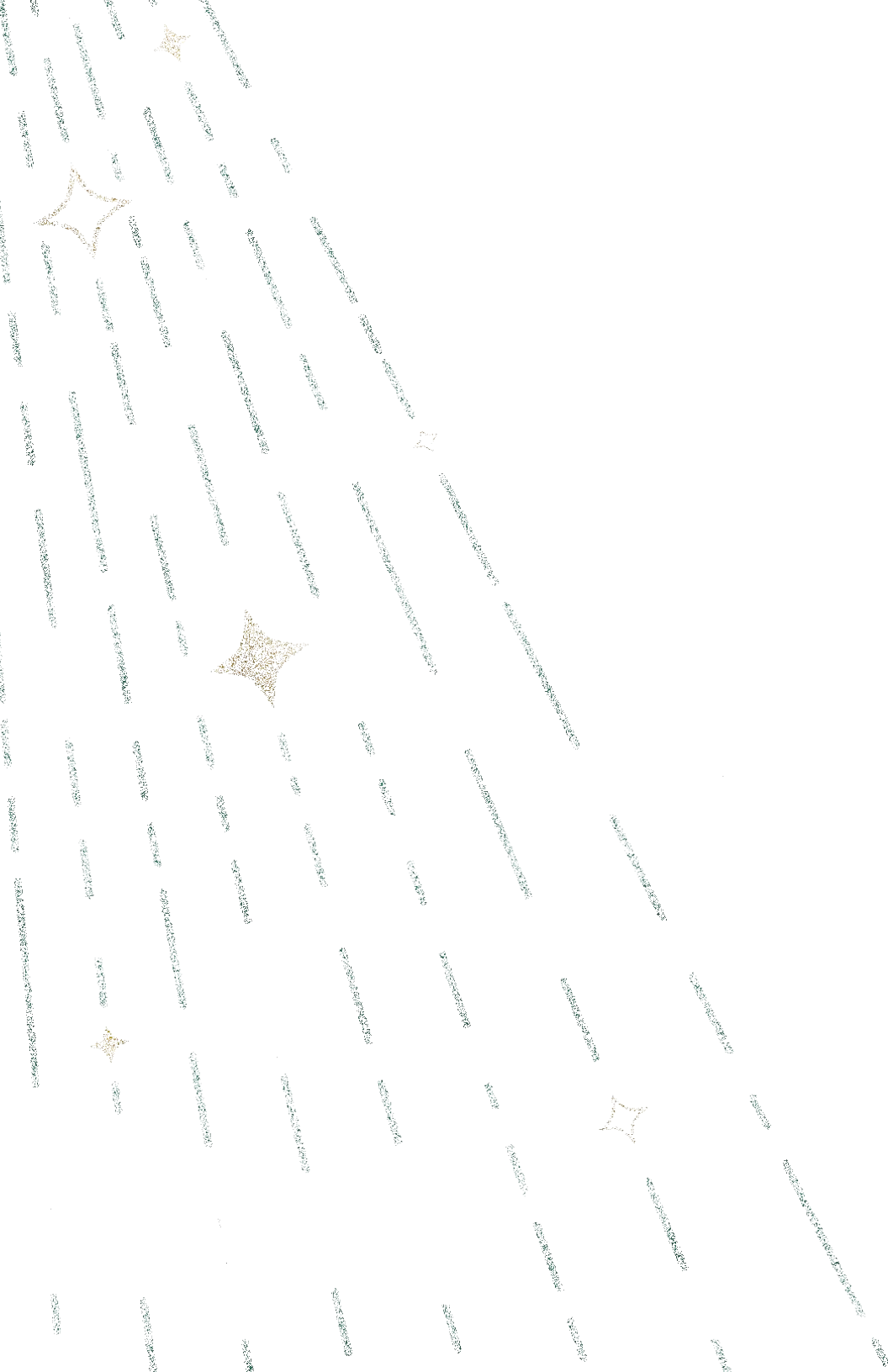


STORIES & REFLECTIONS

FOR THE SEASON OF ADVENT



NORTH
CANTON
CHAPEL



How To Use This Resource

The season is here. Amid the bustle or the quiet of the hearth, there is one thing we all share in common: our God, who is with us. Jesus, our Hope, our Peace, our Joy, our Love. And maybe we don't exactly feel that or see that this season. That is okay. We are storytellers who share God's incredible work.

So this Christmas, we asked NCC to share stories of God's incredible work in the past (and His ongoing work). Over the next four weeks, we have stories to reflect on of God's incredible work in the lives of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ at NCC. And we have scripture to read together or individually for your household.


