

2025 Advent Devotional
"A Thrill of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love"
First Baptist Church Carrollton, GA
Pastor: Dr. David Hughes

Dear Church Family,

Happy Advent! As a lifelong and strict "No Christmas Before Thanksgiving" girl, I am thrilled to *officially* step into the Christmas season and embrace the spirit that comes with it. I find myself delighted by all things Advent — the whimsical calendars that offer a small surprise each day, the prayers and devotions, the soft glow of candles, the greenery thoughtfully placed throughout the sanctuary. More than anything else, however, I welcome Advent for the abundant love and sacred quiet it ushers in as we prepare our hearts for Christ's coming.

As we enter this holy season at First Baptist Carrollton, it is our great pleasure to present the 2025 Advent Devotional. This year's collection is a rich compilation of reflections written by members from all across our congregation — writers both new and experienced, voices both new to our congregation and long-established within it, each offering a unique perspective on this most sacred of times. Their words invite us to pause, pray, and draw closer to Jesus.

I would like to thank each and every person who opened their hearts, gave of their time and talents, and contributed a devotional message to this publication. Thank you for your genuine spirit and deep love for Jesus.

May these reflections encourage and sustain you, Church family, whether this time of year feels bright with joy or heavy with pain for you. As we immerse ourselves in the season of the Christ Child, may we remember that our God faithfully welcomes us with open arms in moments of struggle and sorrow as surely as in times of peace and joy.

Wishing you a blessed and meaningful Advent Season,

Stephanie Trumble, Andrea Stone, and Shelley Martin, Advent Devotional Committee

Week #1: "The Thrill of Hope"

Sunday, November 30th

Anchor Message: Where Does Hope Come From? by Michael Stone

We all hope that our children grow up healthy and strong, receive a good education, build a promising career, and one day find a loving spouse to share their lives with. Hope, by its very nature, looks toward the future. It involves waiting—trusting that what we long for will one day come to pass.

But true hope is more than wishful thinking. For Christians, our hope is rooted in faith—faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. This faith tells us that Jesus came into the world to bear the sins of humanity, that He died on the cross, and that He rose again three days later, conquering death on our behalf.

Our hope looks forward to the day when Jesus will return in glory. Until then, we live in a world that continues to test our faith, just as it did before Christ's first coming. Yet in every trial, we cling to the unchanging truth: He will return.

Our hope is founded on faith—and our faith is grounded in the unshakable love of Jesus.

As we enter the Christmas season, let us celebrate this hope with love, peace, and joy. Let us encourage one another daily, remembering that Christmas is not just a celebration of Christ's birth, but a reminder of the hope we carry in Him.

Prayer: Lord, Help me to hear Your voice saying, "I am your hope." Your Word tells us that You are the hope for the hopeless, a steady anchor when life feels uncertain. Fill me with Your hope today, Lord—a hope that is alive, unshakable, and rooted in You. Remind me that hope in You is not fragile, but an unbreakable lifeline to Your heart. You see the silent prayers I barely dare to whisper, the longings buried deep within me. Today, I lay them at Your feet, trusting that You can do far more than I could ever ask or imagine. Let my hope be built not on what I see, but on who You are—faithful, true, and forever near. Fill me with the hope that comes through Jesus, my Savior, my anchor, my lifeline. Amen.

Monday, December 1st

Hope Message #2: Hope by Ann Catherine Cox

Advent reminds us that even in the darkest nights, God is planting seeds of light. Nature shows us this truth again and again. Though trees stand bare in winter, life waits within, ready to bloom. The evergreens we bring inside and dress with lights proclaim that the Light of the world shines forever – even on the darkest night.

We have hope because we believe in that Light, even when it is hard to see. Scripture promises, "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles" (Isaiah 40:31).

Hope is not wishful thinking but confident trust that God is present and working, even when unseen. Just as the earth waits for spring, we wait for Christ, trusting His promise to make all things new. In every sunrise, green shoot, and quiet star, God's hope breaks through. Let the Light of God and the hope of Jesus enter your heart this Advent season.



