

# ADVENT ECHOES



HOPE



PEACE



JOY



LOVE

A COLLECTIVE REFLECTION ON  
HOPE, PEACE, JOY, AND LOVE



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HOPE, PEACE, JOY, AND LOVE



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*Advent Echoes: A Collective Reflection on Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love* is a heartfelt and captivating Advent devotional created through the collaborative efforts of a diverse community of individuals, including Milligan University faculty, staff, and students.

This unique devotional aims to foster unity, inspire reflection, and deepen the spiritual journey of its readers during the Advent season. *Advent Echoes* fosters a sense of community and shared spiritual growth. It celebrates the diversity of perspectives, encourages empathy and understanding, and offers a mosaic of voices that resonate with readers from various walks of life.

*Advent Echoes* explores four key themes associated with Advent, including hope, peace, joy, and love. Each day's reflection delves into the richness of these themes, examining their relevance and significance in the context of everyday life. Through vivid storytelling, thoughtful meditations, and thought-provoking questions, the devotional gently guides readers toward a deeper understanding of the season's spiritual significance.

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# DECEMBER 1

I was never a patient child, especially as the calendar in our kitchen turned to December, just as our calendars have done today. I could not wait for Christmas Day to arrive so I could tear into the packages that had slowly accumulated under the tree. As I got older, the joy of time with family began to overtake the excitement of gifts. And as I get older still, I come to realize that Christmas is not about those things at all; it is about the coming of Christ to live among us, showing us the way to God.

With the season of Advent upon us, we once again find ourselves filled with a sense of hope, and an expectation that something amazing and beautiful is about to happen. But we must wait. It is not yet time to celebrate the fulfillment of the prophecy that our Savior would soon come in the form of a baby lying in a manger. So, we must wait – but we wait with great hope. Now it is time to eagerly anticipate, to embrace the sense of wonder and hope that surrounds the most amazing gift we could possibly receive.

We have reason to hope because of our faith in God and because he promised that he will be with us in the person of Jesus Christ. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed in Isaiah 7:14, *“therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”* We have hope because when God is with us, we are never alone, we are loved, and we are redeemed!



## Prayer

*Gracious God, we thank you today for the promise of eternal life with you that comes through your son, Jesus Christ, whose coming we eagerly anticipate. But for now, we wait, with the hope that he will soon be with us. As the Psalmist declared, we wait for the Lord, our whole being waits, and in His word, we put our hope (Psalm 130:5).*

*-Dr. Bill Greer*  
President



## DECEMBER 2

As we journey through a season filled with laughs, warm spirits, and time with loved ones, it can also be common to feel a sense of hopelessness as our schedules get in the way of feeling those warm holiday feelings. When this season rolls around each year, the busyness, obligations, and past memories of hardships can certainly put a restraint on the holiday spirit. One might believe that God does not pay attention to the hardships and moments of despair in our lives; however, God provides us with a sense of hope that is not offered by any worldly outlet. This hope changes our perspective from adversities that tend to make life harder to a perspective focusing on God's love and faithfulness that never leaves us. God gifts us the ability to hope so we can acknowledge his presence even as we face the most difficult of times.

Isaiah 40:30-31 (CEB), *“Youths will become tired and weary, young men will certainly stumble; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.”* God does not promise an easy life, a life without stumbles, or a life of only happiness. God promises his faithfulness to us if we have hope in him. If we hold on to hope through our hardships, the Lord strengthens us to persevere even when we have little strength.

God calls us to place our hope in him, and when we do, we find a new strength. When we place our hope in the faithfulness of God, we experience the rejuvenation of new strengths to face the hardships of our relentlessly busy lives.



### Prayer

*Dear Heavenly Father, we ask you to open our hearts as we walk through difficult times. We call on your spirit to help us place our hope in you. We thank you for the renewal of strength you provide, and for being an example of faithfulness as you never abandon us.*

*In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

*-Owen Gibson*

Class of '26



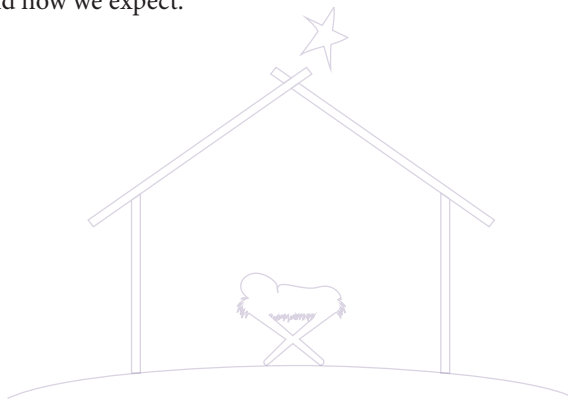
## DECEMBER 3

Normally, when we think of hope, it is in a positive light. Hope is the anticipation we feel about something good. It is grouped together with faith and love in 1 Corinthians 13. Hope is a common theme on posters, wall décor, and calligraphy. Romans 12:12 even instructs us to rejoice in hope. This sounds easy, especially compared to the rest of the verse, which advises us to be patient in suffering and to persevere in prayer.

But is it not sometimes difficult to maintain hope or to rejoice in hope? Hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen. Sometimes, it is hard to rejoice when it seems that the anticipated event will never occur. We have all had the experience of waiting for a good outcome, whether that be the birth of a child in our family, the healing of someone we love, or finding a healthy relationship. The waiting makes it incredibly hard to maintain hope.

