

Advent in a Box
Daily Devotional

By Melissa Weinhandl





Day One: Hope

Date: Sunday, November 29th, 2020
Text: Daniel 6:6-10

We all go through hard stuff sometimes. Something that we have learned in 2020 is that sometimes, pain is outside of our control. In this text, prayer is no longer allowed unless you pray to the king. This was something lifechanging for Daniel that he had no control over. Struggling with things that we cannot control has been especially relevant over the last several months and the impacts will continue for an indefinite amount of time. In the midst of it, Daniel continued to pray.

Advent is a time of waiting, of anticipation. We are waiting for the fulfillment of the prophesy of a savior. The definition of hope according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary is “to cherish a desire with anticipation”. Holding hope throughout the season of Advent means that even when things seem hard or scary we can hold to and cherish a desire for Jesus the Christ.

Read the text:

Daniel 6:6-10 (MSG)

6-7 The vice-regents and governors conspired together and then went to the king and said, “King Darius, live forever! We’ve convened your vice-regents, governors, and all your leading officials, and have agreed that the king should issue the following decree:

For the next thirty days no one is to pray to any god or mortal except you, O king. Anyone who disobeys will be thrown into the lions’ den.

8 “Issue this decree, O king, and make it unconditional, as if written in stone like all the laws of the Medes and the Persians.”

9 King Darius signed the decree.

10 When Daniel learned that the decree had been signed and posted, he continued to pray just as he had always done. His house had windows in the upstairs that opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he knelt there in prayer, thanking and praising his God.

Discuss:

- 1. What is something that you waited a long time for? Tell the story. What were some of the feelings you had while you were waiting? Was it hard or easy?**
- 2. What are some difficult things you have been through that were outside of your control? How did you handle that?**

Pray:

God of hope, as we anticipate the coming of Christmas, help us to look toward you and cherish the desire to have you with us. Fill us peace in the chaos and uncontrollable and like Daniel, give us confidence to remain prayerful. Amen.

Day Two: Hope

Date: Monday, November 30th, 2020

Text: Daniel 6:11-16

An important part of this story is misuse of power and Daniel's courage to stand up to an injustice. While this story is from more than 2,000 years ago, we still see injustice and misuse of power in our world today. It isn't always easy to challenge the wrongs we see or experience. We might feel scared and alone. We might also reflect on those times in which we have contributed to injustice by being silent or misused our own power.

We are not free from sin. Our sins not only hurt us and our relationship with God, they, many times, hurt others as well. As we sit in this time of Advent, waiting and hoping for Jesus, we can consider our role in seeing and fighting injustice.

Read the text:

Daniel 6:11-16 (MSG)

11-12 The conspirators came and found him praying, asking God for help. They went straight to the king and reminded him of the royal decree that he had signed. "Did you not," they said, "sign a decree forbidding anyone to pray to any god or man except you for the next thirty days? And anyone caught doing it would be thrown into the lions' den?"

"Absolutely," said the king. "Written in stone, like all the laws of the Medes and Persians."

13 Then they said, "Daniel, one of the Jewish exiles, ignores you, O king, and defies your decree. Three times a day he prays."

14 At this, the king was very upset and tried his best to get Daniel out of the fix he'd put him in. He worked at it the whole day long.

15 But then the conspirators were back: "Remember, O king, it's the law of the Medes and Persians that the king's decree can never be changed."

16 The king caved in and ordered Daniel brought and thrown into the lions' den. But he said to Daniel, "Your God, to whom you are so loyal, is going to get you out of this."

Discuss:

1. What are some injustices that you have seen? How did you feel? What did you do (or not do) about it?
2. When have you seen a misuse of power?
3. How have you participated in injustice? What are one or two things you can do about that?

Pray:

God of hope, open our eyes to the injustices of this world. Fill us with a sense of curiosity about the places and spaces where we can show up. Give us the courage to fight when we see wrong and the vulnerability to admit when we have wronged others. Amen.

Day Three: Hope

Date: Tuesday, December 1st, 2020

Text: Daniel 6:17

Martin Luther believed that in order to understand the hope of God, we need to feel and understand hopelessness. In order to feel happy, we need to know sadness. While there is no talk of fear in this verse, we can only imagine what he might be going through in this moment as the slab was placed over the den. Daniel is sitting in the pain, fear, sadness, and anger. There seems to be little hope in this situation. What we know, is that Daniel is holding onto the Hope he has in the promise of God.

