



NOVEMBER 25 - DECEMBER 28

GLENKIRK CHURCH CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONALS 2019

CONTENTS

2 From Tim & Betsy

“Hope”

- 6 Carole Reynolds
- 8 Chuck Coutler
- 10 Darren Richer
- 12 Luanne Jamie
- 14 Marlene Lamerson
- 16 Glen Thorp
- 18 Heather Marosi
- 20 Anna Fiaoni

“Peace”

- 24 Mike Gorski
- 26 Jim Sinema
- 28 Gizem Düzgüner
- 30 Darren Thompson
- 32 David Woo

“Joy”

- 36 Jessie Webb
- 38 Dottie Crawford
- 40 Annie Warner
- 42 Denise Shick
- 44 Christopher Schan
- 48 Wayne Herman
- 50 Sue Reid
- 52 Bryant Wilhelmsen
- 54 Zack Dover

“Love”

- 58 Paty Moeller
- 60 Tyler Cunningham
- 62 Christina Hack
- 64 Eunny Lee

Week of Christmas

- 68 Kaitlyn Crawford King
- 70 Andrea Messinger
- 72 Jenn Graffius
- 74 Amanda Purnell
- 76 Cliff Wallman
- 78 Betsy Straeter

Recently the New York luxury jewelry company Tiffany released their 2019 Advent calendar. Standing nearly five feet tall and weighing more than 350 pounds, this Advent calendar retails at \$112,000.

Each day the owner opens a new gift, ranging from a sterling silver cup to an 18-karat gold bracelet. Only four of these calendars have been produced, and consumers must contact Tiffany for a chance to purchase one of the four. How strange it is to call this an Advent gift.

Christians have been celebrating Advent, derived from the Latin word for “coming” or “arrival,” since at least the 4th century. Beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, Advent is a season of anticipation. During Advent we as Christians spend our time preparing our hearts to celebrate the first Advent of Jesus on Christmas Day. And as we prepare our own hearts to celebrate His first Advent, we also look longingly to the future, to the second Advent of Jesus.

The mood of Advent is anticipation, hopeful anticipation of God fulfilling all of His promises. During Advent, as we buy gifts for those we love, decorate our homes, and attend parties, we are also reminding ourselves and each other that we live in between the first and second Advent of Jesus. We have tasted of God’s promises through His first Advent. We will see the fullness of His promises at His second Advent.

Advent is for everyone. Young and old, rich and poor. Anyone can taste of the good promises of God during Advent. This is why Tiffany’s exclusive Advent calendar is so strange and so “un-Advent-ish.” So this year, resist the temptation to rush to Christmas. Linger and savor the in-between. Live in the longings for God’s promises to be fulfilled in your life.

Pastor Tim Peck

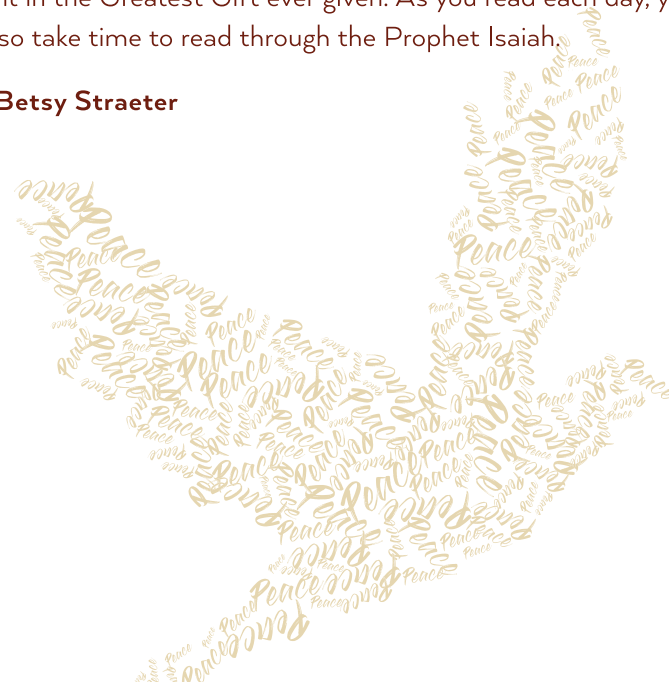
This year’s Advent theme is “Every Longing Heart.” The 8th century Prophet Isaiah proclaimed God’s hope to his own generation amid disasters, invasions, massive political shifts in power.

Through Isaiah’s prophetic message, God invites us to picture the world as Christ will recreate it through the coming of Jesus Christ. This Advent season will look at what Isaiah has to say about the Advent themes of **hope, peace, joy** and **love**.

Each year at Advent we publish a devotional penned by those in our worshipping community. These devotions are their stories about how God has shown up in their lives this last year. They are focused around the four Advent themes Tim will be preaching on each Sunday. This year we have also included some devotions from some of our mission partners in order that you might get to know them a little better.

May these devotions bring encouragement to you as you prepare for the Greatest Gift ever given, Jesus. May your longing heart find fulfilment in the Greatest Gift ever given. As you read each day, you might also take time to read through the Prophet Isaiah.

Pastor Betsy Straeter



Hope

Carole Reynolds

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. — 2 Corinthians 4:18

Glenkirk's ministry, Sowing Seeds for Life, meets the first and third Wednesdays of every month and gives food—fresh, canned and boxed—to whomever might need it. Every week, whether rain or shine, those we have come to know as “the regulars” and always some newcomers, too, will line up for hours in the sweltering heat of the summer sun or, in sharp contrast as we experienced this year, the wet and cold of many a rainy day. Most come well prepared to receive the gift of food they know is coming their way—with boxes, bags, wagons, etc.

As a volunteer, I am just handing out an ordinary can of vegetables or a box of cereal each week; but to some, it is perhaps a welcome item they haven't had in the longest time, or a surprise food they know their children will **love**.

Our guests are sometimes quiet—the universal language is a smile—and most are very grateful and express their thanks. Others appear sad, and I wonder what circumstances landed them in their current position. One such lady came through the line earlier this year. Looking at the can of mixed fruit I was handing out that day, she said her husband, who had passed away, would have loved that. With a faraway look on her face she said, “Perhaps we could have shared it with ice cream. We were married for fifty years. Things are

different now. Well, actually, life is empty now.” About half an hour later she was back, but not to receive more food. She just wanted some company and to talk to the people around her. Her loneliness was almost tangible.

Everyday life as we know it is like this—a blend of challenges and decisions, sometimes bright diamond days, others colorless grieving ones, and everything in between. In the unpredictability of it all, as God is continually working in me and opening my eyes to His heart, I have found my **hope** to be in Jesus alone. His Presence marks the **peace** and stability of my days.

If she hasn't already done so, I pray that my friend in the line at Sowing Seeds will come to know Jesus as her personal Savior—not just as an answer to her loneliness, but also so that her life may have deep meaning and that she will be assured of a hope-filled future.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 1-2**

Chuck Coulter

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so also are My ways and thoughts higher than yours. — Isaiah 55:9

The year 2019 began with high **hopes** and promise. Our family had been blessed with two fraternal twin grandsons the previous December 2018, and we were looking forward to a third grandchild (another boy) scheduled to be born by way of C-section on January 26, 2019. All during the holidays there was excitement in the anticipation of the arrival of Luke Anthony Coulter. Whew! Three infants a year apart in diapers! That's okay. Bring it on!

Well, the big day arrived. My wife and I were watching the twins at home, waiting in anticipation for the phone call that Luke Anthony had arrived. The call came earlier than expected, but the news was not at all what we expected. In doing the preliminary C-section examination, the doctors and nurses could not find a heartbeat! Well, it must be an error! Must be a mistake! This can't be! No, no mistake. Little Luke Anthony was gone. He was born, but was already at home with Jesus. Our world and that of our son and daughter-in-law were turned upside down in a moment! The normal questions came to mind. Why? How did this happen? Etc., etc., etc.

We spent two agonizing, heartbreaking days at the hospital, comforting each other and holding our beloved grandson, who otherwise was normal looking with no visible signs of trauma or complications. Later an autopsy would be performed, but it revealed no new information.

In the days and weeks that followed, healing came slowly but surely as we were comforted with the assurance of God's sovereign control, **peace** and **love**. Trusting can be, and often

is, easier said than done. But as Isaiah 55:8, 9 reminds us, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so also are My ways and thoughts higher than yours."

Our loss and grief have been tempered by the presence of our two very active, joyful grandsons. They are God's gifts and help take the sting away and preoccupy our minds—which they certainly do!

