

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

2025

ReconcilingWorks
LUTHERANS FOR FULL PARTICIPATION



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HOPE

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Reflection

Every year for my own birthday, I make a playlist. I take from Jonathan Larson's *Rent* and ask myself, "how do you measure a year?" I answer that question for myself by creating a tracklist of songs that represent the past year of my life, from birthday to birthday. I include songs that somehow capture a cultural moment, for either the world or myself—though it's mostly a collection of songs that mean something only to me. Celebrity deaths, concerts I attended, sad songs I sing in the shower...all on the list. I can return to an old birthday playlist and remember exactly why a song made the cut. The years of my life are not only measured in love but also in heartbreak and joy, in rage and in grief. If your last year has been anything like mine, it's mostly those last two.

A musician pal of mine, Nathan Evans Fox, made the list this year with his song "Bottleneck," in which he locates the place where his personal grief meets the grief that so many of us are experiencing just by being a person in the world and in this country, in this year in particular. He sings about the rage that lives in his belly and says, "Maybe rage is the kind of hope that these days need." That line is the first thing I thought of when I read the Hebrew Bible passage for this first Sunday of Advent. The prophet Isaiah declares that, in the realm of God, the nations of the world will beat their tools of war into tools of harvest. Swords into plows; spears into pruning hooks. This verse is often used as a cry for peace, an expressed hope that the world might someday be different. I love the intensity of this image. The scripture says the people will beat their swords into plowshares. Not by lobbying, not by gently asking. Thoughts and prayers and vibes won't cut it, either. No, that kind of transformation requires heat and force and hard labor. It requires directed strength, consistency, repetition.

I am not a person who gets seriously angry—at least not quickly or often. Still, for months I feel like I have held this rage right in the pit of my chest, carrying it around everywhere I go with nowhere to put it. I try to keep it from spilling into places it shouldn't, but sometimes it feels like the anger might consume me. I look at the world and I see people stolen from their homes, and I'm angry about it. I see children of all ages who are hungry and houseless. I see what the weapons of our own making are doing to us and to our children, and I'm angry. I'm no blacksmith, but I am pretty confident this rage inside me could hammer a sword a few thousand times until it gives in and becomes something else.

A basic tenet of emotionology is that emotions are information. They are signals that connect our brains and bodies to our environment. Some of our least favorite emotions—things like anger, fear, anxiety—matter because they help keep us alive. Perhaps anger is an emotion that keeps community alive, stokes it like a fire. Angry people care. Angry people get to work, and it will take serious work to turn weapons into tools of community. And please note, dear reader, it is not God who is called to do this labor, it is the people. Hope requires our participation; it does not offer itself up for consumption. Hope is active and alive and demands that we see the world as it is so we can direct our effort toward something better. It is something that holds onto us just as much as we hold onto it. Like Jacob on the riverside, it will not let us go. I love that this new season of hope, of expectation, is grounded in intense action, because we've got so much work to do while we wait. I hope my friend Nathan is right, that rage is the kind of hope that these days need. I hope he's right, because it's the kind of hope I have.

HOPE

Prayer of Blessing

In the days to come,
may your heart be gripped by Hope.

May the threshold of this season welcome you warmly.
May a holy rage awaken Hope in you for the sake of your neighbor.
May the strength of your spirit help shape a new world,
& may you have the courage to expect something of God.
Amen.

Action

Hope is a long game, and it feels like there is so much work to be done. Make your own playlist of songs that will sustain you. Fill it with songs that turn your heart outward, with music that grounds and inspires you. Be it Bach or Bob Dylan, hymns or rock anthems, reach for it when you find yourself on the edge of despair so you can return to a place of hope.