Certainly, maintaining hope must have been difficult for those waiting on the birth of the Messiah when they believed that God was not moving; however, Galatians 4:4 says, *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son.”* Not only would it have been difficult to wait, but it must have been difficult when the Messiah came not as a conqueror but a baby in a manger.

During Advent, not only can we rejoice in the birth of Christ but also in the knowledge of God’s provision in the fullness of time. Just as God was faithful in providing a Messiah, he is faithful in hearing and providing for us, even if it is not when and how we expect.



*-Dr. Lori Mills*

Professor of Psychology



## DECEMBER 4

On August 5th, 2010, a copper mine collapsed in northern Chile. 33 miners were trapped about 2,300 feet below the surface. It took 17 days to even discover they were alive. Then came the diligent but careful efforts to rescue them, which took many more weeks. Can you imagine, trapped under the weight of the world, all that earth and rock, alive, but not really living?

Some of you don't have to imagine. Some of you feel as if the weight of the world is hanging over you. Perhaps it is grades, finances, relationships, health concerns for you or someone you love. Maybe it is loneliness or grief. You understand the weight and pressure.

One of the miners trapped, Ariel Ticona, was expecting his first child at the time with his wife, Elizabeth. They planned to name her Carolina but separated by 2,300 feet of rock and rubble, both Ariel and Elizabeth had a change of heart. Now they would name her Esperanza, the Spanish word for "hope." On September 14th, little Esperanza arrived on the earth, while her father was still trapped beneath it. Amid great fear, suffering, and despair, hope was born.

In the first century, the Jewish people, along with the entire world, shared in a collective anticipation, awaiting the birth of hope. On this side of Jesus' birth, we live in anticipation for that hope to be once and for all fulfilled in Christ's return. We hope even though sometimes it can feel like the weight of the world is upon us.. In this waiting of Advent may we be reminded that hope was born many years ago in Bethlehem. And hope will come again in the fullness of glory!

*"To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory," Colossians 1:27 (NRSV).*



### Prayer

*Oh, Gracious God, we feel the weight of a world that is not what you intended. And under that weight, we wait. Join us Holy Spirit in our waiting. Be God-with-us in our waiting. Be our hope we pray, through Christ, Amen.*

*-Dr. Ron Kastens*

Academic Dean of the Seminary



# DECEMBER 5

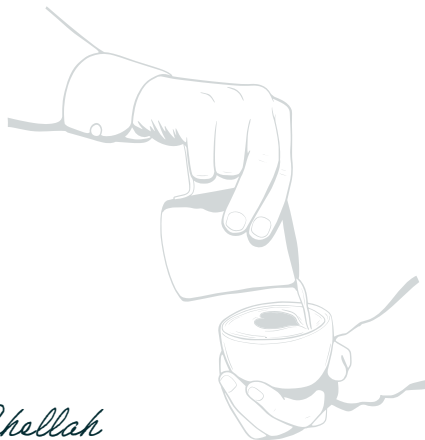
Wherever we find God, there is hope. This is because God is always with us; therefore, we are never without hope. In a world full of uncertainties, one thing remains constant and unchanging - God, in whom we find safety and security. Romans 15:13 says, *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

When we place our trust in God, he fills our hearts and rejuvenates our spirit. It is a refreshing reminder to know we serve a God of hope, a God who will shoulder our burdens and our fears.

Fear attempts to restrain our hope in God. Fear works against us to bring us down. It combats the hope and strength within us. In the depths of fear, may we remember God rules over our fears. He will never leave us nor abandon us.

In the moments we feel the most alone, in our darkest days, HIS light is greater because he shines in the darkness!

From beginning to end, God’s word never fails. As long as he is alive, our hope is alive. Psalm 62:5-6 reads, *“Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. Truly, he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.”* As you reflect on the God of hope, be reminded that our God is forever, and he is capable of removing our fears by replacing them with hope. We exalt his name because he is almighty, holy, and our everlasting hope.



*-Patricia Chellak*

Class of '25





## DECEMBER 6

On a beautiful summer day, you journey down a well-paved cobblestone road. Looking to your left, you admire a lush, Judean orchard of fig trees ready to be harvested. The rays of the sun caress your skin; you close your eyes, take in the goodness of the moment. And then you hear a horrible moan come from your right. You open your eyes and turn. It is a tree—but instead of bearing figs, it bears a bloody, naked man covered in wounds, yearning for death's embrace. A Roman crucifixion.

Scenes like this communicate the normative Roman message to 1st-century Israel: “Do not hope for anything new. The Roman way is the right way. If you disagree, you will end up like this.”

Yet Israel hoped for God's Anointed King; Israel hoped for a new world. And this hope miraculously found its articulation in the words of a pregnant teenage girl living in Roman-occupied Galilee. After the angel foretells Jesus' birth in Luke 1, Mary sings of her hope in what God will do through the child in her womb: “*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.*” In Mary's song, God's Kingdom of Hope confronts the Ungodly Empire of the Present.

Reflecting on Mary's song, ask yourself where you see violence, cruelty, and death in our present world. How will you and your sisters and brothers in Christ speak a word of expectant hope against the hopeless present? How will you, while living in the Ungodly Empire of the Present, announce and embody God's Kingdom of Hope?