Knowing pain, knowing fear, knowing anger helps us to recognize and feel the happiness, the excitement, the peace that comes from God. We have to know the despair that comes from our lives to drive us into the arms of Jesus.

Read the text:

Daniel 6:17 (MSG)

17 A stone slab was placed over the opening of the den. The king sealed the cover with his signet ring and the signet rings of all his nobles, fixing Daniel's fate.

Contemplative Practice

Close your eyes. Imagine yourself in a dark place. Sit in silence for one minute. What is it like to sit in a dark place? What feelings do you have? What temperature is the dark place? What does it smell like? What does it sound like?

Darkness is the opposite of hope. Reflect together or journal as an individual what it means to sit in the darkness.

Discuss:

1. What are some things that cause you to feel sad? Angry? Afraid?
2. Talk about (or reflect on) the idea that you need to know bad before you can know good.

Pray:

God of hope, help us move toward you. Help us to know that in the pain, fear, anger, and sadness of our lives, we can stay focused on the hope of your promise. Amen.

Day Four: Hope

Date: Wednesday, December 2nd, 2020
Text: Daniel 6:18-22

Once Daniel was placed in the lion's den, the king did not eat dinner, nor did he sleep. Sometimes, when we have big or difficult feelings, we feel them in our bodies. Sometimes those feelings might cause us to not want to eat or might make it hard to sleep. We might be able to conclude that the big feelings the king was having could have been remorse. As humans, we all fall short of the glory of God. None of us can measure up to God's perfection. God asks us to be aware of our imperfection and repent and ask for forgiveness for our wrongdoing. We might feel big feelings when we hurt another person, ourselves, or the environment. Confessing those feelings and prayer can be helpful and healing.

Read the text:

Daniel 6:18-22 (MSG)

18 The king then went back to his palace. He refused supper. He couldn't sleep. He spent the night fasting.

19-20 At daybreak the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. As he approached the den, he called out anxiously, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve so loyally, saved you from the lions?"

21-22 "O king, live forever!" said Daniel. "My God sent his angel, who closed the mouths of the lions so that they would not hurt me. I've been found innocent before God and also before you, O king. I've done nothing to harm you."

Discuss:

1. What feelings have you had when you know you have hurt another person or the environment?
2. Have you hurt someone recently? Practice confessing to each other or if you are alone, say it out loud. You can also text or call someone.
3. What feelings do you have when you need to admit a wrongdoing? What feelings do you have when you are forgiven?

Pray:

God of hope, fill us with the vulnerability needed to know when we have caused pain in others. Help us in the big feelings that pain may cause. And give us the strength to go to you and others for forgiveness. Amen.

Day Five: Hope

Date: Thursday, December 3rd, 2020
Text: Daniel 6:24

Daniel modeled a love and faithfulness to God in the darkness as he was shut into the lions' den. It is when we are in the pain, fear, and hopelessness that it becomes hard to see the light of God. During Advent, we wait. Like Daniel, we wait in darkness for the light of Christ. John 1:5 (NRSV) says "*the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it*". Daniel shows us what that means. When the king found out that Daniel was still alive, he was happy. The king saw Daniel's trust in God. Daniel let the light of God shine through him.

As we wait for Christmas, we can reflect on how we show up in our communities, to people in power, to the under-resourced, to our friends, and to our families. How do we show up as people who know that the light shines, even in the darkness?

Read the text:

Daniel 6:18-23 (MSG)

²³ When the king heard these words, he was happy. He ordered Daniel taken up out of the den. When he was hauled up, there wasn't a scratch on him. He had trusted his God.

Discuss:

1. Where might you have experienced darkness? What about pain? Fear? Hopelessness?
2. In what ways do you model a love and faithfulness to God?
3. When is it the easiest to trust God? When is it the hardest?
4. Brainstorm and/or talk about ways in which you can be the light of Christ. In what ways have others been the light of Christ for you?

Pray:

God of hope, fill us with your light. Guide us through the darkness, and help us to know that your light shines through. Give us the strength to shine your light for others, even when it is hard or scary. Amen.

Day Six: Hope

Date: Friday, December 4th, 2020
Text: Daniel 6:25-27

Today, we come to the end of the story of Daniel. At the beginning, we saw a king who used his power in a negative way. Daniel boldly defied the power and continued in prayer. In turn, Daniel was sentenced to death in the lions' den. Daniel trusted God in the darkness and was delivered from the Lions' den without a scratch. When the King retrieved Daniel from the Lions, he was happy. The king felt inspired by Daniel and through Daniel's faithfulness praised God.