Tuesday, December 2nd

Hope Message #3: "The Thrill of Hope, the Weary World Rejoices" by Tammy Hughes

Recently I heard Dr. Terence Lester's story, and it moved me deeply. He was a sometimes—homeless high school dropout and gang member who was incarcerated at age twenty. Then he discovered God's love and purpose for his life, and he now is a professor and the founder of the non—profit Love Beyond Walls. An interviewer asked him how he was able to persist and not give in to despair. Lester stated that at every critical point in his life, an individual spoke words of hope and encouragement to him. One was a stranger, one was a teacher, and one was a deacon in his church. He says that a small room full of people made all the difference because they allowed him to "borrow their courage and believe until I had my own."



Wednesday, December 3rd

Hope Message #4: A Thrill of Hope by Rebecca Hughes

A Google search of *hope* reveals: noun—a feeling of expectation, verb— to desire something, and even the acronym—<u>Hold On Pain Ends</u>. For me the word *hope* encompasses all of the previous sentiments and something more—faith. Hebrews 11:1 states, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

The arrival of Jesus brought hope to a weary world so many years ago and still brings hope to our weary world today. Many of us face pain and challenges in this world that can make us feel hopeless. This past year has personally been filled with pain in my body and the challenges that have come with a diagnosis. It is not something I would have hoped for, yet in the pain and through the challenges, God has been ever—present. Through prayers poured out and the encouragement of family and friends, I have felt God walking beside me, and when I've needed it most, carrying me in His arms. Through my faith in Him, I know that one day all pain will end, and for those who believe through faith, an eternity together awaits surrounded in God's glory. Now that is something to hope for!

Prayer: God of Hope, our weary world is filled with pain and challenges. May we place our hope and our faith in You, knowing that You walk with us every step of the way. Thank you, God. We love You. Amen.



Thursday, December 4th Hope Message #5: The Thrill of Hope by Laurie Luckie

In a world weighed down by uncertainty, "the thrill of hope" reminds us that even the darkest night can't extinguish God's promise. When Israel waited for their Messiah, centuries of silence hung heavy until angels filled the sky, declaring "a Savior has been born" (Luke 2:11). That moment wasn't quiet relief; it was holy excitement—the heartbeat of redemption beginning anew.

Hope is not a passive wish but a living anticipation that God is still at work. Advent invites us to pause in our waiting and feel that same thrill—the spark of divine assurance that light is breaking through. Whatever uncertainties we face, Christ's coming reminds us that joy is not canceled, peace is not lost, and love has drawn near. Let your heart be stirred again by this truth: the hope we hold is alive—and His name is Jesus.



Friday, December 5th

Hope Message #6: Hope by Dave Higgins

Hope is defined as a feeling of expectation and desire for a positive outcome. The word *hope* is found numerous times in the New Testament as Paul writes, "And Hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us." Romans 5:5 (NIV).

Hope can be comforting, encouraging, and consoling. I find Hope in the church sanctuary where I am surrounded by fellow believers of Christ. I hear Hope in the beautiful sounds from the choir, congregants singing around me, and the heavenly music played by Ruthie Phillips and Greg Hendrix on the piano and organ. I see Hope in all the ministries the church is involved with here locally and around the world.

Prayer: My prayer is that you will find Hope in whatever circumstance you are in and that God will fill you with peace during this Christmas season.



Saturday, December 6th

Hope Message #7: Hope by Maryanne Smith

Hope is more than wishing—it is a confident expectation rooted in God's faithfulness.

During Advent, we remember a world waiting in darkness, longing for a Savior. Into that darkness, God spoke a promise: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). Jesus is that light. His coming reminds us that God always keeps His promises, even when we cannot yet see the fulfillment.

Hope is the thrill of knowing that God is already working in the places that feel uncertain, silent, and overwhelming. My family clung to this hope at the unexpected passing of our beloved brother, Rick Schuchman, on December 26, 2022. In the weeks that followed, I realized I was not walking in this darkness alone, for my God was with me. We do not wait alone–God waits with us. We look back at Christ's first coming with gratitude and look forward to His return with expectation.

As you enter this Advent season, let hope take root. Let it steady your heart and lift your eyes. The Light has come— and He will come again.



Week #2: "The Thrill of Peace"

Sunday, December 7th

Anchor Message: Peace by Patrick Erben

Peace is a paradox. We all want peace but mostly as freedom from responsibility, strife, and the din of daily life (essentially, Seinfeld's "Serenity Now").

