

ADVENT ECHOES

A COLLECTIVE REFLECTION ON
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

Genesis 21:1-7

“Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter.’” (Gen 27:6 NIV)

When my uncle heard that my dad, his brother, had died, he immediately drove to my parents’ house from Georgia. It was my brother’s birthday. My uncle walked into my parents’ house and sat right down in the middle of our grief. He was such a force that day! He told stories and riddles. He wrote poems. He made us laugh. We cried till we laughed and laughed again. There was a cookie cake. My brother understood that he was our joy, even in the midst of grief. We embraced the joy. That was what the laughter brought us that day.

Like my uncle, Sarah is known for her laughter. In the book of Genesis, she laughs twice. First, when she is told she will bear a child. Second, when she receives the child. She is scolded for the first, but not the second. There, in her old age, in the midst of grief and barrenness, a child is born, and she laughs. Here in this strange story, we see that faith comes through laughter—laughter against the laughter of doubt. Yes, there was pain and loneliness. But God gives her the last laugh. She has faith. She knows joy. She laughs.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Christians of Rome, talks of Abraham and Sarah having “hope against hope” (Rom 4:18). The world gives its horizon of hope—land, riches, etc. But God wants us to see past this horizon to a larger hope; if you hope for that hope you will find yourself “hoping against hope.” You may find yourself welcoming faith at a time that does not make any sense, like a baby given to an old body, or a birthday party in the midst of grief. Yet, there it is, the advent of something stranger and more wonderful than you can make sense of. If you can, welcome it with laughter.

-Beth Jarvis

Ministry Resource Center Director





DECEMBER 2

Jeremiah 29:10-14

Hey you. Yeah you. The one reading these words. Are you lost? Do me a favor and pause for a second. Look at where you are. Not physically, but where you are in your life. Think about where you have come from. Now I ask again ... Are you lost?

I am lost, and sometimes I even panic because in dark times I feel completely hopeless. It is like I am spinning in a dark room desperately feeling around for a door handle or a light switch, and I just cannot find anything or anyone to help me ... *help me*. It is in these darkest rooms, in my panicked state, that my eyes fall on home. I see my childhood home where my mother would play with me, and I would run around barefoot in the back yard pretending I was a warrior or a superhero. Is it possible to get back to this place? I long for home.

I have good news. The yearning for home and returning to a joyful, childlike state is not in vain. We find this sanctuary in God. He provides the hope of return. Open the Old Testament to a random page, and the odds are that you will shortly meet a human who has fallen away from God and has become lost. The Lord remains faithful to his people. Time and time again he has brought his people home.

When you find yourself lost, like I do often, lean into this hope. The Lord sees you in that place. You may be scared or lonely in those dark rooms but set your eyes on the Light and seek him. Before you know it, you will be running barefoot around the backyard with our Father. He has brought you home. Drown in the light around you and breathe. You are homesick no more.

-Sylas Chambers

Class of '25





DECEMBER 3

Isaiah 9:2-7

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German minister who would later be arrested and then murdered by the Nazis, wrote these words for his Advent sermon on December 2, 1928: “The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.”

Bonhoeffer accurately assessed our situation. We walk in the same darkness that Isaiah speaks of, and we will receive the promised light of the Messiah. But in the meantime, Advent begins in the dark.

In the Northern Hemisphere, our season of winter provides us with an appropriate backdrop for contemplating a spiritual season of shadows. We experience more hours of darkness now than we did a few months ago. God’s creation echoes how our own spirits might feel. The trees around us have transitioned from summer’s lush green to autumn’s vibrant hues, and now to winter’s bare branches. Flowers and other seeds are hibernating, lying dormant, hoping for a new life come spring.

What we are doing now is known as wintering, a verb that describes how we continue to live and manage during the cold, dark days. Like seeds in the ground that wait in promise of bursting forth with life, we as Advent people are waiting. We are full of hope. Or at least we are striving to be full of hope. Being hopeful is a spiritual discipline, and so, we must practice it. Practicing hope is the first step on the Advent journey, as we join our voices with the psalmist’s—“I wait for the Lord; my soul waits, and in his word I hope” (Psalm 130:5 NRSV).

So, as we wait for God’s gift of grace, let us strike a match to candles as a gesture of hope that the light of Christ will come into our dark world, into our shadow selves, and germinate new life.

-Dr. Kellie Brown

Professor of Music; Area Chair of Music





DECEMBER 4

Luke 1:68-79

When we are in the middle of difficult seasons it can be hard to find a reason to have hope. Our problems seem big, and everything else seems so small. Yet, we can find hope in the little things around us, knowing that Jesus is with us in our trials.