PEACE

Isaiah 11:1-10

Reflection

In the early 19th century, Quaker minister and painter Edward Hicks created a series of 62 paintings, each a different iteration of what he called The Peaceable Kingdom. This series of artwork is easily recognizable with collections of animals and their big, Tim Burton-esque eyes. In the background there are often renderings of leaders of the Lenape Nation interacting with white colonizers, which are, of course, problematic to varying degrees. The setting is almost always pastoral, with all the creatures gathered in discordant pairs. The wolf and the lamb, the lion and ox, etc. Sound familiar? Hicks directly drew his inspiration from the 11th chapter of Isaiah, when the prophet continues to tell about God's dream for the world. It's the passage appointed for the second Sunday of Advent this year, a day when so many will light a candle for peace in a world where there seems to be no interest in such.

What is most compelling to me about this series of artwork is the differing levels of tension from one painting to another: sometimes the animals are almost cuddling, others you can see a growl or a snarl still on their face. There's always a shockingly pale depiction of the Christ-child ("and a little child shall lead them...") who might be walking a tiger on a lead, or wrestling a lion, or—my favorite—booping a leopard on the nose. Even the very image of Christ does not have one simple portrayal of peace. The fact that Hicks painted dozens of versions that can't seem to agree tells me that he understood that peace is far more complex than we'd like it to be.

After some thought, perhaps my earlier statement isn't entirely fair. There seem to be plenty of people who claim to want peace. But do we know what peace really is, what true peace requires of us? Peace is not just the absence of tension, it is the creation of safety. This image of predator-and-prey snuggled together is cute and all, but peace can never be measured by the powerful, nor can it be created solely by the vulnerable. Though you could force all the animals together, peace can never be forced. The wolf being able to lie down in repose with the lamb requires serious, enduring change on the part of the wolf. All may be welcome, but if the wolf is still allowed to act and think however he wants...how welcome is the lamb? Praying for peace without expecting the powerful to change their ways is little more than a death sentence for the vulnerable.

Peace requires the lion to un-learn his power. The tiger and the bear must make a meal of something other than their fellow creature. This is the costly, internal work of peace, and it falls entirely to the strong.

True peace, then, is not the powerful inviting the weak into their kingdom. It is the difficult, grace-filled work of dismantling the powers that have always been and building a new commonwealth where the first are last and the last are first. It is the lion choosing a diet of straw, forever, so that the lamb may finally rest.

The vulnerable—the lamb, the Indigenous person, the Queer kid, the traveler, the immigrant, the Trans elder—cannot simply be told they are safe. They can only be at peace when the claws are sheathed, the weapons put away, the orders and statutes rewritten.

In order for there to be peace on earth, a whole lot of change is gonna have to come.

In order for there to be peace on earth, we must want peace more than we want power.

In order for there to be peace on earth, the Christ-child is always being born into the world, always ready to lead us.