This passive notion of peace contrasts with the complicated demands of making peace. Peace requires sustained work, which is why few peace processes—a notable exception being the aptly named Good Friday Peace Agreement in Northern Ireland—truly last.

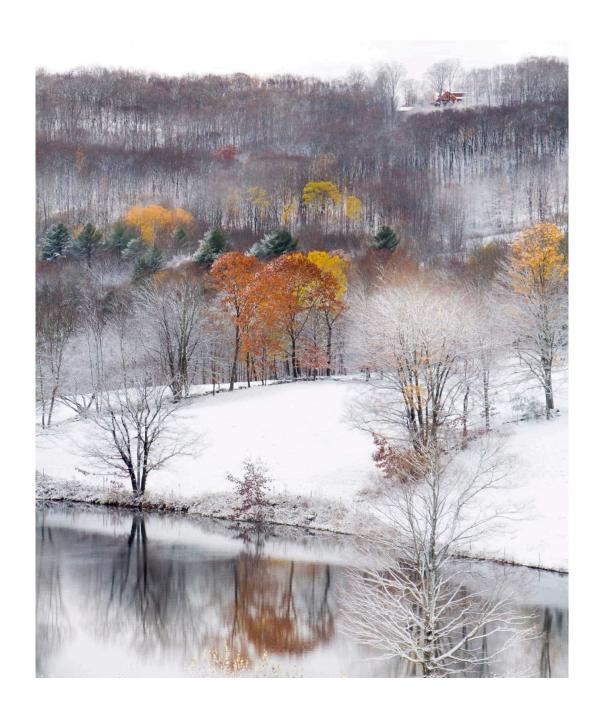
The New Testament reflects this paradoxical nature of peace: In the span of one week, Jesus aggressively drove the "den of robbers" (Mark 11:15–18) from the temple, while telling Peter in Gethsemane to put his "sword back into its place" (Matthew 26:52). The Christmas story is full of similar contrasts, from Christ's peaceful rest in the manger to the brutality of the Roman empire and Herod's homicidal rage turning the holy family into refugees.

During the Advent Season, we desire peace but usually participate in the frenzy of consumption and veritable decorating wars (note ABC's *Great Christmas Light Fight*).

Sure, not all contradictions are meant to be resolved, but some principles are indispensable for achieving true peace. For me, the Reverend Martin Luther King's famous maxim from *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958) expresses such a truth: "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice."

If we want the peace of Christmas to last beyond December 25, working for justice would be a good place to start.

Prayer: Heavenly Father! This Christmas and throughout the new year, let our prayers ask for more than "Give us Peace." Help us transform the heavenly host's Christmas proclamation ("on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests") into a message that a suffering world can believe in. Amen.



Monday, December 8th

<u>Peace Message #2</u>: Peace by Eddie Cole

"It was Friday, September 19, 2025 @ 2:25 p.m."

"JUST THE FACTS - PLEASE!"

"Yes, Sir. You see, I was in my office that day at that time: the dog days of summer. Everything was in slow motion: the weather – not ready to change – the week – not ready to end. And then it happened. An email popped onto my screen about Advent – yes, Advent."

"I thought to myself, *That has to do with Christmas. We have yet to reach the autumnal equinox. Halloween and Thanksgiving seemed like a future event. Advent?* I read no further."

"JUST THE FACTS --PLEASE!"

"Yes, Sir. Then, next thing I knew it was Wednesday, October 1, 2025, about 8:20 a.m. I was in my office enjoying my morning devotional when my phone rang-not peaceful. So, my friend said, 'Eddie, you did not respond to the church email about Advent and that's not like you."

"Guilty!! My mind raced: Advent. Advent. What in the world kind of 'event' could my friend be talking about? The church has events all the time. NO, it's ADVENT, taken from Latin *advenire* (ad=to + venire = come): those four weeks before Christmas representing HOPE, PEACE, JOY, LOVE. Hmmm, Did I mention it was my devotional time? Not peaceful."

"JUST THE FACTS---PLEASE"

"Yes, Sir, So then, my friend told me that the call is about ME writing a 250 word piece about 'The Thrill of Hope, Peace, Joy, Love. Did I mention it was about 8:20 AM.? Autumn has not arrived and we're talking about Christmas, the four weeks before? Again, not peaceful!"