In Luke 1:68-79, we see Zechariah prophesying what his son, John the Baptist, will do to pave the way for the ministry of Jesus. But, a few verses back, we see that Zechariah had been unable to speak for months before this. To lose the ability to communicate with his community must have been incredibly challenging. Despite this, Zechariah continues to follow God's plan and names his son John, instead of following the tradition by naming him after himself. Afterward, when God restores his voice, Zechariah immediately praises God and prophesies about the amazing things God plans to do for his people through his Son. What a gift! Even though Zechariah has been through an incredibly lonely and challenging season, he knows God is with him and has big plans to come, choosing to praise him for the good things he is already doing.

Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we can have hope that there are better things to come. Even when things in this life are difficult, Jesus walks with us and feels our pain alongside us. Difficult things happen in life, but that does not mean it is the end. Have hope; Jesus is coming!



Prayer

Lord, help us to feel your peace near us when we endure trials. Show us the love and joy you offer us through your presence. Most of all, help us to keep our hope and to be a light, even when our circumstances are dark. In Jesus' name, amen.

-Ashlynn Kennedy

Class of '23 & '25 MSOT



DECEMBER 5

Luke 2:25-35

How many times have we been the victims of promises broken and words not kept? Human promises are not as good as gold, and never have been. With this in mind, the faithfulness of God, and the value of his promises are a key aspect of his mission of restoration here on earth. Simeon, described as “just and devout,” embodied justice toward others and devotion to God, qualities inseparable from one another, as British commentator and minister Matthew Henry explained. Raised in the midst of the Intertestamental Period, Simeon witnessed Jerusalem and his nation subjugated by the Romans. Yet Luke says he patiently waited for “the consolation of Israel.” The consolation of Israel, the long-promised advent of the Messiah, provided Simeon with hope despite years of hardship. In the stillness and silence, God was moving.

A key, and sometimes neglected aspect of the story, is the patience Simeon displays. Simeon accompanies his hope with patience, for it was not he who would bring redemption. He could face death and desolation with courage, as his God keeps his promises.

Luke paints a profound picture as our Lord’s parents bring Jesus to the temple and the elderly Simeon sees the personal and corporate promises of God fulfilled. As he takes the Christ child in his arms, the physical manifestation of hope, Simeon displays total contentment. He knows that this little child contains the promise of life beyond the grave. Even Simeon’s hope, which was for the consolation of Israel, would be fulfilled far beyond his wildest imagination. In this Advent season, may we wait for the great Promise Keeper, the one who fulfills our deepest longings. We must be just and devout. We must wait. May we wait with the patience and hope of Simeon.

-Seth Bible

Class of '25



DECEMBER 6

Romans 15:7-13

We tend to think of hope as something that *we* try to do, an attitude to work toward as an individual. We try to “hold onto hope,” to believe that somehow everything will turn out okay. But in the text from Romans for today hope is not something we attempt. This hope is not about trying to maintain a positive attitude when things are difficult, it is a characteristic of God working to unite God’s people in joy and peace. New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa characterizes hope as, “not just an individual expectation but a communal and cosmic reality.”

Trying to remain hopeful, an optimistic attitude looks at the facts and chooses to put a positive spin on them. That perspective suggests an attitude toward the future that attempts to reassure us everything will turn out okay. I do not necessarily see anything wrong in that perspective, but the hope of God offers a different lens that brings the future into the present. We do not know what tomorrow may bring, whether it will be hardship or joy, good times or bad.

Yet, in God’s hope, in God’s kingdom nothing “bad” lasts forever. The past is limited but the future is eternal. The past is flawed; the future is beyond boundaries. For people of faith, the future is always bigger than the past. So yes, it is possible to say, “I do not have the power to change what is happening, but I can choose how to feel about it.” It is also possible to say, without being trite or superficial, “I know it will end. It may even last for the rest of my life, but it will not last forever.” Everything that is incomplete or unfulfilled in life will meet Christ. Nothing is irredeemable in the kingdom of a faithful God. That is Advent hope.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13 NRSVue).

-Dr. Jack Holland

Professor of Christian Care and Counseling, Doctor of Ministry Director



DECEMBER 7

Luke 1:26-38

Peace: shalom; well-being; an absence of war or hostility; a stability in relationship, especially in connection to a covenantal relationship; also a greeting in Hebrew or Aramaic.

The angel Gabriel offered shalom to Mary. Gabriel's greeting also includes the assurance that "the Lord is with you," which is reminiscent of Emmanuel, one of the titles given to the Messiah, meaning "God with us."

In today's passage we glimpse the very moment a messenger from God's kingdom comes to Earth to announce the end to hostilities between God and humanity. The long silence is over! There will be reconciliation with the advent of this child who belongs to God and will serve God. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, this child will be holy, set apart for a specific reason—nothing less than the salvation of God's people. The very name "Jesus" means "God saves" and serves as a reminder whenever it is spoken.

We use "peace" to express inner tranquility and contentment, but historically it has indicated a communal state of wholeness which cannot be overthrown by violence or misfortune, and which conveys completeness and security. Indeed, it is this deliverance and salvation that lies beneath the words of Gabriel which Mary will ponder for the rest of her life.