PEACE

Prayer of Blessing

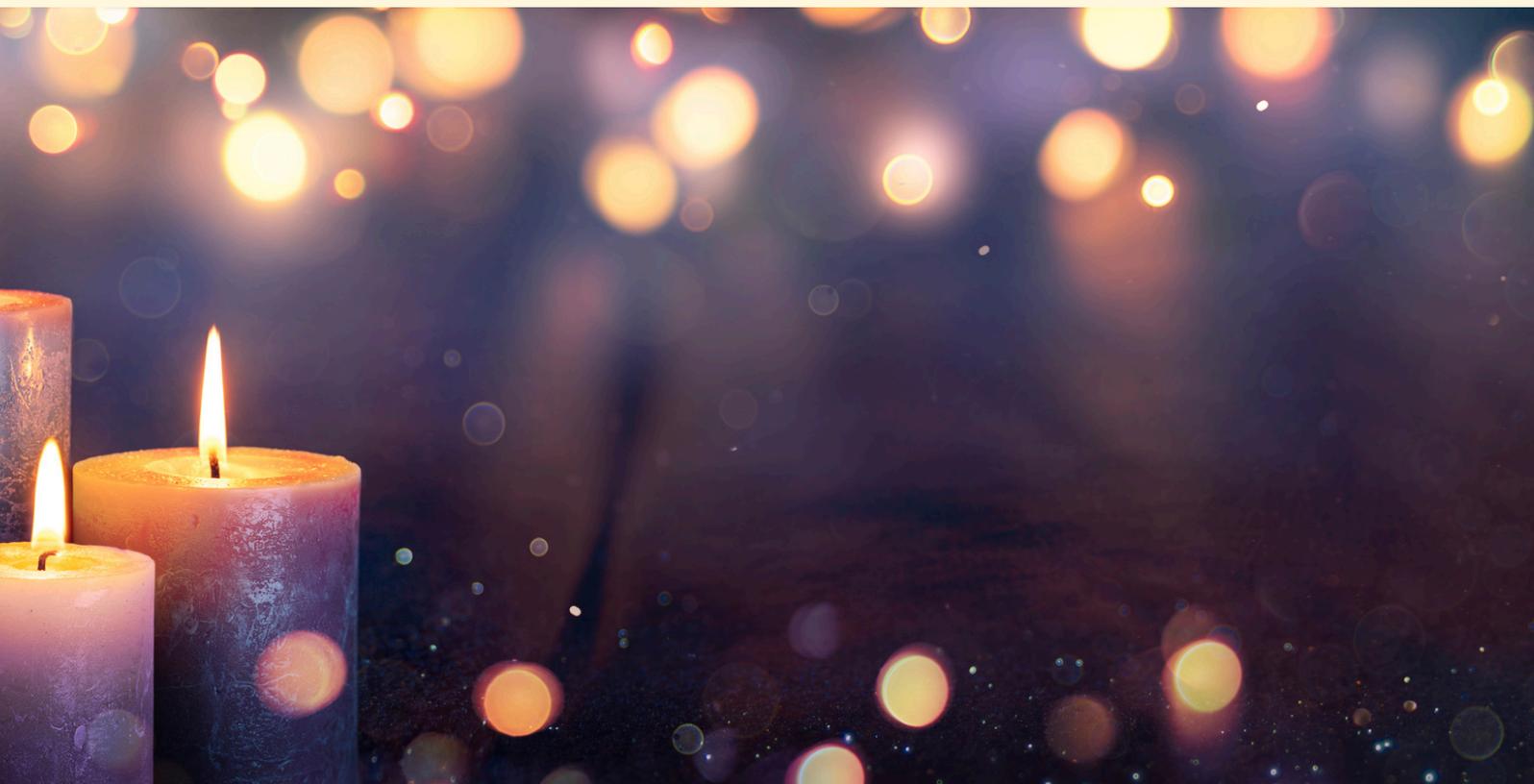
In a world of war,
may the Peace of God forever escape your understanding.

May the full weight of it come to rest gently on your tightened shoulders.
May you allow no claim of power to claim your life,
reserve no right to harm or destroy.

May your hunger for wholeness make you generous, not compromising,
& may your heart find the peaceable kin-dom it has always deserved.
Amen.

Action

1. If you cannot name the indigenous peoples that first inhabited and stewarded the land on which you live, take the time to look it up. Many of us in the US have been taught false narratives of a forced peace among people, and this is one simple way to counter that injustice. (Link to native-land.ca)
2. Make a list of five ways you experience privilege, ways you hold some level of power in the world. Do you have stable housing? Access to food? Are any of your rights being debated in the public sphere? For each point on your list, find a local organization that is directly supporting people and communities that do not share the same privilege. Pray for them. Learn from them. Donate your time and money. Participate in the work of the peaceable kingdom.



JOY

Isaiah 35:1-2, 8-10

Reflection

I want to start this reflection on Joy by admitting I have a tenuous relationship with the subject. I don't think that anyone has ever called me joyful and meant it. If you would prefer a bubbly, rosy, "Yay, Gaudete!" reflection for this third Sunday of Advent, I invite you to look elsewhere. This will not be that. It will be instead an invitation to examine your own wilderness for seeds of joy, like Mother Mary sings of what joy might be born into the world even from her lowly state. That's my hope, anyway.