### Prayer

*God of Hope, in the present world filled with violence, cruelty, and death, we praise you for offering us expectant hope through your Anointed King Jesus. May the hope Mary articulated in her song become the hope we proclaim through our words and actions.*

*-Samuel Guy*

Class of '24 ECS



## DECEMBER 7

In a world often overshadowed by uncertainty, pain, and despair, our peace finds its ultimate source in Jesus Christ. As we talk about the theme of peace, let us explore the profound peace that Christ brings and how it can sustain us even in the darkest of times.

The peace found in Jesus Christ is our shelter and refuge, protecting us throughout life's storms. As we embrace this peace in our hearts, let us remember that it not only sustains us but also empowers us to bring his peace and light into the lives of those around us. In every season of life, may the peace of Jesus Christ ground and strengthen us.

As we enter into the second week of Advent, we build upon the theme of hope with peace. Anticipation characterizes the Advent season as we look forward to the promise and fulfillment of God's plan through the birth of Jesus Christ. In times of anticipation, peace may seem out of reach, yet as we cling to the hope found in the birth and presence of Christ, life giving peace can be found.

How can we let the profound significance of the Advent season shape our lives in a way that extends far beyond Christmas morning? What are ways in which the peace of Christ can rule in our hearts while the hope of Christ propels us forward?



### Prayer

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for the profound peace we find in your embrace. Through your loving presence, you have granted us a living hope that transcends the challenges of this world. Fill our hearts with this hope, Lord, and empower us to be ambassadors of your tranquility in a world that often feels tumultuous. May our lives reflect the peace we have in your presence, and may we share it abundantly with others. In your name, we pray. Amen.*

*-Dr. Aaron Hymes*

Associate Professor of Clinical Mental Health Counseling

# DECEMBER 8

Names are important. All throughout the Bible, there is emphasis on the importance of names. God coming to earth in human form is the Bible's greatest emphasis of this. Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he was given a name. Matthew 1:23 quotes Isaiah 7:14 stating, *"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel" (which means "God with us").*

Emmanuel. God with us. Nothing brings more peace than Jesus' name and the promise his name holds. It reminds us we're never truly alone.

Jesus came to Earth to be with us, bring peace, and bring good news. When life becomes uncertain, cling to this truth that never fades or changes. It is the very essence of who God is - he is with us.

At Christmas time, we hear Jesus called Emmanuel more often. We might hear it through the Christmas story and many Christmas songs; yet, once the Christmas tree is taken down and ornaments packed away, when life resumes into mundane normalcy, God is still with us.

We may face a range of hardships and challenges where peace feels far from us. In these moments, we can cling to God and who he is - A God who walks alongside us every step. He is always with us.



## Prayer

*Lord, Emmanuel, we are so grateful for the constant peace found within your presence. Thank you for being with us in every moment, whether we sense it or recognize it at the time. We pray we would feel your peace today and that you would help us share your peace with those around us. In Jesus' name, amen.*

*-Emily Harper*

Class of '22 & '24 MSOT



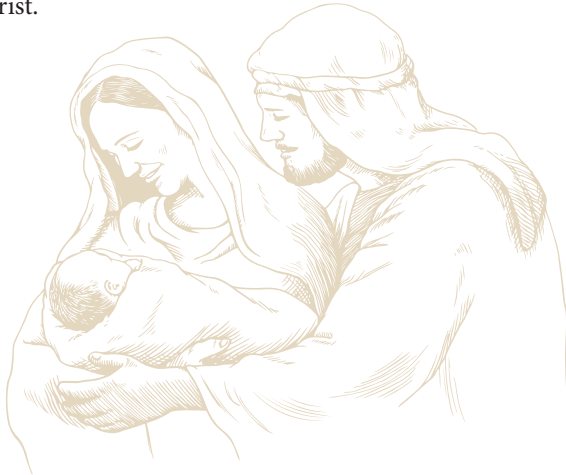
## DECEMBER 9

In Luke's account of Jesus' birth, after Mary was greeted with the news that she would give birth to the Son of God, she offers a song of praise to God. The song is important to the worship of the church to this day, and there is a rich tradition of Christians reciting this prayer daily as their own declaration of God's goodness.

In the first part of the song, Mary gives thanks to God for calling her and blessing her. She rejoices that God has seen "the lowly state of his servant" and has "done great things" for her. God has chosen her not for her wealth, status, or position—quite the opposite. God has called Mary to bear the one who will bring peace to the world because of her humility and "lowly state" as well as her devotion to serving God.

The second and larger part of the song is a declaration of who God is. It reflects on the history of Israel and how God has remained faithful to God's people by showing mercy to those who are outcast. Throughout the generations, God is the one who "brought down the powerful" and "lifted up the lowly". This work is fulfilled in Mary's son, Jesus, who lifts up the poor, broken, and suffering and gives them peace.

As we prepare our hearts to celebrate Jesus' coming, let us turn to Luke 1:46-55 and pray these words from Mary celebrating the peace for the lowly that is only found in Christ.



*-Evan Magness*

Class of '24



## DECEMBER 10

The times I feel most “at peace” often include birdsong and the morning’s first cup of coffee. Invariably, though, a buzzing phone and busy calendar interrupt the calm. Sometimes, I respond to such disruptions with confidence and gratitude. Other times, especially when the interruptions include problems that do not have easy answers, I allow worry to rule the day.