We have the benefit of biblical interpreters that Mary did not have—we know about reconciliation between God and humanity (2 Cor 5:18), to which Christians are called. We have heard the stories Jesus told to describe the breaking in of God's kingdom. We have assurances of our redemption through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, and the reconciliation of our relationship with God, because Jesus made peace with us at the cross (Col 1:13-20).

As we ponder with Mary the meaning of Gabriel's words, let us rejoice that even before she was aware of it, God was with her, just as God is with us.

-Lissal Huhn

Instructor of Bible and Humanities

DECEMBER 8

Matthew 1:18-25

In today's hectic and stressful world, it can be difficult to find peace. For many people, including me, family, work, school, or personal stressors seem at times to be overwhelming. Peace can seem far away, if conceivable at all. I tend to judge my level of peace by the ease with which I am able to sleep. When my mind is filled with anxiety, stress, or disappointment, sleep proves particularly elusive. The worries and stresses of the day visit most commonly, and intensely, in the night.

It is through this lens of sleepless anxiety that I read Matthew 1:18-25. However significant my worries or concerns on sleepless nights may seem, they are nothing compared to what Joseph must have felt when he learned that Mary, his fiancée, was pregnant. We know from his concern that Mary would be publicly disgraced, that Joseph was aware of the reputational and relational perils of his and Mary's situation. He was thoughtful and caring enough that such things would burden his mind and spirit. We can imagine Joseph, sleepless and unsettled, as waves of sadness, frustration, and fear rolled over and over in his mind, even after an angel appeared to him in a dream and revealed God's plan for his new family—though he clearly got at least *some* sleep!

Joseph overcame his anxieties, fears, and reservations through faithfulness (v. 19) and obedience (v. 24). When faced with a mountain of anxiety, he turned away from the stresses of the world and towards the providence and faithfulness of God. In this turning, he, and generations of believers down through the present day and into the future, are blessed immeasurably by the birth of our Savior, Jesus, which we celebrate during the Christmas season.

We can all rest easily, even in times of difficulty, as we remember the love and saving grace of the gospel, born on Christmas Day.

-Brent Nipper

Director of Property & Risk Management



DECEMBER 9

Luke 2:8-14

When you think about peace, what comes to mind? Is it being in your home with nothing on the to-do list? Is it being rewarded for accomplishing something you have worked hard for? Is it enjoying a long-awaited vacation? As I reflect upon these things I cannot help but to think about the temporary nature of them all. While each can be wonderful in its own way, such feelings cannot compare to the everlasting peace that the Lord offers us.

We live in an age where the word “peace” is overused and under-demonstrated. Peace is often something we are on a search to find at any cost, yet the Lord has offered us peace in his presence at no cost other than devotion to him.

Often, peace can be a trend rather than an extension of God’s love. It is our responsibility as followers of Christ to re-center our minds on the proclamation that the angel Gabriel gave to us on the night of Christ’s birth: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14 NIV). When we prioritize loving God and loving our neighbors, we become immersed in the peace of the Lord.

Peace is not fleeting and it is not trendy. Peace has been declared over our lives. When we embrace that promise, we can live joyfully and without strife.



Prayer

Dear God, I thank you for the peace that you have freely offered us, your children. We could never earn your love, peace, and joy, yet you offer them regardless. I pray that you make our hearts receptive to these gifts and allow us to extend such fruit of the Spirit to those around us this Christmas season. In your name, we pray. Amen.

-Paxton Barnes

Class of '23 and '26 PA

 **DECEMBER 10**

John 14:25-27

So much of our society today is driven by news, social media, and constant updates on the lives of those around us and it is so easy to get wrapped up in negative emotions. Christ combats this with a wonderful gift: the gift of peace.

John 14:27 states, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (NIV).

These words can comfort us in times of distress. This world gives us fear, anxiety, and doubt, but Jesus gives us the opposite. He gives us peace, “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (Phil 4:7 NIV). What a beautiful gift! Jesus knows our human nature; he knows how quick we are to forget. So, God sent the Holy Spirit to be a Counselor. The Holy Spirit “will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I [Jesus] have said to you” (John 14:26 NIV).

Jesus graciously extends gift of peace to us and we must choose to accept it. We must choose to surrender, not to live the way the world expects us to, but to seek God. We must seek God’s guidance in every area of our lives. We must choose him, give our hearts to him, and every day prayerfully ask that our hearts may be in line with him and his plan for our lives. Let us surrender fully and allow Jesus to calm our troubled hearts. Jesus tells us not to be afraid but to accept the peace he offers us. So today, and every day, let us pray that our hearts, and the hearts of those around us, may be open to receive God’s gift of peace.