Fast forward another four months. In May, I received a call from an old high school friend and football teammate with whom I had had limited contact over the years and none whatsoever in the past four or five years. He had heard from another school friend of our loss. As we shared, he said that they were expecting another grandchild in about a week. About eight days later, I received a call from my friend that his expectant grandson, also with the name Luke, had been born deceased! Almost to a tee, he experienced the same set of circumstances. No visible signs, no visible issues. We prayed together, and we cried together. Having been through a similar ordeal, I prayed that God would use me to be there in **love** for my friend.

We know that life is a precious gift. Our **hope** is in the eternal nature of God and life everlasting to those whose trust is in our Lord Jesus Christ. Some of us, like the little Lukes, enter into that glorious joy sooner than others. But as King David stated in 2 Samuel 12:23, referring to the death of his seven-day-old son, "He will not return to me, but I will go to him." That, too, is our **hope**. One day we will be reunited with Luke Anthony Coulter as we, too, enter into the **joy** of the Lord!

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 3-5**

Darren Richer

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint. — Isaiah 40:31

This last year God has showed up to give me **hope** for my future. I wouldn't say that I am in the midst of a mid-life crisis, but just on a path to discern where God wants me in this second half of my life. God has been good to me with this wonderful church family at Glenkirk.

My faith has grown tremendously since my wife Augusta and I have been here 20 years now. I grew up as a pastor's kid at a small church where I felt the **love** of so many older adults throughout my formative years. Then while attending college and traveling the world, I was a tennis coach for a few years. I knew God was there; He just wasn't the focus in my life. When Gus and I fell in **love**, she helped me to redirect my priorities, and we put God at the center of our marriage.

My career as a tennis teaching professional has been good. It is wonderful to do something you **love** for a living. However, it is a constant struggle to balance my time and to say "no" to potentially very rewarding coaching opportunities which would conflict with my family goals and my responsibilities in the church. I have absolutely **loved** serving in small groups, as an elder, and now in kid's ministry.

In wrestling with what to prioritize, Galatians 6:8 makes it clear to me, "*Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, for the Spirit will reap eternal life.*" This last year I have connected with a few of my old college friends. Wow! God sure did use these experiences to help put me on His path! My friends were highly ambitious and went after worldly successes which proved to be extremely destructive in their lives and to those close to them. God used me to speak into their lives and give them **hope** in Jesus.

In my life, ambition has been both a blessing and a curse. I have coached many top players, but not being able to travel and watch my players has also put me more removed from high performance coaching. There is a time and season for everything. During this time God is using me a lot as a mentor, and going through a church leadership course has been very stimulating. God has wired me to be a planner, so I now need to wait on Him to see what my next chapter is. In my life the best things have happened when I am not forcing something to happen. A guiding Bible verse for me is Isaiah 40:31.

Let me leave you with a blessing: "*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*" (Romans 15:13).

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 6-8**

Luanne Jamie

Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. — 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Giving thanks in all circumstances is both a command and a prescription for a joyful life. To be thankful is to be conscious of a benefit received. It is to be grateful, joyful, satisfied. It is the opposite of being dissatisfied, joyless and sad.

We know that God consistently throughout Scripture tells us to be thankful. How do we do that when we have lost a loved one, suffered the loss of a dream, or received a diagnosis that will change the trajectory of our lives? The all-consuming reality of our losses and fears crowds out the knowledge that there is still both a need to be thankful and a reason to be thankful. And to make it even more difficult, we are told to be thankful in ALL circumstances. So, we ask why and how.

Because God created us and **loves** us deeply, He knows what will keep our souls at rest and satisfied. He knows the number of our years of life on this earth and that to get through both the good and bad times, we need something deeper than the shallow gifts our culture has to offer. He knows that our appreciating what He has given us and appreciating the uniqueness of the people He has surrounded us with will deepen the meaningfulness of our lives and sustain us when we are heartbroken. Jesus modeled thankfulness for us in so many ways in Scripture. At the Last Supper, knowing what lay ahead, He still gave thanks in front of His disciples.

Throughout our lives as we take time to be thankful and as we choose to see those things that have been given to us as gifts, we reinforce a structure within ourselves that allows us to look back and remember what we have been given throughout the years and be thankful for it. When the Apostle Paul was

languishing in a harsh Roman prison after having been separated from friends, unjustly accused and brutally treated, he continued to praise God and say words of thanksgiving. By doing so, he did not become bitter and dissatisfied. The Apostle Paul modeled giving thanks in all circumstances.

Ingratitude leads to bitterness and hardened hearts. It creates dissatisfaction and joylessness. It is the exact opposite of what God wants for us. An ungrateful heart is a heart that is cold toward God and indifferent to His mercy and **love**. It is a heart that does not feel empathy for others. It is a heart that has forgotten how dependent we are on God for everything.

Each of us encounters many bumps along our roads. We have a choice as to how we deal with those bumps. I believe God has blessed me with events in my life that have broken me but at the same time have prepared me for further bumps in the road. He has shown me that it is possible to be thankful in all circumstances and thus be strengthened for what lies ahead.

When my 14-year-old granddaughter was diagnosed with OCD and high functioning autism, my heart broke as I envisioned her future. At the same time, I remain thankful for her and who she is as God created her. I am thankful that there is medical and psychological help for her. I am thankful that her family sees the challenge and accepts it. I am thankful that our society has evolved to a point that people who are afflicted with disabilities are accepted and helped rather than ignored and pushed to the side. I am thankful, most of all, for the **hope** that God has given me that we are not alone and that, as believers in Christ, we have Him by our side as we encounter the bumps in the road.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 9-10**

Marlene Lamerson

Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob whose hope is in the Lord their God. — Psalm 146:5

As we enter the season of Advent and prepare our hearts and homes for Christmas, I think back on the year and the many blessings my son and I have experienced. Being a single parent has been challenging and at times scary. But the Lord has taught me that I'm not alone as I **hope** and trust in Him.

Over the past four years, after my ex-husband abandoned us, after a history of domestic violence, I was left heartbroken and there were days when I wasn't sure how I was going to make ends meet or even keep a roof over our heads. There were many uncertain times, but God is faithful and has always provided and blessed us in unexpected ways. He is our constant help.

I was reminded of this recently by a friend who was remarking about how positive and hopeful I had been in a very uncertain situation last year. You see, during this time last year, I was working in a contract position. With my contract having been extended to the fullest (1 year), it was due to end in a matter of weeks. I had begun to apply for a position at other places, but I didn't seem really worried. I did not have a sense of panic because God has been so faithful. I just began to lean on and **hope** in Him. I was open to whatever it was He had in store for me. My **hope** was not in my own efforts or even capabilities. I did what I knew to do: I prayed and left the outcome up to Him.



With only two weeks left before the end of my contract, I interviewed for a full-time position within minutes of my home. Within three days I was offered the position and accepted it! Everything about the job exceeded my expectations, but this did not exceed God's plans for me. God knows and always wants what is best for us. Because of this and because He is in control, I've come to realize that He can be trusted in all circumstances.

We live in uncertain times. Our hearts long for better days, and life can be challenging and scary for us all. But we have **hope**. **Hope** is a gift from our God—not only at Christmas but every day of the year. May God bless you as you put your **hope** and trust in Him.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 12-13**

Glen Thorp

Advent means “coming.”

It is a time of **hope**. We long for the coming of Jesus Christ, especially in a time of unrest around the world and in our nation. It seems as if darkness is overcoming light and hopelessness is turning into despair. We hear: “Can’t we just get along?” “All we want is **peace** in our time.” Humanity has been deceived and betrayed in its attempts at and hopes for seeking **peace**.

In the 8th century BC, the kings of Israel and Judah relied on human treaties rather than God for security. Some prophets proclaimed, “**Peace, peace,**” when there was no **hope of peace**. God sent Prophet Isaiah with a message of **hope**. No Scripture is quoted more frequently and with greater longing or has been more of an inspiration for writers around the world than Isaiah 2:4.

*He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.*

This Scripture is carved into stone on a building across from the United Nation’s Building. It is one of the greatest visions of all time. It is indispensable for **hope** of the world. There shall be a day when all humanity will live together, walking together in faith and righteousness. However, for now humanity is unable to learn the act of living together in **hope** and **peace**.

Often when Isaiah 2:4 is quoted, the first line is not used. But it is key to the vision: “He will judge between nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.” Who is the He? It is not the United Nations or any country. As noble as their motives may be, they start at the wrong place.