Over the week, we have considered the pain, sadness, and hurt that the world imposes. We have thought about the pain, sadness, and hurt that we impose on others. We have wondered about our role in that pain and sadness and challenging injustice and power. We have sat in the darkness with Daniel and reviled in the hope of God's light.

Advent is about waiting. We know that Christmas is coming. We might have an Advent calendar to count down the days, we might be making Christmas lists for ourselves or shopping for others. We will put up Christmas trees and other decorations.

We also know that in the midst of our planning and preparing, darkness still exists. There are many ways in which us or others might be sitting in the darkness of the lions' den. As we plan and prepare for Christmas and enjoy the excitement, let's take time to see the darkness and wonder how we can show up to others and shine the light of God.

Read the text:

Daniel 6: (MSG)

25-27 King Darius published this proclamation to every race, color, and creed on earth:

Peace to you! Abundant peace!

I decree that Daniel's God shall be worshiped and feared in all parts of my kingdom.

He is the living God, world without end. His kingdom never falls.

His rule continues eternally.

He is a savior and rescuer.

He performs astonishing miracles in heaven and on earth.

He saved Daniel from the power of the lions.

Discuss:

1. Tell the story of your favorite family Christmas tradition or memory. If you live alone, call someone or post the story on Social media. Reflect on why this memory is your favorite. What feelings did you have? What feelings come up when you share the story?

Pray:

God of hope, thank you for the excitement of Christmas. In the middle of the excitement, help us to see the darkness too. Fill us with curiosity for new ways to show up and shine your light. Amen.

Day Seven: Hope

Date: Saturday, December 5th, 2020

Text: Daniel 6:6-27

Today, re-read the entire Daniel text from start to finish. In this practice, you will read the text three times with silence between each reading. The full text is not included this time. Find it in your own Bible(s). If you have multiple translations in your house, read from all the translations.

- Someone read the passage the first time followed by silence. Ask the question “*What word or phrase stands out to me the most?*” Feel free to share or journal.
- Someone read the passage for a second time followed by silence. Ask the question “*How is this passage speaking to me today?*” Feel free to share or journal.
- Someone read the passage for a third time followed by silence. Ask the question “*How will I be different this week based on this passage?*” Feel free to share or journal

Read the text:

Daniel 6:6-27

Pray (When you get to the end of this prayer, there is an option to add your reflection from reading the passage. If you are with multiple people, this can be popcorn style or you can decide on an order to people offer words of prayer):
God of hope, thank you for your amazing love. Help us to hear your word and let your word lead us and our lives to you.
Help us this week as we _____. Amen.



Day Eight: Peace

Date: Sunday, December 6th, 2020

Text: Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

Last week, we spent some time with the topic of hope. This week, we turn our direction to peace. What does peace mean? The Merriam Webster dictionary defines peace as “a state of tranquility” and a “freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions” and “harmony in personal relations”. Elements of peace are tranquility, freedom, and harmony.

Read the text:

Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

*12 Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your hearts,
with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow;*

*13 tear your hearts
and not your clothing.*

*Return to the Lord your God,
for he is merciful and compassionate,
very patient, full of faithful love,
and ready to forgive.*

*28 After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone;
your sons and your daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.*

*29 In those days, I will also pour out my
spirit on the male and female slaves.*

Discuss:

1. What does the word peace mean to you?
2. While reading the definition of “peace”, what images come to mind?
3. How does peace make you feel? How do you experience peace in your body?

Contemplative Practice:

Have paper, writing utensils, and/or stuff to color with ready

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

Sit silently for one minute. If your family can manage a longer sit, sit as long as you can manage.

Imagine a peaceful image or place.

Wonder:

- What makes this place or image peaceful?
- How do you feel in your brain and body while thinking about this peaceful place?

As your silence comes to an end, allow for a little more time of quiet to draw, journal, or list words that describe your peaceful place.

Pray:

God of peace, help us to know and feel peace in the middle of chaos. Be with us this week as we explore the peace that comes from you and your love for us and the world. Amen.

Day Nine: Peace

Date: Monday, December 7th, 2020

Text: Joel 2:12

Our text comes from the book of Joel. Joel comes from the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament. Scholars are not sure when Joel was actually written, but what we do know is that it comes from the books of the prophets. The prophets were people who told about God and God's promises for the world. Even though we do not know exactly when Joel was written, the message of it is consistent with the story of God's people. God loves us, wants what is best for us, but things still feel hard, or sad, or frustrating. The world is hard because we are not perfect, and we sin. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, but when we sin, we turn away from or run from God's love. This text tells us that God is asking us to turn back to God.

