that first Christmas morning, we are invited to come and see. The world will never be the same. Neither will we.

Merry Christmas! May this day be filled with joy, wonder, and maybe a little bit of silliness, too.

PRAYER:

Holy God, Be gracious to us as we celebrate the good news of your love for us today. Fill us with good memories of those who are not with us today and give us a generous spirit as we interact with our loved ones around the Christmas tree and dining table. In Christ's name and for his sake, amen.

Jon was ordained at Covenant in November of 2015. He is an avid trail runner, newsletter subscriber, and Arsenal supporter. He and his wife, Abby, have two boys, Thomas and Eliot, and one Australian Labradoodle, who keep them on their toes.

CHRISTMAS & EPIPHANY

For many of us, the Christmas season officially ends as we box up the decorations. My family usually does this sometime between Christmas Day and New Year's Eve. But according to the Church calendar, the Christmas season begins on Christmas Day and ends on Epiphany. During this time, we are invited to celebrate how Christ's birth profoundly changed the world, which in turn draws us into deeper commitment, deeper trust, and deeper joy. Maybe this year, we should leave the decorations up a little while longer.

W.H. Auden's Christmas poem, "For the Time Being," is a powerful reflection on the meaning of Christ's birth. It subtly reminds us that Christmas is about far more than a baby in a manger; it marks the beginning of a whole new world. I think it is more powerful to read *after* Christmas Day when we're all trying to sustain the Christmas miracle. *After* the holiday cheer has faded a little bit. *After* our families have returned home. *After* whatever rest we experienced reverts to restlessness. Auden captures the feeling of this suddenly insufficient present moment by calling it *The Time Being*, which he says is the most trying time of all. And it is. The time of striving, wanting, and worrying is trying. But, Auden reminds us, it is this time Christ came to redeem.

Read a section from the poem on the next page. Take your time and read it with care, aloud, slow, and steady. Linger over the lines that evoke your curiosity. Notice how Auden describes both the struggle of the "time being" and the promise of redemption that invades the present.

When you're ready, turn to the next page, where we've put together a reflection and Examen prayer from counselor Rhett Smith.

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes -
Some have got broken - and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week -
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted - quite unsuccessfully -
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have see the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long...

To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.

The poem is inconclusive, left a bit unresolved. But then again, so is much of our lives. But there is an invitation: to follow, seek and love the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.



Dwelling on What Matters Most - by Rhett Smith

Rhett Smith is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, Clinically Trained and Certified Executive Coach, Author, and Speaker

The author and organizational psychologist Adam Grant helped many name what they were feeling this year when he penned an article in the *New York Times* entitled, "There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing." He defined languishing as,

"A sense of stagnation and emptiness. It feels as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield. And it might be the dominant emotion of 2021."

So many clients in my counseling and executive coaching practices brought this article to my attention, sharing how it helped them understand themselves better. It helped them feel not so alone.

As I sat with my clients, I noticed other words that captured difficult feelings started to emerge out of these conversations that Adam Grant started.

Words like, "drifting," "burnout," and "disengaged." I started to notice a pattern emerge in my work. It looked something like this.

Disengagement >> Drift >> Burnout

When we are in a season of uncertainty, usually filled with high levels of anxiety, it's easy to disengage. Anxiety tempts us to take our focus off what is important, and when we do, we start drifting. When we are not engaged in what we are doing, we often burn out.

I think a lot about the famous passage on anxiety in Philippians 4. Not the one where Paul encourages us not to be anxious. The one where he encourages us to "think", "dwell", and "consider" anything that is excellent or praiseworthy. It's a command to focus on better things. Think of it as an admonition to reengage.

Epiphany, the liturgical feast that celebrates the Magi's visit to Jesus, is a time for revelation. To have an epiphany is to receive insight or see something with new eyes. I invite you to use Epiphany as an occasion to consider what you pay attention to. The Apostle Paul knew thousands of years ago what neuroscientists are talking about right now. What we give our attention to - what we think about - shapes our beliefs, and our beliefs shape our actions.

EXAMEN

Here's an Examen prayer to help you reflect on the past year, what you're dwelling on, and what new insight might lead you to reengagement.

You are encouraged to pray through this Examen on your own or with your small group, family, or Bible study.

01

Review your life for a pattern of drift. If you have experienced burnout, ask yourself:

- **When did I feel disengaged over the last year?**
- **Where have I drifted off course?**

02

Reflect on a typical day during your week. If you were to rank in order the top three things that you dwell on, what would they be? Do they increase your anxiety? Are they praiseworthy things that generate non-anxious joy in your life?

03

What is one thing you could intentionally dwell on daily in the weeks and months ahead?

04

What is one practice that you believe would help you engage your life and stay on the course that matters to you? (Examples include: Physical self-care like moving your body; emotional self-care like intentionally connecting with others; mental self-care like stimulating your intellect; spiritual self-care like fostering your faith).



“According to the Christian liturgical calendar each year begins with the season of Advent, which uniquely concerns itself with past and future events: it remembers the first coming of the Messiah and looks forward to the day when, as the Nicene Creed puts it, Christ “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” To be a Christian is to live between these two advents, to be thankful for the salvation brought by the first Advent and to be soberly penitent in light of Christ’s inevitable return in judgment.”

— Alan Jacobs

Living the Year Liturgically

For the next year Covenant will shape our worship and formation around the liturgical calendar. While we typically observe the major liturgical seasons of Advent and Lent, we typically don’t follow the lectionary for preaching or emphasize other liturgical holidays. We asked Covenant Senior Pastor Thomas Daniel to explain the liturgical calendar and why we are shaping our congregational life around it in the coming year.

01 What is the liturgical calendar and why should we pay attention to it?

The liturgical calendar is an ecumenical tool that Christians around the world use to mark time. It names the moments throughout the year when Christians celebrate specific seasons, such as Advent and Lent, as well as specific celebrations such as Pentecost. Each year, the liturgical calendar begins with Advent and lasts through the following November with its completion on Christ the King Sunday.

02 How can ‘living a year liturgically’ be a gift of grace and not a burden of rules?

It is a gift of grace because it reminds us of the full story that God is writing in Creation. We are reminded of moments and occasions that are the foundation of our lives and our faith. The story that God is writing is a story of grace and the liturgical calendar can anchor us firmly in that narrative.

03 What are you personally most excited about learning over this year?

I am excited to celebrate moments in the Christian calendar that we normally do not focus on at Covenant. Moments like Epiphany and Pentecost have profound importance and beauty. Rooting ourselves in these traditions is something that I am looking forward to experiencing with my family.

04 What is one thing you hope our congregation takes away from this series?

My hope is that we are reminded that Christianity is a counter-cultural movement and that our lives should move to a rhythm of grace and love. I believe our default is to allow our culture to shape the way we think about time. The culture tells us when we are busy, when we observe holidays, and what values they convey. As followers of Jesus, it will be a radical change to allow a narrative of grace to shape when/how we live our lives and think about our days/weeks/months/year. And I believe doing so might be a profound witness of our faith to the people with whom we live, work, and play.

Christmas Eve Worship Times

2:00 p.m.
SANCTUARY Traditional service with candles

4:00 p.m.
SANCTUARY Children and family service

5:00 p.m.
FE 200 Contemporary service with candles

8:30 p.m.
SANCTUARY Traditional service with candles

8:30 p.m.
LIVESTREAM Traditional service with candles

Advent Events

Please visit covenant.org/advent for a full list of Advent activities



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