"JUST THE FACTS --- PLEASE!"

"Well, my mid 1800s British Baptist preacher friend, Charles Spurgeon, tells me that Isaiah 32:18 says in part, 'My people will abide in a peaceful habitation.' Then Spurgeon explains, 'The person of Jesus is a quiet resting place for His people, and whenever drawn near to Him thru the breaking of the BREAD, the hearing of the WORD, the searching of the SCRIPTURES, prayer or praise, we find that any form of approach to HIM brings peace to our spirit.'"

Maybe here is the thrill of peace!

Prayer: Gracious God, please bring Peace as in the Garden of Eden before our fall. AMEN.



Tuesday, December 9th

<u>Peace Message #3</u>: Peace by Randy Brittain

"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those of goodwill." Luke 2:14

The Advent Season brings a sense of anticipation to us. I have often imagined how fearful the shepherds were as the angels announced Christ's birth. The message of peace was not only for them, but for all people of goodwill. It is not something that can be earned. It is a gift from God to all those to whom He grants His grace.

Peace is not based on circumstances of life. It can exist in happy times or in the middle of hardships. I remember feeling peace after the birth of my children and at the death of my parents. It brings a deep sense of assurance of His love. His Holy Spirit helps believers to deflect anxiety and fear, to withstand deprivation and temptation, and to grasp hope and victory in the face of adversity.

God's peace is greatly different from the world's understanding of peace as the absence of war and/or violence. The peace of God is manifested in our lives when Christians faithfully obey God's will and share His love.

The Christ child brought peace, hope, love, and joy to the world. Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds were the first to receive Him in Bethlehem. However, we all can still today find the peace of God that the Christ child brought if we receive Him as our Savior and Lord.

Merry Christmas!



Wednesday, December 10th

<u>Peace Message #4</u>: "There Is a Pleasure in the Pathless Woods" by Andrea Stone

"There is a pleasure in the pathless woods." This quote by George Cordon Byron speaks to me of peace. My first memories recognizing the sensation of peace were those of riding horses in the pathless woods. I remember that peace of youthful and carefree freedom. God desires that same feeling of carefree freedom for everyone.

We all have memories of peaceful moments in time, but the peace that comes with the love and light of God is the true peace that we all seek. Advent invites us to be awake and to wait and anticipate the coming of Christ. We are invited to listen, to look beyond the ordinary, and listen for God's quiet voice with the ear of our heart. This is the peace of God that comes through . . .the breaking in of God's peace.

John 14: 27: "Peace, I give to you. My own peace I leave with you."

Prayer: O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Thursday, December 11th

Peace Message #5: Peace Will Come by Lewis Baumstark

Peace can be defined as the absence of stress. The best stress remover that I know is laughter. When I was a Minister of Music our church had a dinner theater Christmas production. One particular production, along with conducting, I had a solo. As part of my costume, I had a large black hat that had been rented. Unknown to any of us the hat had been treated with something to maintain the dark color.

When I took the stage to sing, I had been conducting and was perspiring. As a dramatic move, I took off the hat and held it in my hands. When I turned back around to face the choir, I had a large black smudge on my forehead. The choir thought it hilarious, so much so that it became a recurring joke in years to come. We were all able to take an unfortunate accident and turn it into a stress relieving moment with long lasting effects.

Are you able to laugh at yourself?

My solo that night was entitled "Peace Will Come." Here is the chorus of that song:

Peace will come to those who let the son of God be born to them; born in their hearts, their homes, their lives, Christmas comes when we hear the still small voice of God. (Lyrics by Terry York)

God gave us laughter to help release stress and bring peace. Christmas will come when we hear the voice of God and know that our laughter comes from Him.

Prayer: God, Give us hope, peace, laughter, and the joy of Christmas! Amen.



Friday, December 12th

Peace Message #6: Peace by Jack Gilbert

Peace is often defined as absence of hostilities, tranquility, a greeting, etc. We sometimes seek peace in a variety of activities and medications. Christ told his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you, not as the world gives do I give you" (John 14:27 ESV).