This verse talks about repentance. Repentance might be a big word. What it means is to say you are sorry, admit to the things that you have done wrong, and feel the sadness that comes with hurting others.

Read the text:

Joel 2:12

*Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your hearts,
with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow;*

Discuss:

1. What feelings do you have when you have made a mistake?
2. What does it mean to do something with all your heart? What are some things that you do with all your heart?

Pray:

God of peace, thank you for loving us, even when we turn away from your love. Give us the courage to know and admit when we have done something wrong. Guide us back to you with all our hearts. Amen.

Day Ten: Peace

Date: Tuesday, December 8th, 2020

Text: Joel 2:13

The theme of God's people is that God always offers us love and humans still mess up. God loves us and we chose to turn away from that love. We live in a world in which sometimes, it is hard to find peace. What this verse tells us is that God is a loving God. God wants us to look toward God, not turn away. God asks that we know that we see and understand that we are broken but know that we are loved. We can find peace knowing that God is full of never-ending love for us.

This verse tells us to tear our hearts, not our clothing. During the time of the Hebrew Bible, when people were grieving, they would tear their clothing. This was an outside expression of what they were feeling. God is expressing the need to feel the sadness and hurt that comes along with sin, or turning away from God's love. We need to feel it in our hearts.

Read the text:

Joel 2:13

tear your hearts

and not your clothing.

Return to the Lord your God,

for he is merciful and compassionate,

very patient, full of faithful love,

and ready to forgive.

Discuss:

1. What ways do you show others that you are sad? Hurt? Frustrated? Angry?
2. What is it like to read that God is very patient, full of love, and always ready to forgive?
3. Talk about the peace that comes from this unending love.

Pray:

God of peace, fill us with gratitude for your unending, compassionate, and patient love. Help us to feel the peace that comes with knowing that your love is unending, compassionate, and patient. Amen.

Day Eleven: Peace

Date: Wednesday, December 9th, 2020

Text: Joel 2:28-29

Joel 2:12-13 and 2:28-29 are paired together in the narrative lectionary because the first two verses talk about turning back to God with repentance, or saying you are sorry and the second two verses talk about reconciliation . . . another big word! To reconcile means to restore or fix. When we turn back to God, we get to restore our relationship with God. God will always welcome us back.

The pairing of repentance, or saying sorry, and reconciliation, or restoring, is a part of our worship service. During confession, we ask God for forgiveness. During the absolution, the pastor or liturgist reminds us that God loves us and is always working to restore our relationship with God.

Read the text:

Joel 2:28-29

*28 After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone;
your sons and your daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.*

*29 In those days, I will also pour out my
spirit on the male and female slaves.*

Discuss:

1. Talk about the word reconciliation. What does this mean to you?
2. Do you have any relationships that have been difficult? How easy is it to restore or fix broken relationships?
3. Have you ever had a relationship that you were unable to restore? What was that like?
4. Have you ever had a relationship that was hard but you were able to restore? What was that like?

Pray:

God of peace, guide us back to you each time we turn away. Help us to find peace in knowing that you will accept us and want to restore relationship. Give us the love for others to work toward reconciliation in all of our difficult relationships. Amen.

Day Twelve: Peace

Date: Thursday, December 10th, 2020

Text: Joel 2:28-29

So far this week, we have talked about peace and the meaning of peace. We have talked about mistakes and making mistakes. Then we talked about God's unending love and what that means to us. Yesterday, we considered reconciliation. Throughout time, God has worked in this way. God, the creator, loves God's creation. God's people turn away from God's love and God still seeks us out and wants us to turn back to God.

Read the text:

Joel 2:28-29

*28 After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone;
your sons and your daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.*

*29 In those days, I will also pour out my
spirit on the male and female slaves.*

Discuss:

1. Talk about the peace that comes with knowing that even though we mess up, God loves us anyway.
2. Go back to Sunday and look at the definition of peace. What does that mean today?
3. Talk about the peace that comes with God's love. How does that make you feel?

Pray:

God of peace, fill us with your love. Help us to know peace in your love. Give us eyes for the world and curiosity for how we can be a part of the world and work to spread God's peace. Amen.