Advent has two foci. One is anticipating the birth of Jesus the Promised Messiah. It is fun, joyful, hopeful, preparing and celebrating the birth of the *Word Made Flesh* (John 1:14). Jesus triumphantly approaching Jerusalem wept over it saying: “... if you ... had only known ... what would bring you peace ...” (19:41a). The second focus is anticipating Jesus’ return. Jesus told His disciples He would leave them, but He said, “I will come back” (John 14:2, 3).

Submission to God is the only way of achieving the **Hope of Peace**.

God gave Isaiah vision into the future. God showed the prophet what would eventually happen to Jerusalem. Revelation 21 depicts the glorious fulfillment and **hope of peace**: a New Jerusalem where those who have placed their faith in God (submitted to God) will dwell. God’s faithfulness gives us **hope** for the future.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 2:1-4, Revelation 21**

Heather Marosi

But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. — Philippians 6: 13b - 14

The year 2019 has been intense for our family. My husband began a new job, my kids started new schools, and I have had a number of significant commitments. All of this has led me to feel pulled in many different directions and a bit untethered. I have spent my efforts hoping to meet people's expectations and produce work that honors the commitments I have made. In doing so, however, I am having to learn the difficult lesson of how to reprioritize and let go of my desire to accomplish every goal and meet every deadline. It has been a humbling season.

Even in the midst of the all that is going on in my life, I sense God is at work. When I feel at the end of my rope, someone steps in just at the right moment to offer help. When I have encountered painful stumbling blocks, I have seen God answer prayers in other areas. When I have felt hopeless and tired, I have been encouraged and lifted up. God has provided, even when I haven't known how to ask for help.

As I look toward to the next year, I am filled with **hope** as I sense that God is clearly calling me in a new direction. Philippians 3:13b-14 has come alive to me in new ways,

"But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."
In pursuing God's calling on my life, I believe I am getting closer to the prize of being in communion with Him and abiding in His perfect will.

I am deeply thankful for how God has provided in the challenges of this season and am eager to see all the ways He will continue to show up. As I press on into the next chapter, I can't wait to see all that God has in store.



Anna Fiaoni

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. — Psalm 46:1

There was never a day when God's presence and protection were so vivid than on November 12, 2010, when my daughter Giulia was sick with what we thought was strep throat.

Three days had gone by while being on antibiotics and she began to get sick again; fever, vomiting, and a rash were her symptoms. I took her back to the doctor who had originally diagnosed her, and this time she said Giulia now had mononucleosis. When I was sitting with the doctor, I didn't feel like this was the correct diagnosis. You know that instinct that tells you something isn't right or, as I call it, that the Holy Spirit is talking to you? I knew that the feeling was true, but I thought who was I to question the doctor. She would know better than I, so I thought.

Once we arrived at home, I took Giulia to bed and kept her comfortable. That feeling of being unsure of her diagnosis was not going away. That evening I sat down with my eldest daughter, Veronica, to spend some time with her. While we were watching TV together, I felt God's presence most distinctly. I felt a tap on my shoulder, as clear as day, and a voice so clearly saying, "Take her to the hospital." Within the next few hours after we were home, I noticed how quickly Giulia was declining in health, and I was beginning to get worried. I knew what she had was not strep throat or mononucleosis. I knew it was meningitis. How? To this day, I really don't know, but on that day I was confident of my own diagnosis.

When we arrived at the hospital, I felt that I needed to tell the doctor what I thought Giulia had, even though I'm not a doctor. After rushing to the ICU for a spinal tap, it was confirmed: my Giulia was diagnosed with meningococcal bacterial meningitis. Once we knew the diagnosis, the doctor shared with us that my daughter had the most serious form of meningitis and that we were hours away from losing her. At that point, I knew what could have happened to her, but I also knew we were in the right place and she was going to be okay.

It was 11 days of strength and 11 days of insight in learning to question the professionals and tell them all that I felt and thought of my daughter's illness, trusting that it was all coming from God. I felt His presence near us always, and His **peace** and **hope** were all that I needed to guide me.

For the next five months, I watched Giulia closely and prayed for her to heal and to eventually be healthy again one day. With prayer from family and friends, I can say that today she is almost 100% healthy. I am thankful to God and that I listened to Him that day. This was a turning point in my life where I truly began to seek God and seek a relationship with Him.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 14-17**



Peace

Mike Gorski

Casting all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.

— 1 Peter 5:7

Sometimes growth can be so slow. The term “at a snail’s pace” comes to mind. That phrase is representative of how I feel about some slow growth areas within myself. In particular, I feel that way about a lack of inner **peace** in situations of unrest. I am not prone to easily find **peace** in restless situations, especially ones that I care a lot about and have absolutely no control over.

Earlier this year I found myself in one of those positions, which would be typically peaceless for me. I was dealing with a person who I felt was being very inflammatory about how I had chosen to handle an issue. Because of the route I had taken, this person was trying to get my superiors to discipline me for something I had done, earnestly trying to help someone through an issue.

Going through something like that would normally give me no **peace** whatsoever. The lack of control over potentially being penalized for something in which I had been trying to do my best can bring on a lot of anxiety within me. In my life, I have been in other situations where I had similar lack of control over my future. Those situations, while definitely not always turning out as I would choose, have taught me that I can make it through challenges if I keep faith that God will remain in my life even when the future is out of my control.

Because of that accumulation of previous life experiences mixed with knowledge of and faith in God’s ways, I was able to get through this situation without the level of anxiety I would have previously been likely to feel. I knew that no matter what I went through, at the end of the day God would be there as an unending part of my life.

My growth is slow. I had trouble sleeping through the entire process. But I did not feel like I was facing a doomsday situation and, in the end, my identity would not be changed by the outcome. Before, that identity might have been wrapped up in what I might lose. This time, it was secure in knowing that no matter what happens, I would remain a child of God while moving toward inner **peace** at a snail’s pace.

SCRIPTURE READING [Isaiah 18-21](#)

Tim Sinema

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

— Philippians 4:6-7

A few years ago, my wife and I were in Portland, Oregon, visiting my brother Bob and his wife Fran, who was battling acute leukemia. Bob was her brave supporter and “gopher,” taking her to appointments for chemo and getting groceries, etc. Though it seemed impossible, their goal was to go to Florida to attend their granddaughter’s wedding six weeks later.

During that visit we went with them to make their funeral arrangements as it was apparent Fran would not be living past six months.

Shortly after my wife and I returned to California, Fran called to tell us Bob had been diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis. They desired our help since their children were busy with wedding plans and they didn’t want to have them cancel the wedding!

Over the next few days, Bob’s breathing became more labored and he was admitted to ICU. When we arrived, we went directly to the hospital. Bob was in critical condition and the doctor told the three of us that he was not going to recover.

Our goal and fervent prayers were to have Bob live until his two sons could get there from Florida to say “good-bye.”

It was difficult for Bob to talk, but I had some wonderful alone times with him. We both realized he would not be going home from the hospital, but we both felt **peace** knowing God’s hand was directing all things. We were able to speak of how thankful we were to have been brothers, as he was my closest brother and friend in a large family of eight. I was able to share Psalm 91 with him, which was also our mother’s favorite psalm. We talked about his memorial service, and I asked what his favorite verse was. His immediate response was: “*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*” (Philippians 1:21).

On our fifth day there, Bob’s sons arrived, so they took over supporting their mom and dad. I was sorry to lose my dear brother, but I had **peace** because I knew he was with Jesus in heaven. Eight weeks later Fran passed away and joined Bob.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 18-21**

Gizem Düzgüner

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. — John 14:27

Peace is a difficult word for me. As you may know, I live in Turkey. Although there aren't any big wars in my country right now, we hear news about wars in nearby regions every day. War in the geography near us is unfortunately a normal event of life. There is no big war in my country. Bombs don't explode every day here. But there are many other problems.

My people are at war with their inner world. They want to live without thinking about the future, without thinking about death. In fact, the most important reason for this is that our people have not yet reconciled with God. They have not yet opened their hearts to know God. If you ask the Turks if they **love** God, they will all say, "Yes." However, they are alien to God and their enemies. They are alien to God in their thoughts. They don't realize that they really have to make **peace** with God. They live recklessly because they don't know this.

Colossians 1:21-23 states: ²¹"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²²But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation— ²³if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant."

When I read these verses, I certainly see that I was once an alien. And now I realize that millions of people like me are in the same situation. I just don't believe it's enough to feel sorry for that. I once lived a hostile life to God. I never thought I hated God. Every time I thought of God, I would say that I **love** God, just like the other Turks do. But when I did, my heart showed me that I was never at **peace** with God.