-Eloria Pelton

Class of '26



DECEMBER 11

Romans 5:1-5

I sat at the side of her bed and counted the seconds that passed between each painful breath. Her time on earth was coming to an end. I could only imagine the things she must see as she inched closer to heaven, closer to our Savior. I was envious God was about to take my grandmother back home to him. More than that, I was jealous that my grandmother was finally meeting our Lord face-to-face. Losing my grandmother was the hardest trial I have faced thus far in my life; however, the peace that filled the room during her final days and the joy of God's promises far outweighed the heartache. This gift of true, lasting peace can only be accessed through our Lord Jesus Christ. Advent is a time when we are reminded of this peace.

Perhaps you have faced similar trials and moments of suffering in your life. Maybe you have experienced dark days—feeling alone, hopeless, or less than. The Apostle Paul understood suffering. Paul knew what it was like to have it all and to have nothing. He was brutally flogged and stoned for his faith in Christ. He spent many cold, hungry, and sleepless nights in prison. Yet Paul boasted in his suffering because “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Rom 5:3-5 NIV). Rejoicing in our suffering is not easy. But one promise we can trust is that God is present in our suffering. God sent his Son into this cruel world so he could be with us, bringing us a new peace with him through Jesus.

Take a look at your life. Take note of all the ways God is present. This is *why* we can rejoice in our suffering. This is *how* we can have peace during our trials.

-Belle King

Director of Alumni Relations and Development





DECEMBER 12

Colossians 3:12-17

Close your eyes for a moment and visualize your favorite holiday experiences that inspire a sense of peace.

(Set this guide down and take 30 seconds to do this visualization.)

Maybe you saw yourself admiring the shimmering lights of a Christmas tree? Perhaps you were soaking in the silence of a freshly fallen snow? Were you enjoying the warmth and radiant glow of a Christmas Eve candlelight service?

It is easy for us to identify with the peace that may come from these cherished holiday memories, but this peace is temporal and situation dependent. The Christmas tree will eventually come down, the big snow of the season will melt, and the beautiful candles will be extinguished. Where does one find peace that is permanent and changes us from the inside out?

Colossians 3:15 says, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful” (NIV). The words “Let the peace of Christ rule” imply that our role is to simply surrender. The act of surrender allows the peace of Christ to influence and guide how our hearts respond to other people.

Peace incarnate came to earth as a baby in a manger on that silent night of the first Christmas. It is this gift that compels us to seek peace in our relationships with others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The manifestation of God’s peace can be seen and experienced firsthand through the Church. Because of Christ and for his glory, we are unified. We choose to love. We choose to serve. We choose to encourage. We choose to forgive. We do these things so that peace may abound within every community of faith, draw others to it, and spread to the ends of the earth. How is God calling you to share his peace with the world this Advent season?

-Dr. Stacy Edwards

Assistant Professor of Education



DECEMBER 13

Luke 1:39-45

As we read this passage about Mary and Elizabeth, we are entering our reflection on the theme of joy. This event in our text is often overlooked in stories about Christmas, but it is important. As we journey along with Mary, I invite you to contemplate her humanity and her active role in receiving the promise.

In previous verses, we learn that the angel Gabriel has come to Mary. She will give birth to a son who will be called Jesus. Her consent and response in verse 38 was, “Let it be to me according to your word.” Next, we read that Mary left with haste and went to Judea to see Elizabeth. Mary believed what the angel said, and she was excited. She traveled a considerable distance to Judea. That is quite a journey, especially while pregnant and traveling by donkey or on foot.

When you receive joyous news or seek someone to understand your circumstances, to whom do you go? We want to be understood and believed. That is exactly what Elizabeth would do.

When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe John leaped in her womb. God was doing something in both their lives. When John leaped, she was filled with the Holy Spirit. This compelled her to speak a blessing to Mary from God. When we have the Holy Spirit, regardless of where we are in our own journey, the Spirit produces much fruit. One of these is joy. Consider the joy that both Mary and Elizabeth must have felt in this moment: Mary, carrying the Savior of the world, and Elizabeth, carrying the one who would prepare the way for him. Elizabeth blesses Mary and her child, and her humility inspires us to also leap for joy for all God is doing. When God speaks to us, we can respond with joy and take comfort in the presence of Christ.

Mary’s faith was not passive. She actively received this great promise. God speaks remarkable promises to us all. May we believe them, not be passive, and respond in joy. Blessed indeed is she who believed.

-Tammy Hartley Fredrickson

'24 MDiv





DECEMBER 14

Luke 1:46-55

When I was child, my family and I would attend a drive-through nativity scene. My favorite scene was of Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus ... cattle lying still in the hay and the angel watching over. It was such a peaceful scene.

As the years have gone by, I have become aware that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph's lives were not always peaceful. My thoughts have often turned toward Mary, who was young and undoubtedly filled with many questions, fears, and expectations for her future.