Day Thirteen: Peace

Date: Friday, December 11th, 2020

Text: Joel 2:28-29

God loves us. God forgives us. God longs for us to come back when we turn away from God's love. The last thing this scripture tells us is that this love is bigger than the individual relationship we have with God but that the spirit is poured out for everyone. It is not something that we keep for ourselves but share. God hopes for peace. God's love, God's spirit fills us and we get to allow that love and peace to overflow from us into the rest of the world.

Read the text:

Joel 2:28-29

*28 After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone;
your sons and your daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.*

*29 In those days, I will also pour out my
spirit on the male and female slaves.*

Discuss:

1. What does it mean to you to allow God's love and peace to overflow into the world?
2. What are some ways you can share God's love and peace?

Pray:

God of peace, fill us with your love and let that love flow from us to the world. Help us to show up in times and places where there seems to be no peace. Give us the courage to continue to live out your word in the world. Amen.

Day Fourteen: Peace

Date: Saturday, December 12th, 2020

Text: Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

Today, re-read the entire Joel text from start to finish. In this practice, you will read the text three times with silence between each reading. The full text is not included this time. Find it in your own Bible(s). If you have multiple translations in your house, read from all the translations.

- Someone read the passage the first time followed by silence. Ask the question *“What word or phrase stands out to me the most?”* Feel free to share or journal.
- Someone read the passage for a second time followed by silence. Ask the question *“How is this passage speaking to me today?”* Feel free to share or journal.
- Someone read the passage for a third time followed by silence. Ask the question *“How will I be different this week based on this passage?”* Feel free to share or journal

Read the text:

Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

Pray (When you get to the end of this prayer, there is an option to add your reflection from reading the passage. If you are with multiple people, this can be popcorn style or you can decide on an order to people offer words of prayer):

God of peace, thank you for your amazing love. Help us to hear your word and let your word lead us and our lives to you.

Help us this week as we _____ . Amen



Day Fifteen: Joy

Date: Sunday, December 13th, 2020

Text: Isaiah 61:1-11

When we read passages from the Bible, it is important to know where in the story these pieces come from. Everyone, go find a book, open it to a random page, and read a sentence or two! Now, you might have read the book and so you might know what is going on, but if you read that sentence or two to someone who had not read the book, would they understand? For us to really understand, it is important to know where in the story the verses fall.

In this case, we are still in the books of the prophets. During the time of the prophets, a lot happens. The lands of Israel and Judah were attacked and taken over, the people were exiled, the people came back and rebuilt, but things were still not as they had hoped. Some books of the prophets cover bits and pieces of this time. The book of Isaiah, however, covers the entire story.

This part of the scripture takes place during the “post-exilic” time. This is when the people have come back to their homes and things were not as expected. The people these verses were written for were people who might have been sad, worried, angry, or hopeless. What we will talk about this week is that we can find joy even when things do not go as expected. Our preparations for Christmas and our Christmas celebrations will not look the way we expect them to look. How do we find joy?

Read the text:

(Find the whole text in your Bible)

Isaiah 61:1-11

Discuss:

1. Talk about context, or knowing what part of the story you are reading from in order for what you are reading to make sense.
2. When have you felt worried, sad, angry, or hopeless about something? What was that like?
3. Talk about Joy. What is joy? What does it mean to you? What is something that you think is joyful?

Pray:

God of joy, help us to read your word. Give us the curiosity to wonder what that word means for us today. Fill us with joy as work to live into your hopes for us. Amen.

Day Sixteen: Joy

Date: Monday, December 14th, 2020

Text: Isaiah 61:1-7

Last week, we talked about restoration, or making things good. These verses explain to us what that looks like. Remember that the readers of this book have come out of exile, they have come back to their homes and things were not as expected. The people expected to come back and have things restored, or brought back to what they were before. While this text was written for people a very long time ago, we can relate to what they might have been going through. We have all had times in which things did not go the way we had hoped. These verses tell us that even though things are not as we expect, God's promise is restoration.

Read the text:

Isaiah 61:1-7 (MSG)

*The Spirit of God, the Master, is on me
because God anointed me.
He sent me to preach good news to the poor,
heal the heartbroken,
Announce freedom to all captives,
pardon all prisoners.
God sent me to announce the year of his grace—
a celebration of God's destruction of our enemies—
and to comfort all who mourn,
To care for the needs of all who mourn in Zion,
give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,
Messages of joy instead of news of doom,
a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.
Rename them "Oaks of Righteousness"
planted by God to display his glory.*

*They'll rebuild the old ruins,
raise a new city out of the wreckage.
They'll start over on the ruined cities,
take the rubble left behind and make it new.
You'll hire outsiders to herd your flocks
and foreigners to work your fields,
But you'll have the title "Priests of God,"
honored as ministers of our God.
You'll feast on the bounty of nations,
you'll bask in their glory.
Because you got a double dose of trouble
and more than your share of contempt,
Your inheritance in the land will be doubled
and your joy go on forever.*

Discuss:

1. What is something that turned out not as expected?
2. Talk about the word restoration. What does this mean?

Pray:

God of joy, give us eyes for restoration. When the world behaves in ways that we do not expect or in ways that make us sad, angry, or hurt, help us to know that your word is at work in us and in the world. Amen.