Peace at our house begins before sunrise talking with God through prayer and is followed by a beautiful chorus of birds singing as the sun rises. Sometimes their songs sound as if they are singing, "Jesus is coming."

In his letters, the Apostle Paul wrote, "Now the Lord of peace himself gives you peace always by all means" (2 Thes 3:16 KJV) and "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful" (Colossians 3:15 NIV).

May we all be thankful this Advent Season as Christ guides us homeward, and join those birds, knowing and believing Jesus will return!

Prayer: Our Father of grace and mercy, You are the reason for the joy, peace, and hope in our hearts. For You sent Your son, Jesus, the Prince of Peace to save us from our sins. As we seek peace in our world and daily lives, may You continue to rule in our hearts forever and we live our lives with gratitude to You. Amen.



Saturday, December 13th

<u>Peace Message #7</u>: Peace by Greg Hendrix

As Advent dawns, the world around us hums with urgency — lists to make, plans to keep, lights to hang. Yet, in the quiet corners of our hearts, God whispers an invitation: "Be still, and know that I am God."

The second candle we light this season — the Candle of Peace — glows softly, reminding us that peace is not found in perfect circumstances, but in the presence of Jesus. When He came as a fragile baby, heaven's peace entered our chaos. That same peace still reaches us today — steady, unshaken, and tender.

Maybe your heart feels restless or heavy as this season begins. Bring it all to Him. Let His peace settle like snow over your soul — gentle, pure, restoring. This Advent, may we pause long enough to feel His nearness and let His peace fill every waiting place within us.

"The Lord blesses His people with peace." — Psalm 29:11



Week #3: "The Thrill of Joy"
Sunday, December 14th
Third Sunday of Advent

Anchor Message: Joy by Henry Tyson

In the liturgical tradition of worship during the season of Advent, JOY is the celebrated theme of the Third Sunday of Advent typically based upon the angelic message to the shepherds from Luke 2:10: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great JOY for all the people." However, my reflections on JOY centered on the words of Jesus in what we name as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" in Luke 15:11–32. I as a sojourner have always been more overwhelmed by the father/parent in the story than the flawed siblings.

The immeasurable depth of grace and forgiving love demonstrated by the father/parent "standing on the front porch" with constant vigil is a watershed moment in "Salvation History." Timothy Keller in his book *The Prodigal God* applies the appropriate definition of "prodigal": (1. Recklessly extravagant; 2. Having spent everything) to our Creator God Parent who is overjoyed that the lost one has come home and Who calls for a celebration feast with all the trimmings. In these parable words of Jesus—the Babe of Bethlehem and Barefoot Rabbi—we find the very essence of the gospel. And I am filled with that same JOY.



Monday, December 15th

Joy Message #2: Why Choose Joy? by Lisa Loftin

In John 10:10, Jesus tells us: "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."

The thief represents negative influences in our lives that take away our joy. But what is an abundant life?

We may think of an abundant life as one filled with material things and good health. But Jesus' meaning is deeper than that. An abundant life is one filled with joy from having a personal relationship with Him.

The enduring joy of which Jesus speaks is a life that is spiritually fulfilled regardless of our circumstances. In this relationship we open ourselves to receive His blessings, guidance and love. By nurturing our faith, we can overcome challenges and resist the "thief" that comes to steal our joy.

A life of joy is one of peace that remains no matter the circumstances of our life. It is living with the trust and knowledge of a greater purpose – a greater existence.

Everyone is going through something. When life seems to be in chaos or falling apart, it is up to each one of us to choose joy.

Why choose joy? For the full and abundant life Jesus promises that comes from a relationship with Christ that brings us out of the darkness and into the light.



Tuesday, December 16th <u>Joy Message #3:</u> *Joy* by Cole Fannin

As a husband and dad, I've come to realize that joy isn't about everything going right—it's about knowing Who holds it all together. During the Advent season, our house is full of excitement: kids counting down the days until Christmas, the smell of cookies in the oven, Christmas music playing in the background, and yes, even those mushy Hallmark movies that seem to all end the same way, which my wife thoroughly enjoys!

But the real joy isn't found in any of that—it's found in Jesus.