I noticed that when I read the Bible, the Holy Spirit showed me my heart's desire for **peace**, and it was found in the Bible. Now when I think about it, I see that the Holy Spirit really needs to touch the Turks much more powerfully. The Turks have to understand that they have to make **peace** with God. Until this happens, the Turks will still live as enemies to God. Everyone who knows this problem (not just me) should pray for the hearts of the people in Turkey.

I didn't know I was an alien and an enemy to God. Before reconciling with Christ, I didn't even know what I did or glorified. The most important task of the Church today is to recognize that there is hostility in all of us and reconciliation with Christ brings real inner **peace** (John 14:27).

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 27-28**

Darren Thompson

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. — John 14:27

Life has a unique way of disrupting the peaceful life that God wants us to live. It might be a health diagnosis, relationship struggles, conflict, or uncertainty about the future. There are so many ways that our **peace** can be disrupted, creating feelings of anxiety, doubt, and even depression. Often, our lack of **peace** is due to the unknown. If you are like me, being in control and knowing the path forward provides a level of **peace** and comfort in my life. When that's not there, I struggle to live in the **peace** that God wants for me.

In my own life, this lack of **peace** often represents a lack of trust in the plan that God has for me and is working through me, even if I don't fully understand the plan yet. Our Sovereign God knew that we would struggle with this, and He understands that a lack of **peace** can lead to discontent and fear. This past year my **peace** was disrupted when an opportunity at work didn't result in the outcome that I had hoped it would.

As I dealt with feelings of disappointment, fear of the unknown, doubt, trust, and anxiety, it was my support network of family, friends, and our church community who helped me refocus on God's plan for my life. I realized that God fully desires for us to live in a state of **peace** and trust, knowing that we will experience seasons of life where our **peace** is disrupted.

In the Gospel of John, Chapter 14, Jesus comforts discontent and fear in His disciples by telling them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God but also in me.” Later in verse 27, Jesus says, “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.” God desires **peace** for our lives, not fear or anxiety.

Just think...out of all the things Jesus could have said to His disciples when He returned to them, His very first words were John 20:19: “Peace be with you!” And again, Jesus tells them for a second time in verse 21, “Peace be with you!”

As you reflect on God's faithfulness in your life this past year, know that He desires a **peace** for your life that is not of this world, even as the future presents uncertainty. May you live in the **peace** promised by Jesus and trust that He is faithful.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 29-30**

David Woo

Isaiah speaks of the promised Messiah who will bring us **peace** with God and **peace** with others. The barrier of sin between humankind and God is broken; and the broken relationships between people can be healed. Broken relationships are healed by extending forgiveness to those who have hurt us. We are to forgive others as Christ has forgiven us. However, it can be very difficult to forgive those who have hurt us deeply. It may take a great deal of time and effort to reach the point of being able to forgive profound pain.

For a certain young woman, it took a long time to be able to forgive her father who had abandoned her as a baby. At the time her mother was only sixteen; therefore, she was raised by her grandparents. Growing up without a father, she had strong feelings of hatred toward him. Over the years she learned the first name of her father and the town where he lived.

In time she became a Christian, grew in her faith, and worked for a Christian organization which ministers to needy families. When she was twenty years old, in a staff Bible study, she asked for prayer that she could forgive her father. It took her an extended period of time before she reached the point of being able to forgive him.

Then, a year later, she went with her organization to minister in another region. There, while ministering to the needy, she met a boy with the same last name as hers. She asked the boy where he lived. It turned out that he lived in the same town where she was told that her father lived. She asked

what was his father's name. It was the same first name as her father's. She told the boy that she might be his sister. She wrote her name on his arm.

The boy ran home and told his father. Both of them ran back to see the woman who might be his sister. There was an obviously close facial resemblance between the man, the woman, and the boy. He was her father. They warmly embraced each other. When she was able to forgive her father, the Lord brought opportunity for reconciliation.

Jesus was born to bring **peace** with God and **peace** among people, especially the healing of broken families. Are you willing to ask God to help you heal your broken relationships?





Joy



Jessie Webb

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

— James 1:2-4

Three out of my four kids were born overseas in the Middle East. We learned with my first daughter that I am susceptible to high-risk complications early in pregnancy. This first became evident when at 21 weeks I began to dilate. Emergency preventative measures were taken, I was put on bed rest, and the doctors began preparing us for the worst. We heard things like, “Babies don’t have a good chance of survival if they are born before 30 weeks in Jordan.” “You have only a 30% chance that this baby will survive, let alone carry to term.”

Fear crept in. I was torn between the reality that I had ZERO control over anything happening to my body or my baby, and the paralyzing fear that getting up to make a quick sandwich might send me into early labor and cause me to lose our baby. This season of unknown and waiting was dark, yet we earnestly prayed and clung to **hope** and the Lord.

You see, before all of these complications came about, the Lord had separately given both my husband and I our baby’s name. He spoke it to me, so softly and sweetly at nine weeks of pregnancy, but I kept it private. Weeks later, my husband awoke and announced, “God told me in a dream that we are having a girl, and she is going to be named Selah Joy.” “Yes,” I responded. It was exactly the same name He had given me weeks prior. It was settled.

In the middle of our complications, when nothing was guaranteed, the baby’s name was the only thing that kept us going. While it was not a guarantee of life, it was proof to us that the Lord knew this baby by name. Everyone around us had things to say about her odds of survival and her future, but we clung to the truth that God had named her Selah Joy, and it was for a purpose and a reason. So we rested in that. In a season where I was literally forced to pause and rest (the meaning of Selah) and a season of deep darkness, we daily fought for our **joy** in all the literal ways.

Fighting for **joy** in the midst of darkness is one of the hardest things we will do as followers of Christ. Silencing the noise of the world and focusing on the truth of the Lord can be next to impossible, but it’s what we all must do. It’s not easy, but it’s worth it. I carried our daughter to 38 weeks. Full term. She was a miracle by all standards. The doctors were amazed.

Our faith was tested. During that time we felt defeated, but we persevered. We fought for **joy**. His Word was our confidence. He delivered a beautiful testimony of His power. In the midst of suffering, **joy** comes in the morning.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 31-35**

Dottie Crawford

Hardships often prepare ordinary people for extraordinary destiny. — CS Lewis

Bill and I have had a few “difficult” years. Finances have been tight with three children in college. We have been struggling to take care of my parents, one with Alzheimer’s. Bill was on Session, which was time-consuming and difficult on his emotions. Paul was in a car accident, which resulted in a frivolous law suit that is still playing itself out. We’ve had family deaths, surgeries, and illnesses. We found ourselves just getting through the details, focusing on the tasks; we were getting through life, but we weren’t experiencing much **joy**.

So, of course, when our daughter Leyla and her boyfriend Ray got engaged this year, the family was VERY happy to have something so joyous to focus on. We immediately started planning an engagement party. The party was perfect. We had the most joyous night celebrating with Leyla and Ray. We had fun getting to know Ray’s family, meeting his friends, and watching Leyla and Ray’s worlds meld together.

The morning after the engagement party, we were sitting in our living room talking about what a great night it was. All of a sudden Leyla’s body became rigid; she stood up halfway and went head first into the floor and had a Grand Mal seizure. It was life-altering for her. After the visit to the ER, CAT scans, doctors’ appointments, new meds, and her driver’s license being taken away for four months, we found ourselves wishing for the life that was pre-seizure.

But guess what ... we started seeing **joy**. We really liked Leyla’s fiancé, Ray, but watching him so lovingly support Leyla in every way made us **LOVE** him. Leyla’s life was too busy—as we all said, “Life at the speed of Leyla.” Without a license she couldn’t go anywhere anytime; she had to learn to be still.

Leyla has always had a hard time accepting help, but with her new condition she had to accept it. In the process she realized how much she is **loved**. We watched her friends surround her. Our amazing family pulled together and supported each other like never before. Her seizure could have happened anywhere; it happened in our home with us present. Leyla turned to God. We went through a period of extreme **joy** and thankfulness in the midst of difficult times. God is SO good.

We relearned an important lesson: Look for the good; be aware that God has a plan, HIS plan, and it is much bigger than ours. God doesn’t promise us that life will be easy, but He does promise He will be with us through everything. Leyla’s life verse when she was baptized was Jeremiah 29:11: “*For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*” What a promise He gives us all.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 36-40**

Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.
— Psalm 30:5

Christmas can be a time of **joy** and sorrow. Christmas 2012 was a challenging season for me as I was having a hard time maintaining my **joy** through life's uncertainty. The previous year I began fostering and experienced the highs and lows that come with it. My foster son, Daniel, was unexpectedly placed with his biological family up in Northern California; and as the holidays approached, I knew I wanted to spend Christmas up north with him. It was not the Christmas I was used to or wanted, but I felt it was where I needed to be.