Mary is living the normal life of a teenage girl at the time. She is planning for a special day, her wedding day. Suddenly, her plans change ... her life changes ... her world changes. The angel Gabriel appears to her and announces that she will give birth to the long-awaited promised Christ, the Savior of the world.

In her excitement, she hurries to Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth. While visiting Elizabeth, and after being encouraged and strengthened by Elizabeth's words of blessing, Mary is filled with thankfulness and she breaks out in joyful praise, saying, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (Luke 1:46-48 NIV).

Mary glorifies the Lord and rejoices in God because he remembers her. Mary also proclaims that God remembers her ancestors (Luke 1:54-55). God promises that through Israel, the Savior of the world will come. Mary marvels that she will be the one who will give birth to the Savior. Giving birth to the Savior of the world changes Mary's world, her life, and her plans.

Yet she rejoices. We rejoice also.



Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for Mary who gave birth to Jesus, the Savior of the world. Thank you for Jesus, the One who changes our plans, our lives, and ultimately the world. Because of Jesus, our souls rejoice.

-Becky Robertson

Associate Registrar





DECEMBER 15

Nehemiah 8:9-12

After years of exile and subjugation to political powers that did not worship God, the people of Judah were allowed to return home. When they finished building the temple and infrastructure of the city, the people of Jerusalem rejoiced. The renewed city listened to the Torah being read by Ezra for the entire day and then had a party, a feast, a celebration. Responding to the word of God, to God's faithfulness in bringing them back from exile, to God's provision of their freedom, the people of Judah celebrated. What joy they experienced at being brought home to the city of God's promise!

In this season of Advent, we wait for the coming of the Lord. We wait with joy, knowing that God will meet us and be with us.

We wait, knowing that God became human. We wait with joy, knowing that in our current situations God can again be present with us.

We wait, knowing we have been brought back from the exile of sin and distance from God. We wait with joy while striving for justice, knowing that the Lord became human so that the wrongs of this world will be made right.

In all of this, we are reminded that in response to hearing Scripture read, the people rejoiced. In response to the Word-become-flesh with us, how much more ought we be filled with uncontainable joy? This season of waiting is a time to see how God is good, even when the world is upside down. This Advent season is a time of expectation, believing God will be present in our sorrows and in our celebrations. This Advent season invites us to celebrate the abounding love of God that comes to us in the person of Jesus. Take heart! Have joy and celebrate!

-Dr. David Kiger

Director of Libraries and Theological Librarian





DECEMBER 16

Psalm 95:1-11

I am sure you have noticed—our passage does not end so cheerfully at all. This is strange in a week dedicated to joyfully celebrating Jesus' birth. What was your experience while reading? Did you, like me, feel inspired by the first seven verses? Were you somewhat disheartened as you read its last half?

If you can spare a moment, read these texts which our psalm references: Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13. Upon reading, we find that the end of Psalm 95 tells the story of how God, through a rock, provides water for the grumbling Israelites on their journey out of Egypt. Though free, the Israelites still feel trapped by thirst, hunger, and perhaps uncertainty. They lash out with anger at these circumstances. Their posture toward suffering is not much of a breeding ground for joy.

One of my favorite poems is called "When in Doubt," by Sandra Cisneros. In it, she reinterprets part of the Lord's Prayer to say, "When in doubt,/ Forgive us our myopia/ As we forgive those who are myopic against us." Myopia is short-sightedness, but it could also mean lacking wisdom or living selfishly.

Short-sighted people find it hard to claim lasting joy. Our psalmist suggests that, when in doubt—when we are in a desert where everything is new and water is scarce—we look beyond. Look as far as the mountains, imagine the depths of the sea, and know that God cares for all of this. God is as far-sighted as they come. He has been crafting salvation throughout time and saw that one day his Son would come into the world as living water. God formed his church on Peter, "The Rock," and on the other apostles, and it continues to grow. God is still crafting salvation as we celebrate the Advent again. I pray it is a joyful time this year, as we learn to look with far eyes toward the bigger hopes God has in store.

-Bethany Hicks

Class of '25



DECEMBER 17

1 Peter 1:8-9

Christmas can seem like a season of interminable waits. Many children anxiously count down the days until they can open their gifts; meanwhile, many adults anxiously strive to meet the milestones of the Advent calendar—hang up decorations by Day X, send Christmas cards by Day Y, finish watching those classic Christmas movies by Day Z. Everywhere we go during this time of year, we hear the imperious command: Be Joyful! And yet the anxious waiting can make the season feel, well, a bit joyless. How am I supposed to experience joy when I am in a state of perpetual anticipation for joys to come?

1 Peter 1:8-9 tells us that although we have not yet seen Jesus, we can be satisfied in his love for us, and although we have not yet arrived at the result of our faith, we can nonetheless revel in the joy of that future moment. In other words, even as we look ahead to the consummation of our faith, we can get a taste of that joy in the here and now. What a powerful reminder of the grace that propels the Christmas season.