Fleeting moments of tranquility may hint at, but they do not capture the deeper meaning of peace. True peace, shalom, is lasting. It is not shaken by trials. It embodies hope and wholeness. It shapes the way we live in, move in, and see the world.

In the season of Advent, we are both awaiting and remembering the arrival of the source of our shalom, the Prince of Peace, who has come and is coming to,

*“Preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Isaiah 61:1-2, 58.6, Luke 4:18-19)”*

The now and not yet of this good news animates the Christian life. In all of its mystery, it is our “first cup of coffee,” our daily interruptions, and the antidote to our worry.



### Prayer

*God, when we become overwhelmed by the chaos of classes, relationships, health concerns, or the daily news, may we find rest in the knowledge that you are with us and have already overcome all that stands in the way of our peace. Embracing the example of Jesus, may we face life’s challenges with confidence in and gratitude for your shalom. Amen.*

*-Theresa Garbe*

Director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness  
Adjunct Instructor, Bible



# DECEMBER 11

One of my favorite Christmas songs is “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”. In particular, I prefer the Johnny Cash version from 1963. It is a classic and is one of those Christmas songs that has seemingly always brought me all the Christmas feels. Even if you know it, look it up and take a listen. It is great.

Long before I knew the story behind the poem that became the song, and even before I paid much attention to the lyrics, the song appealed to me. In roughly a two-and-a-half-minute casual listen, you can't help but feel the determined optimism that crescendos into the final victorious refrain:

“Then pealed the bells more loud and deep, God's not dead, nor doth he sleep;  
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men.  
Peace on earth, good-will to men.”

A few years ago, I learned the moving story of the original poem. One hundred years before Johnny Cash's recording, a recently widowed Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the poem after learning his son had been badly injured fighting in the Civil War. The poem seems to be the words of a husband and father wrestling with extreme grief and despair in the midst of a not-so-peaceful Christmas season. Yet despite his certain sadness and doubt, he chose to remember, affirm, and find comfort in the peace-bringing message of Jesus' birth in Luke 2.

Today, there are plenty of personal and global tragedies from past and present that, in a moment, could convince any of us “there is no peace on earth”. But this season of Advent is all about choosing to remember and affirm the ultimate peace that came to us in Jesus. That peace comes from knowing that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God demonstrates resolving all for good.

If this Christmas season you're finding it difficult to sing celebrations and declarations of “peace on earth,” remember that divine, peace-bringing pattern that begins with Jesus's birth and crescendos to his victorious resurrection. Whatever comes our way, ultimate peace has already come and is coming again.

*-Jus Morgan*

Director of Financial Aid



## DECEMBER 12

“How’s he snoozing through this?” a disciple murmured under his breath. While water ravaged their boat, the twelve grasped the sides for dear life. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were familiar with stormy seas. As fishermen, they had plenty of tales from sailing and reeling in their bounty. But this storm came abruptly, and they were overwhelmed by its passion and power. As chaotic winds and spray engulfed the disciples, Peter finally gave in and issued a directive: “Wake him up.” The disciple nearest Jesus inched toward him, shook his shoulders, and spoke in a panicked tone, “Jesus, don’t you care that we’re drowning?” Jesus rose and addressed the storm, “Be quiet!” Suddenly, the wind ceased. Their eyes, filled with amazement, fixated on their teacher. He had quieted the waves. He had given them peace.

Much like this scene, our world can feel like a tempest. Amidst global and personal troubles, we’re reminded of the world’s brokenness and our powerlessness to piece it back together. Like the disciples, we’re tempted to ask, “Jesus, don’t you care that we’re drowning?”

When life feels overwhelming, Advent reminds us that there’s only one place we can go for true, lasting peace – Jesus. Peace doesn’t manifest when we rid ourselves of problems. Rather, we experience peace when we come to Christ amid our troubles. Our peace is a person, not an ideal set of circumstances. That’s why Jesus gives this encouragement in Matthew 11:28:

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”*

Where have you sensed a lack of peace in your own life recently? And how is Jesus inviting you to bring your troubles to Him?



### Prayer

*Thank you, Jesus, for being our perfect peace. With you, no obstacle is too great, nor is there any pain that is unendurable. Help us to fix our eyes on you and become instruments of peace in this world. Amen.*

*-Dr. Josh Little*

Director, Ministry Leadership Program



## DECEMBER 13

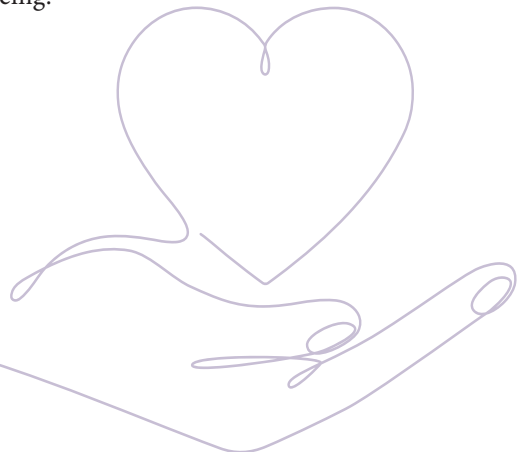
Joy is an emotion deeply embedded in the Christmas season. The sight of distant relatives visiting, shiny new presents, and delicious Christmas feasts are all examples of joy that we experience this time of year. Often though I feel we get so caught up in the festivities of the season that we forget why we're able to enjoy such gifts in the first place. I propose that this year and beyond, we look at these gifts from a different perspective, and, as the psalmist writes in Psalm 100: 1-2; 4, *"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs...Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name."*