He's the reason we can have hope when things feel uncertain and peace even in the middle of chaos. His love is steady and unchanging, and that's where real joy begins. As Scripture reminds us, "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

This Christmas, may our homes and hearts be filled with that kind of joy—the kind that comes from knowing Emmanuel, God with us.



Wednesday, December 17th

Low Massage #4: "It is Well with My Soul": Fin

<u>Joy Message #4:</u> "It is Well with My Soul": Finding Divine Joy Amidst Sorrow by Rebecca L. Harrison

When most people hear the term *joy*, they think about feelings of great pleasure, experiences that are defined by happiness and bliss. But, what is joy in a time of sorrow and sadness? Where do you find exuberance in the wake of a series of challenges? After a difficult personal year, this question has beleaguered me for the last five weeks since I was assigned the topic for this collection. Indeed, I have often asked myself why must I reflect on joy? Hope and peace are part of my daily gratitude prayers, topics I have contemplated often and could easily write about. But joy? That concept has eluded me in recent years, but I have come to realize that I am far from alone. The holidays are often difficult for many in our spiritual community who continue to mourn loved ones, who have suffered loss, who struggle to make ends meet or even to just get out of bed in the morning. The problem, then, may not be the state of our experiences but how we think about and define joy itself.

Like any good college professor, I decided to go back to the text and think about biblical joy—not the one defined in Merriam—Webster or sold to us in the uber—consumerist culture we live in—and what it could teach me. What I found there is that divine joy is not fleeting pleasure, it is an enduring peace rooted and sustained in communion with God—a thread that crosses both the Old and New Testament. Nehemiah 8:10 teaches us that joy is strength found in the Lord, a sentiment Psalms 16:11 echoes. Joy here is a gift to be experienced throughout suffering where, in the presence of our sorrows, our Lord remains with us. The Christmas season reminds us of this ecclesiastical joy as Christ becomes the literal fulfillment of God's love, God's gift of divine joy: "Don't be afraid!," said the angel to the shepherds, for "I bring you the most joyful news" as our savior is born (Luke 2:10). In fact, Jesus himself links joy with discipline, a spiritual gift derived from "obey[ing]" and "living" in his love: "I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy" (John 16: 10–11). Most surprisingly to me, though, on this reflective journey, I found the most comfort in James, a book I have read little from over the years. He advises us to see trials that often test our faith as joy: for our trials, he contends, breed

a perseverance that helps us grow in our faith and makes us more complete in Christ (James 1:1-4).

In thinking about James's message, I started to consider one of my grandmother's favorite hymns: "It is Well with My Soul." This hymn, written by Horatio Spafford, was composed during the holiday season after Spafford lost his four daughters when the SS Ville du Havre sank in the Atlantic Ocean on November 22, 1873, a fate he escaped as he was delayed on business. Spafford received the news from his wife Anna who simply stated: "Saved alone. What shall I do?" Just a few weeks later, he composed this hymn as he crossed the very spot of the ocean that claimed his children's lives. Later, he wrote to his sister—in—law that he did not think of them there but as "safe, folded" into the love and joy of Christ. This tragedy did not break Spafford or drive him away from his faith, rather it strengthened him to move away from material success to a life of spiritual pilgrimage.

In the end, what I have come to see for myself is simply this: we are each, indeed, saved alone in our individual walks with God, but that redemption is joy itself—rejoicing found through the fulfilment of hope, peace, and gratitude for our savior. Thus, for those of you who, like myself, feel sadness, anxiety, or even profound grief this time of year, I offer you these words, words I now see rooted in ecclesiastical joy, penned by Spafford.

When peace like a river, attendeth my way, When sorrows, like sea billows roll; Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.

I hope they bring you some comfort this holiday season as you reflect on Christ's birth who promises that we, too, can find divine joy through communion with God's love.



Thursday, December 18th

Joy Message #5: Joy by Jill Entrekin

One of my very first memories is attending preschool training union at the First Baptist Church of Thomaston, Georgia. My daddy's mother, whom I called Mommie, had never taken a piano lesson but could bang out just about any tune that five—year—olds could sing. My favorite was "I got the joy, joy, joy down in my, down in my heart, down in my heart to stay."

What is joy? Some of the world's finest philosophers have tried to pen the meaning of joy. Most of their findings can be summed up in Voltaire's words: "Happiness is an abstract idea."