In the hills of Middle Tennessee, about an hour's drive northeast of Nashville, sits the Larkspur Conservation at Taylor Hollow. Larkspur is a natural burial ground protected by a conservation easement which guarantees it will forever be sacred, undeveloped land. It is a land where bodies are honored as sacred vessels that once held the light of a loved one, and a place where those bodies are gently returned to that from which they came. It is a cathedral composed of the saints that have gone on ahead. Rarely have I walked on ground that is as holy.

In early spring of this year I went to Larkspur for a grief hike led by a local hospice organization, on a cold and wet day where everything was grey and brown and muted green. I didn't really want to be there, until we were introducing ourselves before the hike when I looked around the circle and realized no one really wanted to be there. Duh. As if I had thought I was the only person death had come close to, as if no one else had ever felt left behind by someone they loved. The first leg of the hike goes up a steep hill—what a metaphor. But when you reach the top, there is a break in the trees and the one, uphill path swirls off in different directions. You'd hardly know you were walking among graves, aside from stone markers and the occasional mound of turned dirt, some of them too small to bear.

This year has been a wilderness of grief for me after my favorite person died suddenly and without my permission, as apparently happens sometimes. As heavy of an anchor as her love has been in my life, my grief continues to be equal the weight. Some sorrows are too great to bear, yet we must bear them anyway. And when we're lucky enough, we encounter other people with whom we can share the load. While I wasn't at Larkspur to visit my person's grave, it was an inimitable gift to be with others as they visited theirs. I found myself sitting around the edge of a too-fresh grave with a stranger not much older than me who had buried her spouse there. We wept as she laid on the straw, listened as she told stories and as she wailed on behalf of their children. Moments later we were laughing at something, as if we had come up for air and joy had worked its way out somehow. We breathed deep, dusted off our hands, and walked off. Still walking in the wilderness, but now walking together.

A few years ago on the first day of my pastoral internship in Baltimore, the church sign had a short quote pieced together from one of Ross Gay's essays, in his work *The Book of Delights*, where he writes about life and loss and the sorrowful wilderness that seems to find us all.

"What if we joined our sorrows? What if that is joy?"

JOY

I put the quote on my own church sign after our hike that day. It attracted visitors, inspired our community Grief Garden, got shared around on socials. It resonated with folks, this idea that sharing our sorrows and walking together in the wilderness is where joy is born. In fact, I think the deepest joys bloom from a bed of grief.

The day we opened our Grief Garden, I had discovered some palms I forgot to burn for Ash Wednesday. We gathered around the garden beds and compost pile, tears on neighbors' faces as strangers shared their stories, and while the leaves burned people wrote their grief on a slip of paper. I invited folks to bury them in the garden along with seeds or burn them, however people needed to join their sorrows. One guy even ate his paper, and I think about that almost every day. We dumped the ash into the soil and delighted in the five year-old who mixed it all in with his bare feet. It was Church at its' very best.

Months later I went back to Larkspur for a quiet All Saints' Day and visited the same grave. When I finally found it, it was all covered in purple wildflowers.

Like the crocus popping up from the dry ground, joy blooms in the desert.

Prayer of Blessing

In the wilderness,
may Joy find you.

May you always make space to attend to even the smallest of delights.
May the fractures your heart has collected be mended by the steady graces of God and neighbor.
May we continue in joining our sorrows, yours to mine and theirs to ours,
& may God open the seed of your heart to let Joy grow as we go.
Amen.

Action

- 1.A) Listen to Ross Gay's essay, "Joy is Such a Human Madness."
<https://onbeing.org/blog/joy-is-such-a-human-madness/>
- 2.B) Every day this week set aside one hour to tend to joy, yours or someone else's. If you don't have time to set aside one hour: go ahead and make it two.



LOVE

Matthew 1:18-25

Reflection

In 1992, at Advent Lutheran Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, I made my theatrical debut as the live-action Baby Jesus. I gave a flawless performance while sleeping in the arms of the kid who was cast as Joseph, who also happened to be my big brother Patrick. I always give him second billing. Which, coincidentally, is pretty much how I've always thought about Joseph. In every telling of the Christmas story, he usually even gets fourth or fifth billing. Jesus is obviously the headliner. Mary sings, the magi gift, the shepherds quake, and Joseph...is also there, I guess? Somehow, poor guy, Joseph is always background.