I think of no better example of joyful gratitude for God's gifts than that of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1-2. In Hannah's anguish and despair over not being able to bear a child, she prays to God. When God hears her prayers, he responds to her faithfulness and grants her a child. Hannah is overcome with joy, and she lifts praises to God in song. Hannah's words paint us a picture of what she is feeling. God lifted her from her lowest point and showed favor to her. We see this same joy reflected through Mary in the Christmas story.

In the echoes of Hannah's profound gratitude and the radiance of Mary's joy in the Christmas story, we find a timeless reminder of the boundless blessings that God bestows upon us. Their stories serve as a testament to the transformative power of faith and prayer, illustrating how even in the depths of despair, God's grace can illuminate our lives with newfound hope and joy. As we embrace the precious gift of Jesus, let us not only celebrate the favor God has shown to us but also extend our hands to those who may be in need of a touch of his grace during this season of giving and rejoicing.

-Samuel Sosebee

Class of '25





# DECEMBER 14

Expectant joy. We see it in the story of Mary. First she is visited by the angel Gabriel and is told that she is going to have a son, who will be the Savior of the world (Luke 1:26-38). She must have been scared; yet, she allowed her joy to prevail, traveling to her cousin Elizabeth to share the good news (Luke 1:39-56).

Fast forward 33 years as Mary stands watching her beloved son die on the cross (John 25:25-27). Oh the grief. And yet, she knew the bigger story. I have to believe that Mary looked to her eternal future with the same expectant joy she shared with Elizabeth years before.

Both of these women had much to grieve (i.e. Matthew 14:1-12). Even in the midst of grief they could experience joy as they looked forward to what was to come. That is true for you and me as well.

The reality is that we live in a fallen world, a world that will not be fixed until our Lord returns. We experience great hardship – broken relationships with loved ones, unmet academic, relational, or professional expectations, severe illness, and ultimately death. However, when we live with expectant joy, those very real things do not get to have the final word. Jesus gets the final word.

As we remember His first coming this Advent season, may we joyfully anticipate His second coming - that moment He calls us home. Let us live with expectant joy.

## Prayer

*Lord, in the midst of the good and the hard, in the laughter and the pain, in the ups and the downs, help us to always keep our eyes fixed on you - living with expectant joy. Amen.*

*-Dr. Kristal Dove Bohlman*  
Associate Professor of Business Administration



# DECEMBER 15

Nine months ago, we welcomed our first long-awaited grandchild. What unbounded joy we felt! How we rejoiced as we found ourselves overwhelmed by the sheer wonder of this precious life! For at least a few days, our everyday anxieties were eclipsed by the profound reminder that we're all part of something bigger than ourselves.

Early in Luke's gospel, Mary finds herself experiencing a wide range of complicated and contradictory emotions. An angel greets her as "favored one" and assures her the Lord is with her. She is perplexed by this but is told not to be afraid. Then the angel announces she will have a son who will be called the Son of God and who will fulfill the promises made to her ancestors!

Upon hearing this, Mary visits her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also surprisingly with child. When Elizabeth hears Mary's voice, the one within her (who will grow to be John the Baptist) leaps for joy! And then Mary herself breaks into a song of joy: *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."*

Such joy. Such rejoicing. Yet Mary's path ahead will be deeply difficult. Neighbors will whisper and shame her both for being pregnant out of wedlock and for trying to cover it up with an outlandish story of still being a virgin. Mary's consent to bring Jesus into the world will bring her great pain at both the beginning and end of his life. Yet she still rejoices, knowing she is part of something bigger than her own life and that God has promised to be with her.

What circumstances in your own life are currently threatening to rob you of any joy? Might Mary's example offer you a path toward greater joy?



## Prayer

*Gracious God, open our hearts to the possibility that a life of joy is less about our current circumstances and more about our trust in you, who promises to always be with us.*

*-Dr. Phil Kenneson*

Professor of Theology and Philosophy

# **DECEMBER 16**

The character of Herod in Matthew 2:1-12 is a joyless man.

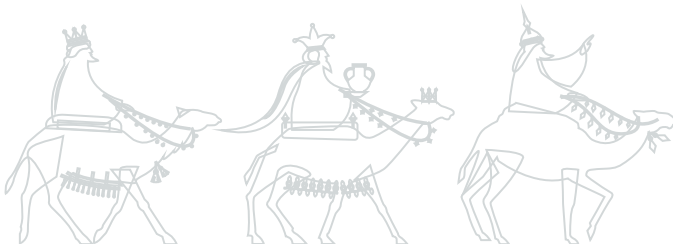
For his entire life, Herod's happiness and contentment has been built on his status and circumstances. Because of this, when what appears to be a turning of tides is heralded by strangers from afar, he grows fearful. Herod is blind to what is being done by God in this miraculous circumstance. His only thoughts are of how he can protect himself and salvage this situation for his own gain.