Even the 70s rock band Three Dog Night wrote a nonsensical song about joy:

Jeremiah was a bull frog
Was a good friend of mind
I never understood a single word he said
But I helped him drink his wine.
Joy to the world
All the boys and girls
Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea
Joy to you and me.

While the lyrics are foolish, they make the listener smile. Why is that?

Just before Jesus ascended into Heaven, He promised His disciples that they would not be alone. The Holy Spirit would take up residence in their souls. The Apostle Paul writes about the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5: 22: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, JOY, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

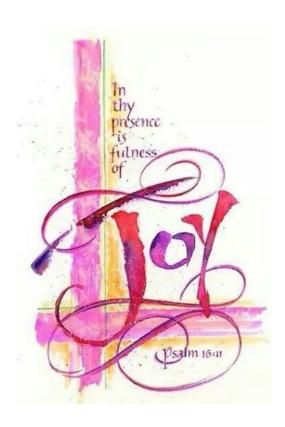
I think God intended for JOY to be the second ingredient in the Spirit's fruit right after LOVE. Because He loved us, God wanted us to discover true joy even in the midst of a sinful world. So, God gave us His son who is "the joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts to Stay." While we may not be able to wrap our brains around its meaning, we can wrap our hearts around the JOY of the Christ child whose Spirit is always with us.

Friday, December 19th

<u>Joy Message #6:</u> *Advent* by Larry Frazier

One definition of *Advent* is waiting for God's presence on earth. Scripture reminds us that the Child of Bethlehem—the baby Jesus—is God, the creator of the universe, the eternal Christ, unbound by time because he is past, present and future. Christ is not slow about his promise to come again, but patient, not wanting any to perish but to come to repentance before the renewal and transformation of new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home. No tears, no suffering, no evil, no death!

For 2,000 years believers have waited; their hope and faith are a witness to us as we of First Baptist attempt, with Christ's help, to love God and each other— "a caring people, sharing God's love." The incredible love and sacrifice of God becoming flesh—one of people, sharing God's love."



Saturday, December 20th

<u>Joy Message #7:</u> "What If We Were as Good as Our Dogs Think We are?" by David Trumble

Matthew 22: 36 – 40: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

"What if we were as good as our dogs think we are?" This is a question my father posed to me several years ago. Our dogs look at us with unconditional love, and they assume that we are the absolute best people on Earth. We definitely do not deserve this. We are not worthy of this type of love. We have earned their love and admiration under false pretenses.

But what if we really were that good? Almost every religion in the world teaches us to love our neighbors. Imagine what the world would be like if everyone spent half as much time focused on loving one another as opposed to persecuting others for their differences. Imagine what Carrollton would be like. Imagine what our church would be like.

Be the person your dog thinks you are.



Week #4: "The Thrill of Love"

Sunday, December 21st

Anchor Message: Love by Shelley Martin

Key Verse – John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

This verse isn't normally considered a "Christmas verse," yet it captures the essence of the season perfectly. "For God so loved..."—this is where it begins. Not with judgment, not with fear, or blame or punishment but with love. A love so vast it includes the entire world. A love so personal it reaches each of us individually.

Our oldest child, and only son, was born on Christmas Eve. I remember holding him, just hours old, and thinking about John 3:16. There was no way I could have given him up for anyone. I would have sacrificed myself to protect him.

Becoming a parent gave me a much deeper appreciation of God's love for me. To sacrifice a deeply loved child for ungrateful, unrepentant people is impossible for my human mind to contemplate. Yet, God did it; and Jesus, in obedience to His Father, gave himself to atone for our sin and pay our debt.

Today, be still for a moment and think about how deep God's love is for you. What are we willing to sacrifice to show God's love to those who are hurting around us?

Prayer: Dear Father, thank You for Your deep love for me. Thank You that You sacrificed Your Son so that my sins could be forgiven and through faith I can spend eternity with You in heaven. Forgive me where I fall short, and open my eyes to see those around me who need to feel Your loving presence. Help me to show Your love in practical and meaningful ways each and every day.