Day Seventeen: Joy

Date: Tuesday, December 15th, 2020

Text: Isaiah 61:1-7

As we read this part of the story and talk about restoration, or making things new or good, we are told that we are partners with God in this restoration. It is God's spirit in us that is an agent in bringing God's peace. God was active during the time of the prophets and God is active with us now today. In this world, where things are not always as expected, God is always working through us. The important thing to hear in these verses is that it is not us, it is not what we do, but the spirit that has been given to us by God. God is the giver.

Read the text:

Isaiah 61:1-7 (MSG)

*The Spirit of God, the Master, is on me
because God anointed me.
He sent me to preach good news to the poor,
heal the heartbroken,
Announce freedom to all captives,
pardon all prisoners.
God sent me to announce the year of his grace—
a celebration of God's destruction of our enemies—
and to comfort all who mourn,
To care for the needs of all who mourn in Zion,
give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,
Messages of joy instead of news of doom,
a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.
Rename them "Oaks of Righteousness"
planted by God to display his glory.*

*They'll rebuild the old ruins,
raise a new city out of the wreckage.
They'll start over on the ruined cities,
take the rubble left behind and make it new.
You'll hire outsiders to herd your flocks
and foreigners to work your fields,
But you'll have the title "Priests of God,"
honored as ministers of our God.
You'll feast on the bounty of nations,
you'll bask in their glory.
Because you got a double dose of trouble
and more than your share of contempt,
Your inheritance in the land will be doubled
and your joy go on forever.*

Discuss:

1. What does it mean to be a partner? Talk about a time you were a good partner. Talk about a time when you could have been a better partner. What was the difference?
2. What does it mean to be a partner with God?

Pray:

God of joy, give us the humility to know that our work is your work. Keep our vision toward one of restoration and spreading your peace. Amen.

Day Eighteen: Joy

Date: Wednesday, December 16th, 2020

Text: Isaiah 61:8-9

As we think about an unfair world that sometimes seems to lack peace, it can be hard to imagine when and where God is. This part of our story for this week uses the word covenant. What is a covenant? It is a shared promise. When two people decide to marry, they make a covenant. God has made covenant with us. But what is this covenant? What is it that God has promised to us?

Our world is often unfair. We may not get what we want or deserve for the work we have done. Sometimes we work too hard for the pay or recognition that we get. Sometimes, we are not recognized at all. Sometimes we are treated poorly. Sometimes, we are ignored. God's promise to us is that God does not operate in this way. God's promise to us is that in the story of restoration, this is not the way things will be.

Read the text:

Isaiah 61:8-9

*"Because I, God, love fair dealing
and hate thievery and crime,
I'll pay your wages on time and in full,
and establish my eternal covenant with you.
Your descendants will become well-known all over.
Your children in foreign countries
Will be recognized at once
as the people I have blessed."*

Discuss:

1. If you are, or have been married, talk about the covenant, or promise you made to each other.
2. What does it mean to have a promise or covenant with God?
3. Talk about God's promise of restoration. What does that look like?

Pray:

God of joy, help us to remember your covenant with us. Guide us through this scary and unjust world. Help us to remember that your love, peace, and joy is bigger than the pain that we are experiencing now. Help us to know that your story is a story of restoration and making things new. Amen.

Day Nineteen: Joy

Date: Thursday, December 17th, 2020

Text: Isaiah 61:10-11

At the end of our reading for this week, we get to a song of joy. This restoration, God's way of being and hope for the world is so incredible, that we sing for joy! It even uses the image of a wedding to compare this joy to. Imagine all the fun, dancing, and hope that happens during weddings. The message translation uses words such as bursting and exploding. What a way to talk about God's love and spirit overflowing from God to us and into the world.