The contrast, of course, is the Magi. These strangers from afar have come to celebrate the work of a God who was not their own. They have no reason to anticipate being able to share in the victory God will accomplish through this baby Messiah. This does not stop their witness or devotion, traveling miles upon miles to lay kingly gifts at Jesus' feet. The Magi's celebration was never in their circumstances or what God was doing for them directly. It was found in the work God was doing all around them.

There is risk in joy, to be sure, but not in the way we tend to think about it. Sometimes, we believe that there is a risk of disappointment. That our joy will be meaningless and ultimately serve no purpose. Disappointment is not the risk of joy. It is what joy allows us to transcend.

The risk of joy is that it constitutes a fundamental change in the way we see the world. The risk of joy is that we are to be joyful in our grief as well as our celebration. Joy breaks apart our ability to be content with our current circumstances. It calls us to see God's beauty and work in the world regardless of whether such goodness is presently affecting our own lives.

In what ways have you seen God working recently, either in your life or in the world around you?



*-Marlee Kastens*  
Class of '24



# DECEMBER 17

If you think about it, most moments of joy are almost never spent alone.

Many moments of joy include memories of time with family, new baby nieces and nephews, experiencing a good belly laugh with friends, and genuine moments of honesty and truth between loved ones.

When Mary was given the news that she would give birth to Jesus, the Son of God, the angel Gabriel pointed Mary to the experience of her relative, Elizabeth. God provided a person for Mary to connect with and help process the mixture of confusion, excitement, doubt, and joy she was experiencing.

These women walked through similar circumstances of life and child-bearing that were out of the norm for their culture and age. While both situations were gifts from God and ultimately for good, their journeys were not without struggles.

The story goes on with Mary staying with Elizabeth for about three months before returning home. This interaction paints a beautiful image of the moments of joy that can come from togetherness through shared circumstances and shared trust in the Lord's faithfulness to his promises. Because of the gift of Jesus and the hope he embodies, joy can be found in all moments of life, such as in the midst of change, hardship, confusion, and miracles.



## Prayer

*God, thank you for the gift of relationships, where we can experience the joy of life together, even in the midst of confusion and struggles. We ask that you would help us see the moments of joy we may normally miss and help us discover relationships wrapped in joy.*

*-Elise Mills*

Class of '22 & '24 PA



## DECEMBER 18

It is impossible to think about the joy of the holidays without music. All kinds of upbeat, traditional and popular songs about Christmas are the background for gatherings, shopping, decorating, and enjoying the season. In Christian communities, celebratory carols and hymns such as “Joy to the World!” are part of the celebrations.

From the perspective of the New Testament, however, the most important Christmas song is Mary’s “Magnificat.” In Luke 1:46-56, Mary responds to the news that she will give birth to the promised Son of God with poetry, praise, and thanksgiving. Like Miriam’s celebratory song about deliverance from slavery (Exodus 15:21), or Hannah’s praise for a long hoped-for son (1 Samuel 2:1-10), Mary’s song proclaims “the greatness of the Lord.”

The joy in her song is palpable. God’s favor and blessing have fallen upon her, and she proclaims, “*My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior!*”

And yet her song of joy is not shy about the world’s injustices, the needs of the poor and hungry, or the conceit of the proud and powerful. She sees the world with clear eyes and names her hopes with confidence and trust in God. The proud will be scattered, the hungry fed, the lowly lifted up.

If Mary’s song can be described as joyful, it is because she sings with utter realism about the radical ways in which Jesus will renew the world.

I take Mary’s “Magnificat” to be the model song of Advent longing and Christmas joy. Our spirits, too, in so many ways, can “rejoice in God our Savior!” At the same time, Mary’s song demands a transparent honesty about the brokenness of the world around us, the trials we face, sorrow over lives lost, and preparation for hardship. In it all, what undergirds Mary’s joy, and ours, is confidence in God’s faithfulness, provision, and commitment to setting the world aright. Her song is our joyful music of Christmas!

*-Dr. Miriam Perkins*

Professor of Theology & Society



# ✝ DECEMBER 19

Few of us would argue that Christmas is about love. Anyone who is remotely acquainted with the holiday could easily identify love as one of the central themes of the holiday season. Because of immense love, God initiated incarnation. Jesus loves us so much that he abandoned the glory of heaven to dwell among us. Most immediately, we yearn to experience the love of family and friends as we share gifts and well wishes throughout the Christmas season.

Perhaps we miss an important aspect of Christmas when we consider only those types of love that benefit us. What about selfless, sacrificial love? What about giving to others who cannot or will not give us anything in return? Why not consider the living sacrifice that Jesus modeled even before his sacrificial death on the cross?

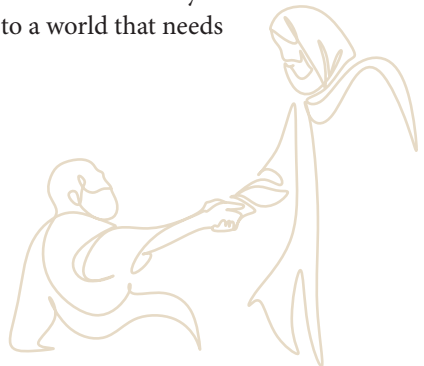
All too often, we act as if we can accept God's gift of love without giving of ourselves. We want to accept the gift, but only to the extent that it does not challenge us or inconvenience us. We think of Christmas and the incarnation in terms of Jesus' sacrifice, but in the middle of the food and the decorations and the gifts, we fail to consider what role we might play in demonstrating the sacrificial love that lies at the heart of Christmas.