Despite a state of near chronic expectancy, we can find satisfaction, even joyfulness, in the act of waiting. After all, faith is not merely the anticipation of good things to come; it is a gift in its own right, a process of affirmation that infuses the present with a sense of lightness and deep contentment. Faith provides us with a wellspring of enduring happiness. And so when I find myself wrapped up in the suspense of unwrapping, I try to step back and appreciate the joy of these darkening days (very soon to crest). It is not that I can bypass the suspense, or wish it away with magical thinking—rather, faith mercifully enables me to transform that crippling suspense into boundless joy. And this gift fills me with a profound sense of gratitude.

-Dr. Michael J. Blouin

Professor of English and Humanities



DECEMBER 18

Matthew 2:1-12

One of my favorite poems for the Christmas season, or any season, is T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi." Unlike many of Eliot's works, notable for their often difficult engagement with vast, deep wells of obscure cultural references, this one takes as its subject one of the most well-known narratives in the Christian tradition.

It tells a story that is reenacted every year by children on pageant stages, who stumble up the center aisles of churches across the land, carrying props of gold, frankincense, and myrrh as they make their way to the manger. Despite the potential historical inaccuracies of such presentations, they are memorable and convey something of the beautifully simple nature of the Christmas season, and the joy that must have come with presenting those precious gifts to that precious child.

So, too, Eliot's poem simply, but powerfully, articulates the story of the Magi, beginning with the challenges they faced on their long journey from the East, the regrets that crept into their mind on cold nights, the longing to be back at home in their comfortable palaces. But he also speaks of the moment when they came to the child and his mother, echoing the scene that Matthew narrates in the second chapter of his Gospel. Eliot's rendering of this scene contains one of the most glorious understatements in all of literature: "It was (you may say) satisfactory." Satisfactory. Almost as if the Magi, these wise, learned travelers from far off lands, were so dumbfounded by their encounter with the incarnate Lord that words completely failed them.

We still encounter Christ today, and the season of Advent is a time when we can prepare our hearts to receive him with joy. Like the Magi, we embark on a pilgrimage, bearing the humble gift of our lives, in anticipation of that moment when our joy is made complete in Christ. It will be (you may say) satisfactory.

-Dr. Todd Edmondson

Area Chair of Humanities; Associate Professor of Composition and Humanities





DECEMBER 19

Isaiah 12:1-6

The mockingbird sits still in the garden. She awaits the anticipated arrival of the One who loves—the One whose heart is set on her wellbeing. The mockingbird sits still in the warm, beautiful summer sun as she prepares to accomplish one mission—adoration for the One who loves. The familiar footsteps are fast approaching, and now the mockingbird has the chance to reciprocate a shadow of the love shown to her, to express reverence to the One who values her life. Now she has the chance to return love for love, so she sings.

The song of the mockingbird is not the only tune used to express gratitude. As described in Isaiah 12:1-6, Israel will sing praises to God in response to his love. God's plan to send the King of Isaiah 11 who comes to bring righteousness, peace, and redemption, prompts the nation to worship God, praising the Savior for his excellent deeds and sharing the goodness of God to all who listen. Isaiah 12 gives a glimpse of what happens when we encounter the love of God.

God's love shifts our future from sin to blessing. Isaiah 12 mentions many blessings that flow from the love God has for his people. Yahweh comforts, saves, and provides for his children, like the One cares for the birds in their garden. The root of all good things is love.

What should we do with the indescribable love God has for us? We sing. We sing the song of Isaiah 12:1-6. Our lips sing the glory of God. Our hands sing when we serve. We sing with our feet, walking as Christ walked. We sing with our heart as our entire life is shaped by worship. We sing like the mockingbird to the One who loves. So sing, beloved, for the steadfast love of God abounds forever.

-Skylan Stephens

Class of '22, '24 MSC, & '28 MDiv





DECEMBER 20

Galatians 4:4-7

Waiting is difficult.

Even if we know unequivocally when a particular “fullness of time” will come and bring an end to our anticipation, waiting is difficult. The wedding that is a year away, the graduation five months away, the due date of a baby ... even knowing when they will arrive does not ease the struggle of waiting.

If waiting for dates we *know* is arduous, how much more difficult is waiting indefinitely for the “fullness of time” to come? Imagine the struggle of ancient Israel as they waited generation after generation for the Messiah with no sense of when the time would be fulfilled.

Waiting is living without the very thing for which we long. Waiting is confronting our fears, hoping for what we cannot yet see, wrestling with doubt that the day will come, and finding strength to wait anew each day.

Waiting is lacking control.

Waiting is active. It takes place in the now. Yet, too often we look so forward to a future arrival that we overlook the joy of the present. We live oblivious to the transformative work of God taking place in us as we wait. In this time of transformation, we lack control while learning to trust that God is in control. In this place we are prepared to more fully appreciate and enjoy what awaits us when God’s “fullness of time” comes.