We have ideas of things to do together to practice being ones who actively display the hope, peace, joy, and love we have in Jesus. (And some of these are great for households with little ones!)

You can use all of this. You can use some of it. Our prayer as a church is that we grow deeper in our knowledge and affection for Jesus this Christmas season and that our hearts would worship for what God has done and eagerly step in as participants to where God is moving.

May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Rest in His hope. Take heart, and worship with joy our Savior this Christmas season.

From all of us at the North Canton Chapel,

Merry Christmas.



"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

- Isaiah 9:6

HOPE

WEEK ONE | NOV 26-DEC 2

What do you **hope** for? Is your heart longing for something this Christmas? Is it a specific gift under the tree, time spent with family near and far, a relationship that you have been praying to mend, or maybe a physical healing that you are asking of God.

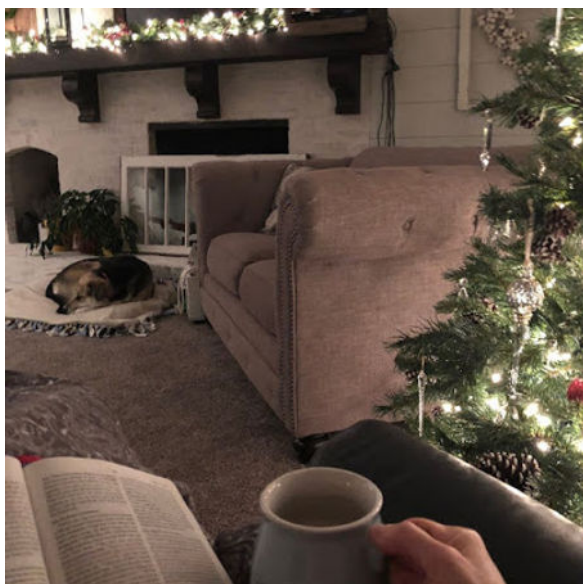
Hope is a confidence that goes beyond a circumstance. The child who believes Christmas brings good things has likely experienced the goodness of Christmas morning. When we as believers experience the goodness of God, we also have the confidence to persevere through hard times with the assured hope that God is bigger than our circumstances.

Hope involves so much anticipation. Outside of Christmas, we have hope in our daily lives that provides strength and motivation. During Christmas, hope draws us to anticipating the celebration of Jesus, knowing this day is coming soon. This should also cause us to pause to anticipate the second coming of Christ, knowing that this earth is not our final home. As amazing as Christmas celebrations can be, they are minuscule compared to the celebration we will have when Jesus returns. This is great news!

For some, this Christmas season may be less about the lights, the presents, and all of the celebrations. The hope that is for all of us – a reminder that we have so much more to come and the fulfillment of God's promises. Just as He fulfilled the promise many years ago by sending His Son, Jesus.

At the Edges

By Kristi Stephens



Do you ever feel like Christmas has a tinge of sadness at the edges? Like you're supposed to be merry, but this out-of-place melancholy lurks just behind... a melancholy you might try to ignore or hide or camouflage with twinkly lights because it isn't supposed to be there?

There have been years when our family has felt

the weight of brokenness in a unique way at Christmastime. Times when the absence of grandparents, a parent, a sibling were conspicuous and heavy as we planned and shopped and baked. Once, when we were a foster family, my mom had ordered a custom stocking for a little one we had hoped to adopt, but he was unexpectedly no longer in our care when Christmas came around. We grieved for him and worried over his safety as we tried to decide what to do with that monogrammed memento of a broken piece of our hearts. You probably have your own stories. The beauty of Christmas is often also laced with sorrow, and sometimes, we don't know how to celebrate when it doesn't seem like *the most wonderful time of the year*.

I often like to read through one of the gospels as I prepare my heart for Christmas. As I draw near the end of the book at the same time that the holiday celebration really ramps up, it's poignant to be reading of Jesus' crucifixion by the light of my Christmas tree. We like the story of His birth better- it seems joyful and safe and appropriate for children. But there was a deep sadness at the edges of that scene in Bethlehem that isn't shown in my daughter's cute plastic nativity set with the happy faces. There was Mary giving birth in a dirty stable. There was hateful, power-hungry Herod. And babies being murdered. And Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt with little Jesus to save His life. That part of the story is less picturesque. *Put some tasteful white lights on there, quick!*

Friend, let me gently assure you today that Christmas isn't just for the good years. If your heart is heavy or completely breaking this season, you don't have to pretend like it's not - you don't need to try to live in a false state of holly-jolly. Grief and gratitude can go hand-in-hand. Blessing and bereavement are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes the grieving years can be the most poignant and meaningful of all- because they can remind us of our need for the Savior, the reason He came, the fullness of His love for us.