Upon arriving for my five-day stay, I researched local churches to attend for Christmas Eve service, checking out their websites, trying to find the right one. Nothing seemed to click, and I was feeling anxious and homesick for the Christmases I am accustomed to having.

That all changed as I was strolling around Kohls with Daniel and overheard a middle-aged lady and an older gentleman discussing their upcoming church event. I stood nearby and made sure I heard correctly. I politely interrupted and asked if they had a Christian church that they would recommend to me to attend on Christmas Eve. They said yes, invited me to attend their church, and asked if I was new to town.

After I explained through my tears that I was visiting Northern California on a regular basis to stay in touch with my foster

son, and that I was homesick and just wanted to find a church to attend on Christmas Eve, they immediately asked if they could pray for Daniel and me. And right there in the Kohls shoe department, Lucy and Tom, two total strangers, prayed for us.

Their kindness and willingness to **love** us brought us great **joy** and **peace** that Christmas. Daniel and I attended their Christmas Eve service, and we were greeted and welcomed with open arms. I saw first-hand the **love** of Christ and the power and **joy** that the church body can bring to those in need.

Each Christmas since then I am reminded of that Christmas, and I **hope** that I can bring **joy** and **peace** to someone during the holiday season as it was done for me. God promises that even in the darkness, **joy** is around the corner. When things seem unjoyful, do not despair. "Joy comes in the morning!" Psalm 30:5.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 41-42**



Denise Shick

Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his dwelling place. — 1 Chronicles 16:27

Sometimes it's necessary to stand back and gain some perspective. In many instances, a trial passes and you move on—a better, stronger, and more joyous person for having passed through a difficulty. The author of the Bible's book of Hebrews wrote:

“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Life can sometimes drain us of our **joy**. Our souls are parched. We're weary and we lose **hope**. Tomorrow looks grim and the next day even grimmer. Our heart wants to give up and give in to despair. And that's when the Bible verses, like the ones above, provide the spiritual water we need and **joy** enters in.

But in some cases, the trial continues, for a lifetime. History is full of martyrs who endured decades of suffering only to have that suffering end in death. That kind of suffering requires a long long-term perspective, a perspective that recognizes relief might not come until the next life. If that thought makes you want to cry (or scream), hang on. Good news is coming!

God hasn't promised any of us that we'll avoid suffering—or even a martyr's death. Every Christian, therefore, needs to gain a long long-term perspective. Perhaps you'll be one of the few who gets through life with few trials. But don't count on it; the odds are against you. On the other hand, if we gain that long long-term perspective, then we can learn to find **joy** in life's smallest gifts. And even more important, we can learn to live joyfully by bringing **joy** to others, despite our pain.

We all want to be happy, but sometimes trying to find happiness can be a struggle. Often times we search for it in all the wrong places or ways when the answer is much simpler—God. *“Happy are the people whose God is the LORD”* (Psalm 144:15). The Bible guides us to happiness through God's Word!

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 43-45**

Christopher Schan

The Old Testament, as well as many of the experiences of Jesus' followers, is full of stories of extreme adversity where steadfast reliance on the Lord carried people through their difficulties.

Isaiah, for example, warned the King of Judah of an international plot against his throne, and he assured the king that God would protect him from the schemes of the adversaries gathering around him.

There are also stories of internal struggle in which the Holy Spirit guided people to a great catharsis to help them clarify significant points in their life's direction. Of course, the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus is one of the most salient examples. Through it all, the **joy** that only the Lord can bring shines brightly. (In Paul's case this was literally true.) These kinds of dramatic flashpoints were not what I experienced this year.

The question, then, is: "How does one experience the deep **joy** of God when life is going relatively well and relatively steady?" The emotional "highs" of contrasting the **joy** that comes from being anchored to Jesus with the former state of confusion, angst, sadness, etc., become less obvious. However, **true joy** is not a temporary "high." Happiness depends on what is happening, but **joy** remains in the good times and the bad, the emotional times and the mundane.

Right now, I am blessed to say that my life is happy. My marriage, my job, and other aspects of my life are thankfully going well. There's nothing wrong with enjoying the good times, but the **joy** to which Jesus calls us must be rooted in something deeper. Ultimate **joy** comes from knowing God and appreciating all that God has done, especially sending His Son to die for us. We want to worship the "Blesser" instead of the blessing.

Sometimes it's not as easy to remember that all provision is God's when things seem under control. It takes prayer, devotion, and dedicated effort to remind oneself to trust in God when tomorrow seems secure. Now I say "seems" secure because the truth is, tomorrow is never really secure when our happiness depends on temporary things of this earth. The only real security that brings true joy is the assurance of God's faithfulness today, tomorrow, and forever.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:19-20: "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.*" That is to say, **joy** is not found in temporary earthly treasures but in the never-ending steadfastness of our eternal Heavenly Father

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 46-48**

Joy of the Redeemed

Isaiah 35

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus,² it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.

³ Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

⁸ And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
⁹ No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
¹⁰ and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.



Wayne Herman

Isaiah's vision of the future for God's people is a splendid example of the Great Reversal, a theme that is found throughout Scripture. The appearance of the LORD'S glory causes everything to change from its "normal" state of neediness to a joyous state of abundance: the desert blooms, the feeble hands are strengthened, the fearful are brave, the blind see, the lame leap like a deer, the voiceless shout for **joy**, and water bubbles up from the sand. That is what happens when God shows up because that is what our God is like. This vision of the future is the grounds for **hope** among God's people. We will not always live in a thorn-infested, drought-prone land; we will not always experience life with our current limitations; we will not always suffer debilitating losses; we will not always live under the shadow of death.

But we must acknowledge that our experience in the world today is not always one of positive reversals. In fact, we often experience the very negative reversals of life: the unexpected diagnosis, the sudden passing of a loved one, the loss of income. In Isaiah's day, Israel as a nation had experienced devastating losses. Caught between Assyria and Egypt—the two superpowers of their day—Israel's existence and independence as a nation were tenuous, at best, and constantly under threat. In the midst of political upheaval, eroded moral values, abandoned religious practices, and a lacuna of leadership, Isaiah pens the promise of Isaiah 35. The LORD will reverse Israel's fortunes. He will make all things new.

Clearly, the Great Reversal promised in this text is not our present reality. As Christians we believe that the full experience of God's Great Reversal will only come when Jesus returns, when Death and Sin are finally defeated, and when every tear is wiped away (Revelation 4:21). But God's gift of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost enables us to experience at least some of the positive reversals that God has promised. The Spirit at work in us is the same Spirit by whom Jesus cast out demons, restored sight to the blind, and raised the dead. By the Spirit we still receive glimpses of God's Great Reversal as the Spirit transforms our sinful hearts, comforts our broken hearts, heals our whole beings, and restores our broken relationships. Through the Spirit we experience the splendor of our God and live in **hope**.



Sue Reid

Several years ago, I received a phone call, not by God—or so I thought—but by a godly woman.

She asked me to pray about teaching children the Bible within a large ministry. I am ashamed to say that it took four years of receiving these requests before I realized that this was a “call from God.” When hearing of my rejection of this woman’s requests, two people very close to me asked kindly, “Are you being disobedient?” Of course, I wasn’t; I was being practical. My husband and I raised seven children together; I was done with that part of my life. Cooking for others was my passion and my **love** now! God knew this—so why was I being asked to teach children?

After the fourth time of being asked to teach children, I decided to put God to the test. “If this is really where I am supposed to serve, and if I truly am being disobedient, Lord, I will do it if asked again,” I said. I was pretty sure I was in the clear for another year. Not so! That very next week I received an early morning phone call from the same godly woman who so patiently had asked me over the years. I told her what had gone on and then said “yes.” My stubbornness had caused me to miss critical training and put me right in the classroom where I had never been within the next few weeks.

I internally kicked, screamed, cried, and truly struggled for several months. You see, I still wasn’t surrendering to God and His call. I wasn’t allowing Him to equip me for this call but relied on my own strength and ability. This is what made it so hard. I had no strength or ability in the area of teaching. My wise daughter told me, “Mom, you need to get out of the

way and let God do it His way!” This is not what I wanted to hear. But soon, after receiving a sweet confirmation from a four-year-old of “Miss Sue, you are my favorite teacher,” **joy** came into my life. I can honestly say that was the moment God confirmed to me that teaching children WAS my call from Him. A few years later, my husband received the same request, and Rob was obedient immediately to the call.