Until a few years ago, when I saw *The Unusual Tale of Mary and Joseph's Baby* for what would be the first of many times. It's a quirky folk musical by a band called Waterdeep. It tells, well, an unusual tale about a poor couple who get some surprising news. My favorite production of it was set in a tent city behind a bus station, and the couple mostly lived out of a shopping cart. The story is all about Mary and Joseph's relationship and life together. The songs tell of their innermost feelings and whispered prayers. They sing of their fear and desperation, of their faith and doubt, both in God and in one another.

This production helped me find Joseph in the Christmas narrative. He became three-dimensional when I got to hear more about his part in the story. He sings of his confusion about what to do and decides to sleep on it when he dreams of a messenger of God telling him to not let Mary go, that this baby was going to do great things.

This baby no one expected.

This baby that Joseph had complicated feelings about.

This baby that Mary already felt in her body but Joseph was still trying to understand.

This baby that will be named Jesus.

Emmanuel. "God with us."

That is what convinces Joseph. The promise, "God is with us."

For Joseph—a faithful, Torah-abiding Jew—the idea of "God with us" is part of the ancient story, a faith passed down to him from his parents and grandparents and rabbis. He knows the story of how God delivered God's people through a raging sea to escape a dictator hell-bent on enslaving them for economic gain. He knows how God led God's people through the wilderness for generations, cloud of smoke by day and pillar of fire by night. He knows that God has always been "with us."

But he still needed reminding. It was this reminder, this promise, the reminder of the old, old story that told Joseph maybe everything was going to be alright. God is with us.

It is not lost on me that, yes, Joseph believes the angel because of his faith in God, but Joseph also has to have some faith in Mary. He could have walked away and Jesus still would have been born. Joseph claiming his role in the story involved him sacrificing his honor in order to protect Mary, sacrificing his expectations in order to make room for God. The God born to be with us. Us. Not just Mary, but Joseph too.

LOVE

From the very moment of his birth—even just the announcement of it—the Gospel message begins. The same message that grown-up Jesus will preach and teach about: that we must take care of each other. Like little baby Liza safe in the arms of her big brother, someone else’s arms had to hold and protect Jesus for a while. Long before this unexpected baby could walk and talk and heal sick people and sick communities, somebody had to choose, over and over again, to love and take care of God.

And so not only is God born into the world, but I think God shows up exactly how and where God wants to. A helpless, little baby with soft fontanel and no kneecaps. Born into a body that needed to be held safe. Born into community.

Born not to the confident and powerful, but to the unsure and overlooked. Born to the outsiders, the poor, the displaced and powerless. Our God—immortal, invisible—comes to those who are the least and the last, the ones crying for salvation. That’s love.

God is Love and Love is born to us and for us and in us. Not just you, not just me. Even when all seems lost, God is with us. As Meister Eckhart once said, “We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.”

Prayer of Blessing

In your deepest and wildest dreams, may you trust that Love has always been with you. May it haunt your days and hallow your life. May you have the strength of Joseph, to let yourself be cradled by love in community. May you come to see your life as a labor of Love. as you mother the very God who mothers us all.
Amen.

Action

1. Right this moment, make a list of every holiday plan, and task on your to-do list this week. Write down all your expectations and events, as many as you can think of in no particular order.
2. Next to each item or task or event, write the name of the person(s) you are loving in completing each task. If you can’t name someone who will be loved by whatever it is you need to do, maybe you don’t really need to do it. If you need permission to do less this season, I am giving it to you.
3. I’m not asking you to change your calendar or your plans, but to change your mindset. Whether it’s wrapping a gift or making a cup of tea, look at it from the perspective of love. When we do that, we might realize love really, actually is all around.



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