The beauty of Christmas is even more beautiful because it isn't neat and shiny. The Lamb of God came as a sacrifice for our sin and brokenness, a ransom for our own rebellion, to bring life into death.

Is there sadness at the edges? Yes. But it's a story of triumph and hope- because the Light of the World came into darkness, the Resurrection and the Life came to the dead and dying, the Bread of Life came to the hungry, the Good Shepherd came after His lost sheep, the Way the Truth and the Life came to make a way for those without hope. For us.

Worship with tears on our faces can be the most genuine worship of all.

Devotional Reading

Read together:

Luke 2:25-38

Reflection Questions

How do you see both grief and gratitude intertwined in Simeon and Anna's stories?

What is the hope they recognize in the coming of Jesus?

If you are in a season of heaviness, what might it look like to allow that grief to refocus your heart on the reason for Jesus' coming?



Christ and Christ Alone

By Micah Hasty



Christmas is one of my favorite seasons. As soon as stores begin stocking their shelves with decorations, my family and I love to wander through the aisles, taking in the merriment of it all.

Christmas marks the ending of a long year, setting aside toil and strife for the sake of joy, peace, love, and hope. While this sentiment is beautiful, it is meaningless without the absolute truth of Christ. Satan has always tried to counterfeit what God creates. He's subtle, and in a season that should be dedicated to drawing our hearts to Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection, we can quickly become focused on creation rather than Creator.

We place our hope in a family gathering or a box under the tree. We look for it in the first fallen snow and a warm cup of cocoa. Are these things sinful? No. They are gifts from God, but when we allow the value of the gift to usurp the value of the Giver, we are guilty of idolatry, and we must repent and remind ourselves of the timeless, unchanging truth that Jesus Christ is our only hope in life and death.

1 Peter 1:3-5 reminds us of this truth: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and unfading, having been kept in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."* (Legacy Standard Bible)

The truth that Christ is our only hope is wrapped up in theological doctrine called the *hypostatic union* (there's your vocabulary word for the day), which presents the fact that Jesus was fully God and fully man. Jesus being fully God and fully man meant that He could be a sinless, perfect sacrifice to atone for the sins of God's chosen people.


One of my favorite Christmas stories revolves around this truth. The lore of Santa Claus that we all know originated from an actual bishop in the catholic church, St. Nicholas. Nicholas was known for his kindness to children, specifically orphans and widows. He would often give them gifts to help them during difficult times.

St. Nicholas was present at the Council of Nicea in 325AD. One of the primary purposes of this council was to discuss if Jesus was in fact fully God and fully man. A council member, named Arius, stood up in the council and began to deny that Jesus was truly man and truly God. The account records that this denial of Christ as the true and living hope of mankind, coming from within the church, angered St. Nicholas to the point where he crossed the room, pulled Arius down by his beard, and punched him in the face. Santa Claus came to pass out gifts and discipline heretics, and he was all out of gifts... Joking aside, St. Nicholas believed so deeply that Christ, and Christ alone, is our *only* hope that he was willing to go to extreme measures to preserve that truth within the church.

Hope is what helps us to see beyond the brokenness of our circumstances and the depths of our sin into the new morning mercies that we find in Christ. Christ is your only hope in this season and in every season. Don't go searching for hope in temporary idols that may satisfy for a moment. Find your hope in Him.

What is our only hope in life and in death? Christ and Christ alone.

Devotional Reading



*“What is our only hope in life and death?
That we are not our own but belong, body
and soul, both in life and death to God and to
our Savior Jesus Christ.”*

Question 1: The New City Catechism

*We are not our own: in so far as we can, let
us forget ourselves and all that is ours.
Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live
for Him and die for Him. We are God’s: let
His wisdom and will therefore rule all our
actions. We are God’s: let all the parts of our
life accordingly strive toward Him as our
only lawful goal.*

– John Calvin

Read together:

Romans 14:7-8

The Grandeur is Overrated

By Beth Wagner



It was a night we had been waiting for; Thanksgiving was over, and it was time to get in the Christmas spirit! Our family was clad in matching Christmas pajamas, bundled in blankets, golden tickets in hand. Christmas carols crackled over loudspeakers as we waited amongst twinkling lights, eyes sparkling with anticipation. A train rolled into the station and came to a halt with a hiss and a screech of the breaks, the Polar Express.