Then in the late summer, after the split within our church, a request came at Glenkirk for Sunday School teachers. Elementary children were coming to church, but no one had stepped up to teach them. Rob and I felt the call again. This time, feeling trained and equipped, we excitedly said we could step in. We were given the second and third graders, who challenged us weekly. But as they grew, we grew and we bonded with them over the next three years. God’s **joy** filled our hearts, and we made new friends with young church families and their beautiful children.

Our own children are long grown up and have moved too far away for frequent contact with them and our grandchildren. But God knew this was going to happen, and He has filled the gap left in our hearts by bringing children, their families, and great fun and fellowship to our lives! Jesus gave the Great Commission, which most of us know: “Therefore, go out and make disciples of all nations,” but He ends this call with “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Rob and I have learned that where God calls, He faithfully equips; and through this call He alone brings abundant **joy**!

SCRIPTURE READING **Matthew 28:19-20**

Bryant Wilhelmsen

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. — Revelation 8:3-4

We have the **joy** of greeting you from the land where God has planted us since 1980. The Father has chosen us to partner with Him in planting new life and **joy** into the hearts of so many refugees coming into Central Europe. Reaching out to refugees is most likely one of the highest priorities one can have in our region today. We sense we are living in that same awe that Noah did when the animals came to the door of his ark. What **joy** he must have had seeing God's hand in responding to all his handy work. Here they come walking through the door of his mighty ark that God asked him to prepare. Revelation 8:3-4 tells us what has motivated the heart of God.

The incense in this Scripture is evidently the unction of the Holy Spirit ... which makes prayer fragrant and acceptable to God. In the Jewish tabernacle, Aaron—in his priestly service—burned incense upon the altar every morning and every evening. This burning of incense is typical of the prayers of the saints. Prayers arising in the Spirit from Christian hearts is a fragrance to God. The fragrance from some sweet-smelling flower is very agreeable and solacing to us.

Divine Truth assures us that the prayer of the upright delights the heavenly Father. We have seen answers to the holy prayers sent to the Father by the saints, including saints from

Glenkirk, as well as our parents' prayers back in Iran and Afghanistan in the early 1970's. In those days Afghanistan missionaries were not able to count Afghan believers on two hands. But in those early days, Afghanistan and Iran prayers were being sent up to the angels of heaven and addressed to the Father.

I have a poignant picture of my father and mother, Kaare and Jean Wilhelmsen, showing compassion to a Pashtun Afghan as they traveled throughout Iran and Afghanistan. At that time they were asking God to send an awakening to the Afghans & Persians. And so it is now here in Bavaria and in other parts of Europe: the Afghans and Iranians are coming in large numbers to Jesus like never before. The prayers of the saints, mixed with the ashes and incense, have penetrated the nostrils of God.

The Good Shepherd is picking up His lambs within both Iran and Afghanistan. Many of them are now coming off the "Refugee Highway" where God is fully at work today. They come to us fully ready to give up Islam and ask if they can learn about Jesus. People are teaching each other and are excited about the **joy** they are discovering in the One who gave His life upon the cross for them.

These are exciting times when the answers to prayers prayed many years ago become living evidence that the Spirit of God is working. It is evident that the Holy Spirit Himself is witnessing to refugees on their way along the "Refugee Highway" today. So keep praying.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 49-50**

Zack Dover

Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes Jesus is the Son of God. — 1 John 5:5

As a kid who has grown up at this church, I have created friendships that will last a lifetime. I can think of four of these great friends whom I met here at Glenkirk. The first three will undoubtedly be groomsmen in my wedding. I met them as a baby but my first memories of them are in Cubbies. The fourth and final person I met when I was a fifteen-year-old kid; he has become my mentor and will one day officiate my wedding.

As that fifteen-year-old kid, I remember going through the church split, just as we all do. I remember that for the first time I experienced a lack of faith. I saw the church struggle to keep itself afloat, and that year VBS had less than half the attendance that I had grown accustomed to experiencing. It was shocking and confusing and sad. I didn't go to church for about a year or so. But in all of that, I believe it was God's intended plan all the way through.

Looking at the emptying pews, the quiet patio, the interim pastor, and the loss of friends whom I once thought of as family, I couldn't fathom going to church. I had become angry. For about a year I did not have a dialogue with Jesus at all. But Dusty (Director of Student Ministries), being the extraordinary leader and pastor that he is, kept on bugging me and bugging me, texting me and texting me. He wouldn't stop! So, when I finally went to re-engage at Glenkirk Church,

I went with the same three kids that I met in Cubbies, and it felt like we were on our way to a new church, which in many ways we were.

As soon as I stepped inside the room, it felt like home again. And there Dusty was with his golden retriever-like smile and his (sometimes) over the top, unmatched energy that you could only get from a former college athlete.

During that night I thought of everything that had actually happened after the split. How perfect were the events following? How convenient was it that Dusty was hired a mere weeks before the "fall-out"? How awesome our interim pastor was, and how great of a full-time pastor that Pastor Tim is.

Thinking to present day, three or so years later our church is healthier than ever. It was all in God's plan, no matter how confusing of a time it may have been. But from those confusing and frustrating times, this fifteen-year-old kid learned what faith truly meant.

SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 51-53

love

The image features a vibrant golden background with a bokeh effect of soft, out-of-focus light circles. A word cloud of the word "love" is scattered across the upper and middle portions of the frame. The words are rendered in a white, brush-stroke style font, appearing in various sizes and orientations, some upright and some upside down. On the right side of the image, the word "love" is written in a significantly larger, bold, white brush-stroke font, serving as the focal point.

Paty Moeller

**Be alert, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong.
Do everything in love.** — 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

About a year ago we received news that changed our lives. Although it was exciting news, it was still unplanned. You see, I had our boys' lives pretty much all planned out in my head. They would go to school, graduate from college, find a job, meet a girl, get married—you know the plan. I'm sure many of you have the same plan for your kids or something close to it. Well, little did I know that the plan was not going to go as "I planned," and it was pulled out from under me.

My husband and I found out we were going to be grandparents! And as wonderful as this news is, it wasn't in my plan. It was way out of order. The news was very hard to hear, so there were many emotions, many tears and sadness. I didn't know how to respond; my head was spinning. Well, I knew how I wanted to respond, but thankfully I didn't go with the initial feeling. All I was doing in that very moment in my head was asking God, "What do I say? Please, help me!" Literally, I was speechless and just trying to breathe through it. What came out was: "I **love** you, son, we will get through this together."

Honestly, I was a little shocked at my response. But I know now that God was with me in that very moment loving me and, most important, He was loving my son. All I could think about then was how scared he might be and the emotions he might be feeling. At that moment, how can I do anything else but **love** him unconditionally and without judgement. I wonder if that's how God feels when we divert from His plan. I can imagine Him saying the same to me: "I **love** you; we will get through this together."

Since then I've come to rely on the verse from a Girls' Weekend Retreat, 1 Corinthians 16:14: "Do everything in **love**." This verse has truly realigned my way of thinking, my way of approaching things and dealing with situations that have come my way. I've learned to stop and ask if I'm responding in **love**, or just responding out of anger, or trying to get my point across no matter the hurt it could cause or the damage it could do. Lots of praying, biting my tongue, and talking to God have been happening this year. Literally, my mantra every day is: "Do everything in **love**." I can't control what people say or how they act, but I can control how I respond. I have to remember the bigger picture. My response needs to point to Christ.

God is teaching me so much right now, and all I can do is lean in and rely on Him. I am so thankful and blessed. His grace and **love** humble me. He blessed us with the most beautiful little granddaughter and we fell in **love** with her from the day she was born. She's a bundle of **love**.

I am amazed at God's **love**. It's pure, unconditional and without judgement. He sent His son to die for me, for you, for us. He's not judging us or counting how many times we sin during the day. He **loves** us just where we are and **loves** us in spite of our sins. I want my actions to be able to point to Jesus. It's hard and most of the time it doesn't go so well. But I know if I can focus on **LOVE**—that one word—that maybe my actions might reflect **love**; and maybe, just maybe, it can be a light to someone.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 54-55**

Tyler Cunningham

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.

¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. ¹² Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

— 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

The gift of God's incredible **love** in my life can't be narrowed down to just a single example. This year God has put His limitless **love** on display for me in just about every aspect of my life. I've felt His **love** every time that I spoke to my family. I've felt His **love** take me over six thousand miles to Brazil and saturate my time in the presence of total strangers with His peace and glory. I've seen God's **love** bring healing to fifty broken people sitting together in Birmingham, Alabama.