Monday, December 22nd

Love Message #2: Love by Marianna Martin

Key Verses – 1 John 4:7–12 "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God... because God is love... since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

I believe my favorite part of this season is the "holiday spirit" that is ever present if you look closely enough. People are more open to giving to those less fortunate, more willing to spend time with friends and family, and often taking the chance to cherish their loved ones with home cooked meals and thoughtful gifts.

However, it is also a reminder that this time of year is not like the rest of the year. Too often the busy nature of the other months eclipses the opportunity to love deeply and freely.

This verse is a reminder to choose to love all the time, not just at Christmas time, not only the people special to you, but to everyone that crosses your path. God's love for us and for the entire world is a shining example of how we should behave. God's love is unconditional and unending, but we as imperfect beings must remember to choose to love: now and later, to our family and friends, and to the people who challenge us.

Today, let us remember that God is love, and all we are asked to do is to love the Lord and our neighbors. Take this time to think about ways to choose love in the absence of the Advent season.

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for showing us Your love every day. Help us to draw strength from You to love others as You have loved us. Forgive us for being selfish, and help us to find ways to love You and others better in this season and the rest of the year.



Tuesday, December 23rd

Love Message #3: "I Want to Know What Love Is" by Tim Martin

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."—1 John 4:10

The old song says, "I want to know what love is — I want you to show me." It is a longing that echoes through every human heart. We search for love in relationships, success, possessions, and even through social media, yet the truest answer to that cry was born in a manger.

At Christmas, God didn't just tell us what love is — He showed us. In Jesus, love became visible, tangible, and personal. His life revealed that real love is not about getting but giving; not about being served but instead in serving others.

Advent invites us to stop searching for love in the wrong places and to recognize that Love Himself has already come. Through Christ, we don't just *learn* what love is — we *experience* it. And when we let His love live through us, the world begins to see what love truly looks like.



Wednesday, December 24

Love Message #4: The Four Words of Advent by Marty Smith

The four words of Advent — Hope, Peace, Joy and Love — are the pillars of a Christian foundation, and they all represent Jesus. As we come to the season to celebrate Jesus' birth, it almost energizes me to anticipate the thrill of his future arrival. To have the most meaningful reflection this season we must spend adequate time in spiritual preparation and align our hearts each week.

1 Corinthians 13:13 says three things will last forever: Faith, Hope, and Love, and the greatest of these is Love. Living on the realms of a political career, I have personally seen the transfiguration of what I have always known Love to be. Through past years, my church, parents, family, and several influential mentors have taught me what true love really means, and that was to reflect the image of Jesus in all that we do, especially towards each other. Turn on any news source that updates you on world events near and far and it just is not there! We have grown divided and put self in front of others.

I pray that this Christmas I don't assume that people know how I feel about them and that I will take better strides to make inside emotions become outside actions and show more Love. I also pray that each of you will join me in that goal!

Prayer: Father, We just ask that you give us the strength and the wisdom to share the love that you yourself have taught us. Love requires us to share what one has with others. Open our eyes for opportunities to be a witness for your kingdom and break down barriers as we share to become one. In Your name we pray.



Thursday, December 25th

<u>Love Message #5:</u> *The Gift of Love* by Ruthie Phillips

Scripture: This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. — 1 John 4:9 (NIV)

Reflection: Advent is a season of anticipation — not just for the birth of Christ, but for the love He brings into the world. In 1 John 4:9, we're reminded that God's love is not distant but is rather a personal invitation to embody Christ here on earth.

The hymn "The Gift of Love," based on 1 Corinthians 13, echoes this truth:

Though I may speak with bravest fire,

And have the gift of all inspire,

And have not love, my words are vain,

As sounding brass, and hopeless gain.

These lines remind us that love is the underlying pulse of all things.

Love is the heartbeat of Advent. Without it, even our most eloquent words and noble deeds fall flat. The season of Advent extends to us an opportunity to receive the love of Christ and reflect it in how we live, speak, and serve.

Jesus is the embodiment of perfect love. His coming is not just a historical event — it's a divine invitation to live through Him, to let love be the rhythm of our hearts and the reason behind our actions.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank You for sending Jesus, the greatest gift of all, who is the most authentic example of perfect love. Help us to live through Him, to love as He loves, and to let our lives be shaped by grace. May this Advent Season awaken in us a deeper desire to give and receive love that reflects Your heart. Amen.







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