Advent invites us to embrace waiting and to joyfully celebrate God’s love that sent Jesus, born of a woman, to redeem us and to make us children of God, gifted with an undeserved inheritance. Advent invites us to actively embrace waiting’s transformation and lack of control as we anticipate the hope of Christ’s return.

-Kit Dotson

Dean of Students





DECEMBER 21

Titus 3:4-7

This past summer, I found myself in a difficult spot—nothing seemed to be going the way I wanted, and I could not understand why things were happening the way they were. One of the hardest parts was trying to figure out how to show love and affection when I felt so distant from the people I care about. The physical distance made it challenging to express the love I deeply felt. After a while, trying to figure it out by myself, I was reminded of God’s love—a love that travels the world and reaches us wherever we are.

Titus 3:4-5 shows us the perfect example of God’s love in action: “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (NIV). God’s love for us is not conditioned upon our actions, success, or closeness to him. Instead, it is a love that is generous, merciful, and transformative. Even when we feel distant or unworthy, his love brings us closer and opens our eyes to live a life with him.

This realization changed my perspective. I recognized that love does not always require physical presence—that I could show love differently—through prayer, support, carefully listening in a FaceTime call, and having a heart open to serving others, even from thousands of kilometers away. Just as God’s love reaches out to us, we are called to love others in ways that reflect his kindness and mercy. Whether near or far physically, we are capable of showing love that reflects God’s heart, a love that is patient, merciful, and steadfast—a love that can travel any distance to reach anyone.

As we approach Christmas, let us remember that the birth of Jesus is the ultimate display of God’s love, a love that reaches beyond our understanding and brings salvation to all.

-Marcos Moreno Prado Filho

Class of '25



DECEMBER 22

John 3:16-21

Perhaps you are familiar with author Gary Chapman's five love languages: quality time, physical touch, words of affirmation, acts of service, and gifts. At this time of year, our minds are often filled with, even consumed by, gifts. We make our lists and check them twice to be sure we bought gifts for all our loved ones.

We may also buy a shoe box of small gifts, for a child who is left out at Christmas time. We want those children to know they are loved.

But what about those who we know do not deserve a gift? What about those who have done awful things, sometimes to those we love? I do not have them on my gift list. After all, I do not want them to think I approve of what they have done.

Will I spend time with them? Hug them? Tell them good things about themselves? Not likely. Will I go out of my way to serve them? No way.

How are we to react, then, when we read John 3:16-21? "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed" (John 3:16-17 MSG). God so loved the world—not just you and me and those we love, but those who have done despicable acts as well—that he demonstrated his love in the person of Jesus, his Son, his gift to us. God also spent time with us; touched us; told us we are children of the King and spoke other kind words to us; and served us by giving his life for us. That is all five love languages!



Prayer

Father God, we are in awe and overwhelmed by your demonstration of love to all of us. May we receive your gift with appreciation and try, with your help, to show love to others in the same way. Amen.

-Dr. Rebecca Sapp

Area Chair of Social Learning; Professor of Counseling



DECEMBER 23

1 John 4:7-12

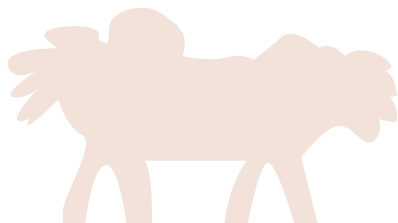
This is certainly one of the love-liest passages in Scripture; the word “love” (in its forms as noun, verb, and adjective) appears fifteen (!) times in a mere six verses. One might assume that such a passage must be comforting, since we tend to associate love with comfort. And in its own way, this passage is indeed consoling: God is love, God loves us, God demonstrated that love by sending his own Son. We also learn that all who love are “begotten by God and know God.” Just as Jesus is the begotten Son, we too—if we love—become begotten children of God.

But sometimes God has a peculiar way of comforting us. This passage also says that God sent his Son as an expiation for our sins. We begin to connect the dots: we are begotten of God if we love, but God’s Son has shown us where love leads—to the cross at Calvary. Our minds trace the odyssey of love from the tranquility of the first Christmas to the abasement of the cross. These two scenes from Jesus’ life do not form the stark contrast they might appear to at first. When God sent his Son, he first appeared in the most defenseless form possible, that of a newborn infant. But how could it be otherwise?

Love, real love, means risk and exposure. The painter Hugo van der Goes understood this when he portrayed the newborn Christ naked and lying on the bare dirt, foreshadowing his death and burial. To love is to remove our defenses, to lower ourselves to the dust, and to offer ourselves to others, courting the very rejection that our Lord himself experienced. At Christmas we tend either to swaddle love in a blanket of sentimentality or to suffocate it with the rags of cynicism. We would do better to kneel with the shepherds beside the manger, marveling at, and conforming to, the invincible vulnerability of Love in the flesh.