I guess my point is that God's **love** is everywhere. It is woven into every chain of molecules and every single person on God's earth. The gift that God has given me this holiday season is the newfound awareness that His **love** is in all things. His

love makes us new; it brings us together in our most divided moments; it heals us in ways that are far beyond what we could have asked for or imagined.

Being able to witness the sheer amount of growth that took place in myself and those around me through God has shown me the awesome power of His **love**. Because of Him, I am free from the shackles of sin. A wise man told me that we always chain ourselves to something and that the wisest thing that we can do is chain ourselves to the freedom that is in God. Learning just how to do that has taken a weight off of me that I was completely oblivious to once.

Overall, God's **love** has freed me. It has freed me from anger and wrath and delivered me from evil. It sets a table in the presence of evil and lights my way through the valley of evil. God's **love** shows me every single day how to better **love** others in new ways.

I am excited for all of the ways that I can continue to experience the **love** of Jesus Christ moving into this next year. I am excited to continue to chain myself to Him and learn how to **love** Him the way that He has **loved** me. You most likely have seen parts of the "**love** chapter" (1 Corinthians 13) written on a wood block or in a frame in fancy script in many homes. I used to view it cynically, getting annoyed at the frequency that I saw it. I now realize that it is prevalent because it is one of the greatest truths that God has given us.

SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 56-57

Christina Hack

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.

— 1 John 4:18

Love is one of the most painfully exquisite things in our world. I don't know another emotion, choice, or conviction that has the power to heal and hurt the way **love** can. So often when we think of **love**, we think of the feel-goods, heart eyes emojis, romance, and all the things that give us butterflies. **Love** has inspired humanity's greatest art, literature, movies, and music. We also talk about **love** being a choice and a commitment, that it's sticking together in the midst of pain and disagreement. **Love** is something you do. It's doing the right thing instead of the easy thing. All of this is true and important, but I think it leaves out an important piece.

God is **love**. That is such a powerful truth. When we let that sink deep into our bones, there is such freedom and **joy** to be found. As time goes by, it can be easy to forget our first **love** of God and the wonder that comes with life with Jesus.

This year God has been teaching me that **love** really is what should power everything we do. As we become more and more like Jesus, we should become more and more driven by and centered on **love**. The greatest commandment God has given is to **love** God and **love** others (Matthew 22:37-38). The awesome thing is when you **love** God, you begin to see others through His eyes, and begin to **love** those you never thought you could.

I think the hardest thing about loving others is overcoming our fears. Fears of rejection, of being hurt, of there not being enough **love** for us all, of things we are prejudiced against in our own ways. The beautiful thing about loving God and loving with God is God's **love** will never run out, never stop short, and never turn away. There is nothing we can do to lose God's **love**. This is the important thing; this is true of everyone in the world ... yes, even that "unlovable" person.

This Christmas season rest in the knowledge that you are **loved**, deeply and holistically **loved**. All we can do is let that truth settle deep into our hearts and souls and pass on the freedom that God's perfect **love** brings.

SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 58-59



Sing, O barren woman ... do not fear! — Isaiah 54:1

These words of **hope** address a people languishing in exile. But *how* are they to sing? *How* are they to set aside their fear? Their beloved Jerusalem lies desolate (childless, without inhabitants), and they are far removed from the presence of the Lord. They have been delivered over to their enemies.

To depict Israel's utter humiliation and despair, the prophet turns to the metaphor of marriage. Israel is likened to a bereaved widow and a wife cast aside by the one who should have **loved** her (v. 4). The imagery is all the more poignant in ancient context, where a woman's identity was inextricably tied to her male relations.

But this intimate metaphor also enables a new imagination (vv. 5-6). Israel's **hope** is grounded anew in who God is: Husband, Creator, and Redeemer, who reclaims her as His own and gives her a new dignity and security. The name "**LORD of hosts**" signifies His power. He is not only willing but infinitely able to deliver her. He is sovereign over "*all the earth*," so that no place—however dark and distant—is beyond His reach. Israel is thus summoned back to God's protective embrace.

Even as the Word of God promises a new future, it fully acknowledges the past experience of alienation. In verses 7-8, God addresses Israel directly in the first person: "*I abandoned you ... I hid my face from you.*" These startling words take seriously both Israel's suffering and the deep pathos of God.

God has willingly entered into covenant with a people who all too often turn their backs on Him. We are meant to feel the pain of exile as well as God's pain over Israel's rejection of Him.

But there is **hope** beyond the exile: "*I will gather you ... I will have compassion on you*" (v. 8). The decisive and abiding reality for Israel will be God's "*everlasting love*," for God takes full responsibility for both Israel's suffering and her full restoration unto Him.

Marriage implies a covenant of mutual obligations. The evocation of the "*days of Noah*" in verses 9-10 anchors God's promises in His unilateral covenant of grace. Through the waters of the great flood, God remade creation and vowed never again to destroy the earth (Genesis 6-9). Now, God's commitment to Israel will be stronger than the mountains and the hills. Indeed, it will surpass the durability of creation itself.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 54:4-10**



Love

Peace

Hope Joy

Christmas

God so love the
World



Kaitlyn Crawford King

Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem — Isaiah 40:1, 2

The 8th century Prophet Isaiah proclaimed God’s **hope** to his own generation amid disasters, invasions, massive political shifts in power. Through Isaiah’s prophetic message, God invites us to picture the world as Christ will recreate it through the coming of Jesus Christ. This advent season we have looked at what Isaiah has to say about the advent themes of **hope, peace, joy** and **love**.

On a very rare occasion, God reveals something to me in an unexpected way. It’s never loud, it’s never big, but it is a chance for me to pause and discern what God might have for me. Most often what happens is a word pops into my head that is wholly not my own. My first indication that it might be from God is that I would have never come up with it on my own, or it is so persistent and strangely connected to what is happening around me that I know it’s a direction from God. Usually, at that point I pause and pray, “God is that you? If it is you, would you confirm it?”—and He does, one way or the other. A good rule of thumb is that the “word from God” is good; it is in alignment with God’s Word and teachings; and it is confirmed by another person when I share it with a trusted fellow believer.

This very thing happened to me towards the end of summer here at Glenkirk. I was sitting in a service and during musical worship, at the start of the service, God impressed on me the word *gentleness*. I thought that was strange, and as I prayed about it, I was unsure what it meant. My first feeling was one of confusion, and also one of desperate longing.

It’s been a tough year for me. Professionally, 2019 held lots of changes and challenges as I navigated a job change right before a round of layoffs. This professional stress has impacted my personal life as well, and I spent much of this year feeling the way that Bilbo Baggins described in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*: “I feel thin, sort of stretched, like butter scraped over too much bread.” I am tired, I am weary, and I am more likely than ever to be impatient and impulsive and just plain crabby.

Gentleness felt like something I didn’t have for myself and certainly am not offering to others. And yet, the longing of my heart is for gentleness. I want others to treat me with tender care. I know now God is offering me what I need. Isaiah 40: 1-11 is in alignment with the message I think God had for me.

God is gentle. He provides the tender care I have been craving. I **love** that the book of Isaiah includes Scripture like chapter 40 that speaks directly to God’s people in the midst of hardship. In Isaiah, the people of God are facing exile and defeat and despair. I can’t compare my year to theirs, but I can say my heart is longing for gentleness. The world is harsh and full of graceless correction. These verses are filled with tenderness, with poetic beauty, and with God’s heart for us. I am moved by the **love** and care that are flowing freely from this passage.

As we prepare our hearts for Christmas and celebrate Jesus, Immanuel—God with us—I am so deeply grateful that our God “*gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart*” (v. 11). How gentle and how strong and how loving is our God.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 40: 1-11**

Andrea Messinger

To us a child is born, to us a son is given. — Isaiah 9:6

In the movie *Talladega Nights*, there is a humorous exchange when one character prays “to the dear baby Jesus.” It is pointed out that Jesus is no longer a baby but that He grew up! Even with this powerful truth, the character insists that he likes the “baby Jesus version best!”

The words in Isaiah 9 give us a vivid picture of an omniscient, all powerful, magnificent Savior. This awesome omniscient Deliverer entered our world as a vulnerable baby, but He is indeed our risen, conquering, returning King. He is worthy of all praise, honor and adoration.

This King is Wonderful! This King is our Counselor! This truth points to a God who is extraordinarily magnificent; He is a wonder beyond our imagination. It is out of the depth and wisdom of the Second Person of the Trinity that we are able to find counsel, wisdom, direction and purpose.

He is our Mighty God! His power and strength are not limited by the struggles and finite nature of our broken world, but He is able to work all things out for our good.