We celebrate the incarnation at Christmas. Why did Jesus come to earth? Among other reasons, he stated this one: *"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10b ESV). The abundant life that Jesus modeled is not the life in which we store up treasures for ourselves. It is the abundant life when it is given on behalf of others. When we fully accept the gift of Jesus, we accept the humble birth that foreshadowed his humble life of service and his sacrificial death. We accept the privilege of following the same path of humble service and sacrifice.

Christmas is about love. May you receive it from God and family and friends. Most importantly, may you pass it on to a world that needs more real, substantive love.

*-Dr. Rick Aubrey*

Vice President for Academic Affairs; Dean



# DECEMBER 20

Imagine Mary five days before Jesus' birth, the stretch and ache of her body speaking of a coming she can't predict. She remembers the angel's promise but wonders if it was a dream. How do you prepare for the birth of a child whose coming is shrouded in mystery? She waits.

And as Mary waits, she sings. In some ways, Mary knows what she is waiting for; she has already begun to taste it in the angel's promise. The song of praise spilling from her lips in Luke 1:46-55 speaks of God's reconciliation and wholeness—not just on the way but already becoming a reality, growing like the child in her womb. Hear Mary not just longing for Jesus' coming but also boldly praising God. Like us, she waits for God's coming. Like us, she sings of the ways God is already here.

Our culture and instincts rail against waiting. But the season of Advent invites us into it. Like waiting for a birth, this time can be filled with growth, not emptiness. When we wait, we can attend to those around us in the present instead of hurtling toward the future or pining for the past. Waiting stretches us, sometimes painfully, opening us to receive and give love. We pray that as we wait, we are already being shaped by the one whose coming we anticipate: Jesus, God's love stretching toward us, swaddled in skin.

The five days before Christmas hit us with a mild panic—presents to buy, cookies to make, cards to send. How can we, like Mary, practice waiting? Slowing. Honing our gaze to see God's coming. As we wait, may our lives sing of all the ways God's love is born among us, over and over again.



## Prayer

*Loving God, grant us a spirit of attentive waiting. Make space in our lives for your love, enfleshed in Jesus, moving among us through the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*-Laura Hicks Hardy*

Program Coordinator - Emmanuel Christian Seminary



## DECEMBER 21

*“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12).*

It is easy for us to overlook the significance of the manger, but that is the unvarnished truth of Christmas. God entered the world as a baby and was laid in a feeding trough for animals. When we romanticize that night in Bethlehem, we remove it from the ordinary, dirty world in which we all must live. But the real story of Christmas is much messier than we would like to admit. God so loved the world that he sent his only son to be with us in the midst of our dirt.

When we talk about our own Christmases, we often try to idealize our own situations as well. We do not talk about the grief and sadness many of us experience at this time of year. We don't speak of awkward and challenging family dynamics that we may have to encounter. Instead, we take the messiness of our lives and try to hide it beneath holiday cheer. But that is not the reality of Christmas. In Christ, we don't have to pretend that everything is wonderful when it is not. When real life gets messy, look to the manger in Bethlehem.

For there is good news in the manger. The child born in the dirt of the stable is Emmanuel—God with us. Right in the midst of the dirt and the pain, God is with us to assure that there is nothing too dirty to separate us from his love. God isn't going to let real life and a little dirt get in the way of loving us.



### Prayer

*God, come to our darkest and most desperate places and transform us. Turn our brokenness into hope. Turn our chaos into peace. Turn our hearts into your manger. And turn our dirt into places filled with your presence. Amen.*

*-Dr. Curtis Booker*

Professor of Christian Ministries





## DECEMBER 22

One summer in college, I hiked on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela for a month in Spain. I went alone, much to my parents' chagrin, and made some good friends along the way, one friend by the name of Zac. On a blazing hot July day, I walked a long stretch in full sunlight, with very few places to refill my water. By the middle of the day, I was out of water. Sweating buckets under the full Spanish sun, I prayed for shade and continued walking. At some point, I knew I wasn't feeling good. My brain felt fuzzy, my pace slowed dramatically, and I realized I couldn't remember the name of my friend not far behind me.

Shortly after this, Zac caught up to me. "I've been calling your name for ages," he said, "why didn't you stop?" Explaining how I felt, Zac recognized that I was experiencing heat exhaustion and handed me his water. He insisted on carrying my backpack despite my protests. Zac stayed by my side as we walked the final miles to our hostel, catching up to others along the way. These friends walked with me, step by step, as the shade and water worked their miracles, reviving me. They showed me love in their desire to be with me and refusal to leave my side. My friends were there when I needed them most, and we are still friends today.

In a few days, we will celebrate the birth of Emmanuel, literally "God with us," the God who walks with us. This is the love of God: God doesn't stay far away in our moments of pain but draws close to us. In the birth of Jesus, we see God joining us in life, choosing to walk with us.

May God draw near to you as we walk together toward this celebration of Emmanuel, the God who chooses to walk with us.