-Dr. Lee Blackburn

Associate Professor of Humanities and History





DECEMBER 24

Philippians 2:1-11

I love music. I love singing. I love playing piano. I love anything with a tune. So, it comes as no surprise that the way I love to praise God the most is through worship music. And even more than that, I love singing his praises with other believers.

Last summer, I stayed with a praise band in Tanzania. I was the only one whose first language was not Swahili, but one thing we all shared was our love for Jesus and for music. We traveled to a region where no one spoke English, so naturally, all of the songs were sung in Swahili. I remember them singing the hymn “How Great Thou Art” in their native tongue. I had no way of telling which verse they were singing, but it did not matter. Our hearts were in the same spot, singing praises to the One we love because he first loved us.

In Philippians 2, Paul talks about this very thing: being like-minded in Christ with one heart, one spirit, and one mind. In verse five, Paul tells us to follow Christ’s example in our relationships with others. Jesus was always loving God and loving people. Jesus humbled himself enough to die on a cross for each of us. He loved us that much! Jesus went as far as to become a human, taking on “the humble position of a slave” (Phil 2:7 NLT), so that he might unite us with him and with one another.

As different as my Tanzanian friends and I might have been, our commonality was our love for the Lord. We are able to love one another because we love him, and he loves us all the more.



*And when I think that God, his Son not sparing - Nikikumbuka vile wewe Mungu
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in - Uliyompeleka mwanao
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing - Afe azichukue dhambi zetu
He bled and died to take away my sin - Kuyatambua ni vigumu mno
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee - Roho yangu na ikuimbie
How great Thou art, how great Thou art - Jinsi wewe ulivyo mkuu*

-Skye Perdue

Class of '25



DECEMBER 25

John 1:1-14

We live in a technological age. So much of our experience is mediated to us by technology. Even on Christmas morning, I suspect many parents will watch their children open presents on the screen of their phone, which they are using to record the expression of their child. As a parent of two daughters, I often find myself in this same position. My phone is out and between me and my children more frequently than I want to admit.

But today, on Christmas morning, I am reminded that there is a profoundly different way—the way of Jesus. On Christmas morning, I learn and am reminded that the way of Christ is presence. Even more, the presence of Christ is immediate. There is nothing between us and Jesus—no screen, no gatekeeper, no distractions. Jesus, the vulnerable and helpless baby—the Son of God—is right there in front of us.

And the more we walk with Jesus, the more we read the gospels, the more we realize that the coming of Jesus as a baby was not some anomaly. Instead, we see that the way of Jesus was and is to always be immediately present to those he encounters. If you look for it, you will see that Jesus is constantly working to remove the barriers that stand between people and him.

When we read the opening of John's Gospel, we see that incarnation—being immediately present—is the way of Jesus. God's willingness to become human and become like us in all things except sin shows us what true love looks like. The vulnerability of the helpless baby on Christmas morning foreshadows the vulnerability of Christ on the cross—present even to the criminals hanging beside him.

This Christmas, I pray that you will find yourself on the way of Christ—the way of love. Just as Christ is directly present to you, I pray that you will allow yourself to be present to those around you. And by your presence, I pray that others might know the love of Jesus Christ, our incarnate Lord.

-Dr. Stephen E. Waers

President



A FINAL NOTE

As we bring this second edition of Advent Echoes to a close, we are deeply grateful to have shared this Christmas season with you. Advent is a time that calls us to pause, to reflect, and to make room in our lives for the profound mystery of Christ's coming. This season is more than a prelude to Christmas—it is a time to prepare our hearts for the Light that overcomes darkness, to listen for God's gentle whisper, and to ready our lives to receive Emmanuel, "God with us."

Throughout these pages, we have sought to capture the essence of Advent's hope, peace, joy, and love—gifts from the Father, revealed through the Son, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. These four pillars remind us of God's promise that, even in times of waiting and uncertainty, his presence is near. Through Christ's coming we see the fulfillment of that promise, and by the Spirit's power, we are invited into a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. Each devotion was written with the prayer that you would have hope in the the nearness of God the Father, sense the love of Christ, and rest in the joy and peace the Holy Spirit brings.

As the season of Advent gives way to the joy of Christmas, we hope that the Spirit continues to speak to your heart, inspiring you to carry the light of Christ into the world. Thank you for allowing us to be part of your spiritual journey this season. May the peace of Christ, born in a humble manger, dwell richly in you, now and always.

In Christ,

-The Advent Echoes Editorial Team



Coming 2025

ADVENT ECHOES



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



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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.
- Advent season serves as a time of reflection, penance, and joyful expectation.
- The season of Advent is broken up into four weeks leading up to the celebration of Christmas, which commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ.
- Each week leading up to Jesus' arrival focuses on various themes, often represented by the lighting of Advent candles on an Advent wreath. 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.



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