This baby born in a manger is our Everlasting Father! In a world of transient relationships, He will never leave us nor forsake us. We can fully depend on His faithfulness and presence;

He alone is unchanging in this turbulent world. We can fully count on His Holy nature, obeying all His commands and standing on His promises.

And in a world of wars and rumors of wars, He is our Prince of Peace. “*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8). Because the baby in the manger came and lived among us, being tempted in every way but without sin, He is for us the perfect sacrifice. He chose to go to the cross and cover our sin and shame. It is through this sacrifice that we can be fully at **peace** with God. This **peace** that is offered through Christ is not temporary or fleeting, but it is a **peace** that holds us tightly in the midst of the storms and crashing waves.

This tremendous, miraculous Gift that brings us from darkness into the light has NO END!!! May each of us bow before the King and take hold of all the powerful promises, declaring His glory and **hope** to a hurting world.

SCRIPTURE READING *Isaiah 9:1-7*

Jenn Graffius

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

— Luke 2:8-11

Angels appeared in front of them, the glory of the Lord shone around them, a miracle was unfolding in front of them ... and the Shepherds. Were. Terrified. The angel was bringing amazing news to them—news that would change the course of history—and, yet, this was really scary for them. **Hope** was right in front of them, and they were freaking out.

Hope is not always comforting or comfortable. **Hope** asks us to open ourselves to what we do not know, to imagine what is beyond our imagining, to bear what seems unbearable. It calls us to turn toward one another when we might prefer to turn away. **Hope** draws our eyes and hearts toward a more whole future, but sometimes that is scary.

This year I have had to face my fears. I have found myself in the tension of experiencing the incredible power of God in tangible ways and the simultaneous fear that comes with knowing that I was not in control of how things would turn

out. I have thought a lot about those shepherds in the fields on that first Christmas. They were just minding their own business. They were doing their jobs when the angel of the Lord completely disrupted their routines.

On this Christmas Day, may you be filled with the **hope** of the Messiah—the One who surprises us, who leads us into the uncomfortable, who is with us in the **joys** and sorrows of life. May we hear the words of the angel, “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid to **love** others deeply, to give generously, and to be the people God has called us to be.

Merry Christmas.



Amanda Purnell

... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. — Isaiah 61:3

Just two years ago I was bent and broken, and the only place I could look was up.

As I was leaving work one day, I received a call from my older brother asking if I had heard from Dad. He had not shown up to work that day; he was not answering his phone; and he wasn't at home. That began the search to find our father. We began calling hospitals and police stations and eventually found that he had been taken to St. Francis Hospital. Upon reaching the hospital, we were filled in on what had happened. It was a nightmare; my world was spinning.

My family spent the next sixteen days at the hospital watching over Dad, but there was no movement and there were no changes. We continued praying over him, reading Scripture, sharing memories, playing music, and just flat out praying that he would wake up. I cleaned all of his facial wounds, I trimmed all of his hair, I massaged his feet, and I applied healing oils over his areas of swelling. Then we realized that there was nothing left; he wasn't going to be coming back to us. He was still alive only because of the breathing machines that kept him alive.

We had to let him go; we had to let him go home to our Lord. We knew he would have asked for that if he could have. But we, his children, had to make that decision. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't feel the guilt and pain from it. Dad lived to serve the Lord as a "Biker for Christ." He made

it his mission to spread the Word of God to everyone he saw. We knew God was calling him home, but I wasn't ready.

God had been calling to me for years. I had to find my way back to church. I needed it and my girls needed it, but I had talked myself out of it every time I felt Him calling. But not this time. I heard the Lord loud and clear, and there was no turning away from His call. God met me on the floor of the ICU at St. Francis Hospital, where we relit our light and our walk together.

Losing Dad the way I did brought me closer to God and brought me here to Glenkirk, where I've experienced so much **love**, light, and growth in the Lord. I belong! I became a member of Glenkirk, and my daughter Amorette and I got baptized on Easter Sunday of this year. It was truly one of the most joyous days of my life! God showed up when I needed Him the most and I am so grateful. I am at **peace**.

Bent and broken, I have risen from the ashes, and now I am walking closer to God than I could have ever imagined!

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 60-61**

Cliff Walkman

**Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid.
The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; He has
become my salvation.** — Isaiah 12:2

I can attest to the power of Isaiah's words since a life-changing event occurred a little over two years ago.

My wife Gina and I attended the three-day Route 91 Harvest Music Festival in Las Vegas in the fall of 2017 with two other couples, all of us staying at the Mandalay Bay Hotel. We love live music and have enjoyed many such festivals in our 33 years of marriage. It had been a relaxing weekend of great country music and poolside visits with friends. On the last night of our three-day visit, we were watching the Jason Aldean concert about 100 feet out from the stage when the shooting began.

As people all around us were felled by a madman, my wife pulled me by the hand and we ran very fast through fences and gates that miraculously opened just as we approached. When the shooting would start again, cars and dumpsters were perfectly placed to allow us to duck behind them just as bullets were ricocheting off the metal on the other side. At the time, it literally sounded and felt like a real-life version of the D-Day Landing in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*.

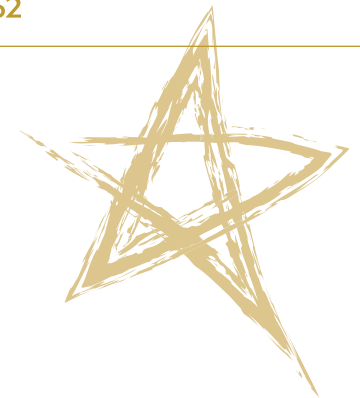
I believe very strongly that God does not pick winners and losers in those situations. Yet the question of "Why them?" (58 to be exact) and "Why not me" will remain for the rest

of my life. It is also true that in the midst of terrible tragedy, it is both amazing and comforting to see God's **love** poured out for you in both the small acts of human kindness of total strangers, as well as the large heroic gestures by regular folks confronting evil in an unexpected place and time.

Gina, I, and our friends are more than fine now. With some good counseling and therapy, as well as **love** and support of our family, friends, and community, we are standing strong. We all have faced our fears in different ways since then, including commemorating the two-year anniversary by spending a happy music-filled weekend in Nashville recently. We were told by the FBI counselors that we have a form of PTSD which won't ever fully go away, but we are getting better at keeping it in its quiet place.

For this lover of the Lord and music—truly He is my strength and my song.

SCRIPTURE READING **Isaiah 62**



Betsy Straeter

⁷ I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us—yes, the many good things he has done for Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses.

⁸ He said, “Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me”; and so he became their Savior.

⁹ In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

— Isaiah 63:7-9

Praise and Prayer

Christmas has come and gone. The New Year is just around the corner. But the beauty of Christmas is that the Gift of Christmas is not packed away. It is a Gift that is meant to keep on growing in our lives in our world. The call of Christmas is to take the Gift of Christmas into every day, every minute, every circumstance of the New Year. The Gift of Christmas is to let God carry us this New Year.

As you reflect back on this last year, where have you seen God show up? What do you have to be thankful for? How has He answered prayers? One of those “youth group talks” that was life-changing for me was when a pastor asked: “If God answered your prayers yesterday, if He showed up the last time you needed Him, will He not show up again? His work in your life yesterday is a down payment, a guarantee of

His work today and tomorrow.” I had just moved yet again (this time after only 18 months) and was yet again the new kid on the block. I yet again felt alone and like a fish out of water. But God had worked before and God was assuring me, through my youth pastor, that He would work again.

As God has shown up in 2019, we can be assured that He will show up in 2020. As God carried us through this last year, He will carry us this next year, for we are His children. In the daily devotional *My Upmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers writes on October 28: “I am not saved by believing; I realize I am saved by believing. It is not repentance that saves me; repentance is the sign that I realize what God has done in Christ Jesus. The danger is to put the emphasis on the effect instead of on the cause.” God’s showing-up this next year is not dependent on me. The Gift has been given. I am, we are Children of God. We have the assurance of His Presence and Care. Reflecting on His previous acts brings assurance for the future.

But the assurance is not just so that we celebrate. We are called to tell others of God’s mighty works. We are to point out the Presence of God to others as we share with others how He has been active in our lives. This year, who are five people in your circle who do not know Jesus? Write down their names and make a commitment to pray for each one each day of this coming year. Ask God for the opportunity to have at least one, one-on-one discussion during the coming year with one of these five about God’s gracious Gift(s).

May the Gift of this Christmas continue to shine and grow into a great beacon of light as we allow the Giver to carry us, and as we share with others His gracious acts of kindness.





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