Read the text:

Isaiah 61:10-11

*I will sing for joy in God,
explode in praise from deep in my soul!
He dressed me up in a suit of salvation,
he outfitted me in a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom who puts on a tuxedo
and a bride a jeweled tiara.
For as the earth bursts with spring wildflowers,
and as a garden cascades with blossoms,
So the Master, God, brings righteousness into full bloom
and puts praise on display before the nations.*

Discuss:

1. What brings you joy?
2. What songs of joy do you know?
3. Talk about the last wedding you were at. Talk about the joy and hope you have at weddings.

Pray:

God of joy, give us the voice to sing for joy for all you have done, do and will do for us. Help us to dance for joy as we remember your love and promise for reconciliation. Amen.

Day Twenty: Joy

Date: Friday, December 18th, 2020

Text: Isaiah 61:10-11

So far, we have talked about where in the God story these verses are, we have covered things not being as expected, we have considered being partners with God, we have thought about covenants or promises, and finally we get to a song of praise. But what does this have to do with Christmas? Remember the part of God's story we are in? The time of the prophets. While that time spans many years, what is consistent through all of the prophets is the prediction of Jesus. In these verses, thinking about the joy that comes with the eventual restoration, we look to Jesus. Jesus is a part of this promise. Jesus actually ends up using this verse during his first sermon. What God wants for the world is healing and restoration. Jesus is a part of that.

Read the text:

Isaiah 61:10-11

*I will sing for joy in God,
explode in praise from deep in my soul!
He dressed me up in a suit of salvation,
he outfitted me in a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom who puts on a tuxedo
and a bride a jeweled tiara.
For as the earth bursts with spring wildflowers,
and as a garden cascades with blossoms,
So the Master, God, brings righteousness into full bloom
and puts praise on display before the nations.*

Discuss:

1. Talk about healing.
2. The coming of Jesus is about healing. Talk about what that means, what are your thoughts, and how does that make you feel?

Pray:

*God of joy, Help us to look toward Jesus. Fill us with joy for the coming of your son. Give us the eyes to wait for Jesus, even when things seem hard or scary. Help us to know that you are God and your promise to us is filled with peace and joy.
Amen.*

Day Twenty-One: Peace

Date: Saturday, December 19th, 2020

Text: Isaiah 61:1-11

Today, re-read the entire Isaiah text from start to finish. In this practice, you will read the text three times with silence between each reading. The full text is not included this time. Find it in your own Bible(s). If you have multiple translations in your house, read from all the translations.

- Someone read the passage the first time followed by silence. Ask the question *“What word or phrase stands out to me the most?”* Feel free to share or journal.
- Someone read the passage for a second time followed by silence. Ask the question *“How is this passage speaking to me today?”* Feel free to share or journal.
- Someone read the passage for a third time followed by silence. Ask the question *“How will I be different this week based on this passage?”* Feel free to share or journal

Read the text:

Isaiah 61:1-11

Pray (When you get to the end of this prayer, there is an option to add your reflection from reading the passage. If you are with multiple people, this can be popcorn style or you can decide on an order to people offer words of prayer):

God of joy, thank you for your amazing love. Help us to hear your word and let your word lead us and our lives to you. Help us this week as we _____. Amen



Day Twenty-two: Love

Date: Sunday, December 20th, 2020

Text: Luke 1:28-29

God chose Mary. There was nothing special or unique about her. One of the many themes that continue to carry though the bible is that God chooses to show up in extraordinary ways. Showing up to Mary was no exception. Mary was a teenager, not royalty, nothing spectacular about her. Mary had a very important call. One of our core beliefs is that God shows up in the world in very unexpected ways. The prophets thought that Jesus might come as a warrior. Jesus came as a small and vulnerable baby.

Read the text:

Luke 1:28-29 (MSG)

26-28 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:

Good morning!

You're beautiful with God's beauty,

Beautiful inside and out!

God be with you.

29-33 She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.

He will be great,

be called 'Son of the Highest.'

The Lord God will give him

the throne of his father David;

He will rule Jacob's house forever—

no end, ever, to his kingdom."

Discuss:

1. God chooses us. When have you felt chosen by God?
2. What does it mean that God shows up in unexpected ways? Has there ever been a time during which God has shown up for you in an unexpected way?

Pray:

God of love, you chose Mary, someone completely unexpected to carry, hold, and bear your love and promise to the world. Help us to be unexpected in our world. Allow us to birth new life into a hurting world. Amen.