*-Cascade Sculley*

Class of '24 ECS





## DECEMBER 23

I was driving on a Sunday morning to a wedding venue for my friend's big day. In the car were the bride, the maid-of-honor and myself. We didn't talk much because it was an emotional day and we didn't know what to say without crying. In the silence the bride played worship music on the hour-long drive to the venue. As we sang a particular song, a rush of peace fell upon us, reminding us of our shared first love, Jesus

Our first love came to us as a helpless infant. Today, our Almighty God continues to walk alongside us in this broken world. The God of love gives us his only son to redeem us and be with us at all times (John 3:16). Jesus will always be our first love.

This love is better than your love for ice cream. It is more substantial than your love for college football. Better than your love for music. It is better and stronger because love happens when God's amazing grace, mercy, and love wash over us, flooding our souls and making us new. It seems unfathomable, but God loves us without limit, though we do not deserve any of his love. Yet he still sent his son. 1 John 4:19 reads, "We love because he first loved us." During this Christmas season, how can we continue to praise God for sending his son to us? How can we share the same love he first gave us to others?

### Prayer

*God, thank you for showing us the incredible depths of the love you have for us. Jesus, your love is wild and our fulfillment is in you alone. We pray we love boldly and love with confidence in the love you first gave us. Lord, we pray the flame in our hearts continue to burn for you and love you always. Amen.*

*-Joy Reks*

Class of '25

# DECEMBER 24

For God so loved the world...

For many of us, John 3:16 was the first verse from the New Testament that we ever memorized, and for good reason. It is a kind of shorthand for the whole gospel. Presumably, God, by a grandiose show of power, could have “fixed” human sin, compelling us into obedience. Instead, he gave us his beloved Son and revealed through him the depth of his sacrificial love for his cherished creatures.

In the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the icon (painted image) of the Nativity of Christ often depicts Christ being born in a cave (symbolic of the heart of the earth), which is plausible since animals were often stabled in caves around Bethlehem. The icon also depicts Mary as reclining beside the Christ child, not in joyous bliss but in a state of melancholy, even lament. She seems already to know what lies ahead for her infant son. And the baby Jesus, rather than in a manger with hay, is depicted as lying in a tiny coffin, wrapped not in swaddling cloths but in burial wrappings. Still, the angels praise his arrival! The point, of course, is that Jesus was born to die. The Son of God in the flesh was on a mission to give his life as a “ransom for many” (Mark 10:45), so that those who believe in him might have everlasting life.

Advent expectation peaks on Christmas Eve and gives way to abundant joy on Christmas morning, but we still remain somewhat sober because it is not all that long until Good Friday. Meanwhile, let the celebration begin beside the Christmas tree, around the table at Christmas dinner, in the eyes of little ones mystified by the events, at the bedside of the aged no longer able to take it all in, in the hearts of those who are new believers in Jesus, and in every appropriate place.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Cor. 9:15).

*-Dr. Paul Blowers*

Dean E. Walker Professor of Church History





# DECEMBER 25

Today, we rejoice in the culmination of Advent, reminding us of the hope, peace, joy, and love brought by Jesus into our lives. As we commemorate the birth of our Savior and God's immeasurable love, we are called to be conduits of that love.

Just as echoes of Advent resounded globally, the echoes of Jesus' love continue to reverberate through time and eternity. Jesus' love is a transformative force capable of touching and changing lives. This love seeks to embrace us fully, mending our brokenness and reconciling us to God. As we open our hearts to this love, we discover it is not limited to a single day or season - it is a love that endures, sustains, and guides us throughout our lives.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:8, Paul encourages the Thessalonians in their faith writing, *"The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia - your faith in God has become known everywhere."* Wherever we find ourselves during Christmas break, we are called to let the gospel "ring out" from our lives, becoming living testimonies to the transformative power of Christ's birth. This call urges us to share his love and embody his compassion, kindness, and grace to a hurting world.

As we reflect on the echoes of Jesus' love and its transformative power, how can we allow the profound significance of the Advent season to shape our lives beyond this joyous celebration, so that the love of Christ may continue to ring out from us and touch the lives around us?



## Prayer

*Gracious God, we are overwhelmed with gratitude for the fulfillment of your promises through Jesus' birth. May the love of Christ continue to ring out from us and touch the lives around us, as we walk in the footsteps of Jesus, who is the true reason for our hope, the source of our peace, the giver of our joy, and the embodiment of perfect love.*

*-Brealla Davis*

Director of Campus Activities & Campus Minister



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# WHAT IS ADVENT

- The word "Advent" itself means "coming" or "arrival," emphasizing the anticipation and preparation for the arrival of Christ.
- The season of Advent is broken up into four weeks leading up to the celebration of Christmas, which commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ.
- Each week leading up to Jesus' arrival focuses on various themes, often represented by the lighting of Advent candles. The four candles typically symbolize hope, peace, joy, and love. Each week, an additional candle is lit, signifying the progressive anticipation and readiness for the coming of Christ.
- Advent serves as a period of spiritual reflection, communal gathering, and preparation for the true meaning of Christmas.
- It prompts believers to examine their hearts, repent of their sins, and align their lives with the teachings of Jesus. It is a time of renewing faith, hope, and love, as well as fostering a sense of unity and community among believers.



## LEARNING ENVIROMENT

As part of the educational process at Milligan University, we provide students with the working knowledge of diverse subjects. Milligan does not necessarily endorse all viewpoints presented but encourages students to think through these issues from a Christian worldview.