Day Twenty-Three: Love

Date: Monday, December 21st 2020

Text: Luke 1:28-29

A consistent theme throughout God's story is that God chooses people to do God's work. For Mary, this was very disruptive! She was going to become a mom! For those of you who have become parents or big siblings, I am sure you can imagine the impact a baby might have! Mary was visibly shaken. Sometimes, God calls us to places and tasks that give us fear. Sometimes, God asks us to show up in places that we do not want to be. Sometimes, God's request feels disruptive. The angel Gabriel assures Mary that there is nothing to be afraid of.

Read the text:

Luke 1:28-29 (MSG)

26-28 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:

*Good morning!
You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you.*

29-33 She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.

*He will be great,
be called 'Son of the Highest.'
The Lord God will give him
the throne of his father David;
He will rule Jacob's house forever—
no end, ever, to his kingdom."*

Discuss:

1. When have you felt called by God? What feelings did you have?
2. Talk about this call that Mary had as disruptive. Has your call ever felt disruptive? What feelings did you have?

Pray:

God of love, sometimes you call us to places that we do not want to go. Sometimes, these places feel scary. Help us to listen to the words of the angel. Give us the courage to follow you and participate with you in this call. Amen.

Day Twenty-Four: Love

Date: Tuesday, December 22nd, 2020

Text: Luke 1:26-49

Even though Mary was afraid and her call changed her whole life, Mary said “yes”. It is not always easy to say “yes” to God and to the places that God sometimes sends us. This part of the text has a special name. It is called “The Magnificat”. Mary’s response of love, joy, and praise is very special and is even sometimes a part of our worship. We look to the Bible to understand the God story. When we read this story, we are always asking the question: “what does this mean for us, today?” In this case, we look to Mary, her love and joy, and song of praise in receiving God’s call and we hope to do the same when God asks us to show up in ways and places that are uncomfortable or scary.

Read the text:

Luke 1:-46-55

And Mary said,

I’m bursting with God-news;

I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.

God took one good look at me, and look what happened—

I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!

What God has done for me will never be forgotten,

the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.

His mercy flows in wave after wave

on those who are in awe before him.

He bared his arm and showed his strength,

scattered the bluffing braggarts.

He knocked tyrants off their high horses,

pulled victims out of the mud.

The starving poor sat down to a banquet;

the callous rich were left out in the cold.

He embraced his chosen child, Israel;

he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.

It’s exactly what he promised,

beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

Discuss:

1. Why is Mary’s song so special?

Pray:

God of love, help us to look to Mary as a model. Fill us with courage of Mary to accept God’s call even when it is hard or scary. Help us sing a song of praise to you. Amen.

Day Twenty-Five: Love

Date: Tuesday, December 23rd 2020

Text: Luke 1:26-49

Today, re-read the entire Luke text from start to finish. In this practice, you will read the text three times with silence between each reading. The full text is not included this time. Find it in your own Bible(s). If you have multiple translations in your house, read from all the translations.

- Someone read the passage the first time followed by silence. Ask the question *“What word or phrase stands out to me the most?”* Feel free to share or journal.
- Someone read the passage for a second time followed by silence. Ask the question *“How is this passage speaking to me today?”* Feel free to share or journal.
- Someone read the passage for a third time followed by silence. Ask the question *“How will I be different this week based on this passage?”* Feel free to share or journal

Read the text:

Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

Pray (When you get to the end of this prayer, there is an option to add your reflection from reading the passage. If you are with multiple people, this can be popcorn style or you can decide on an order to people offer words of prayer):

God of love, thank you for your amazing love. Help us to hear your word and let your word lead us and our lives to you. Help us this week as we _____ . Amen

Day Twenty-six: Love

Date: Tuesday, December 24th, 2020

Text: Luke 1:26-49

Take items from your house to create a nativity scene. Feel free to be creative! You can also google images of the nativity scene, see how many different images you find! Maybe draw the nativity scene.

Read the text:

Luke 2:1-20

Discuss:

1. *Talk about this unique scene. Share the images you found or created.*

Contemplative practice:

Close your eyes and take several deep breaths.

Imagine the nativity. Imagine yourself present there. What does it feel like to be there? Is it hot? Cold? In-between? What does it smell like? What does it sound like?

Think about how you might have felt to show up there?

Allow silence, as much silence as you or your family can manage.

When you are ready to end the silence, re-focus on your breath and open your eyes.

Pray:

God of love, thank you for Jesus. Thank you for coming into the world as a small and vulnerable baby. Help us to look for you and recognize your presence in the unexpected places. Help us to look at this nativity scene and see the amazing image it is. Amen.