We clambered onboard in all our parent-toddler glory, expectation hanging in the air. But what happens when your expectations and reality don't match up? Have you ever had an experience that just left more to be desired? That was my first Polar Express experience. I *love* the Polar Express: the story, the hot chocolate, the music, the bell, *Santa Claus*! But when the grandeur of your imagination is confronted with a pre-packaged cookie, mediocre hot chocolate, and a less-than-enthusiastic elf as your master of ceremonies, it is hard not to be disappointed. When all was concluded, and the locomotive groaned to a stop back at the station, I couldn't help but wonder to myself, "That's *it*? *That* is what we had been waiting for?"

Fast forward a few years to last Christmas. My then four-year-old son brought home a book he had made at preschool outlining his favorite things about the season. It was so pure and genuine. His favorite things were the seemingly simple, inconsequential things that we might brush past. Time spent with his family, in our home, doing things together: drinking hot cocoa with his siblings, baking cookies with mom, sled riding with dad. We did not have to go anywhere or spend any money to make him happy. The grandeur is overrated.

I wonder what Mary thought on the night Jesus was born. The time had come for the Savior of all mankind to make His dwelling among us; it was the night that all of history had been leading up to. To mortal eyes, it would appear there was a marked absence of any kind of extravagance pertaining to His arrival. Mary and Joseph were a great distance from home, alone, frightened, and lacking a setting free of even livestock and filth to welcome Him. On the surface, it could be easy to wonder, “*This* is it? *This*? Surely, the King of kings could muster up something a little more impressive than *this*?”

But lucky for us, God is not about perceived splendor. Our grandeur is overrated. Because the true grandeur is in Him and Him alone. All other things pale in comparison. Just as my ever-so-wise toddler was able to discern, whether he realized it or not, is the significance of relationship. It is not about the what, but the who. His favorite things were tied to the persons with whom he performed them. Moreover, our hope is bound to the person of Jesus Christ. His love for us reached such depths that He stepped into a dark world, lived a perfect life, died a sacrificial death on our behalf, and defeated the grave all so that we could draw near to Him. He wants to be in a relationship with us. He made a way. That is our hope. Christmas is the embodiment of things hoped for. And if that is not the pinnacle of all grandeur, then I don’t know what else ever could be.

Family Activity

Christmas Light Gazing

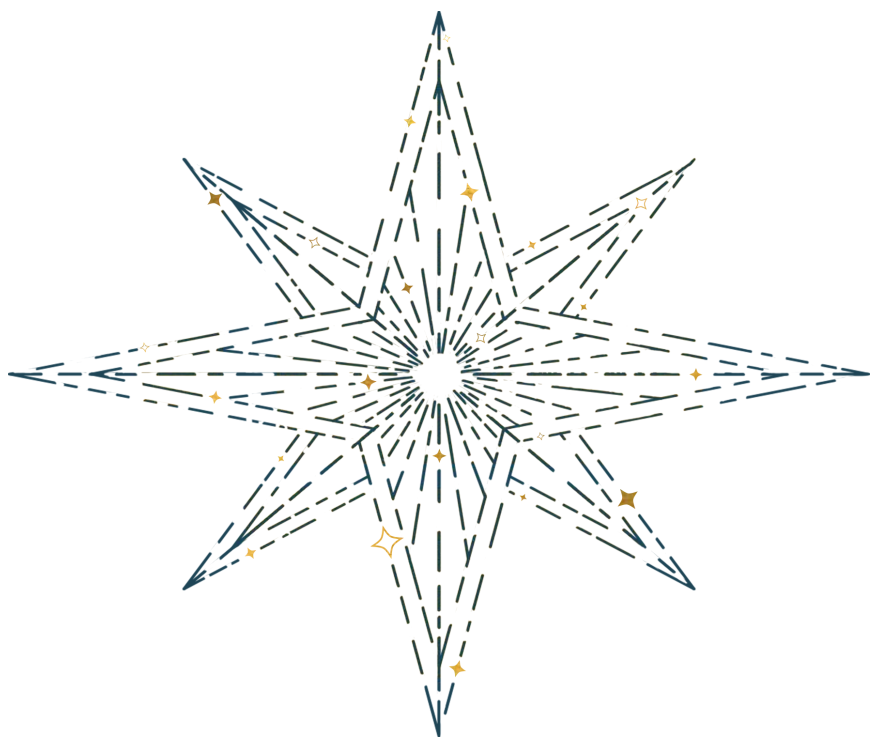
Start by mapping out a handful of local Christmas light displays- it's as easy as googling the best light displays in the area and ordering them geographically to create a sort of gazing route (I would be happy to share our route if anyone is interested).

Next, put on your PJs or something comfy, grab a snack (we typically go for hot cocoa and a Christmas cookie *or two*), pile into the car, put on your favorite Christmas music, and set off.

Some locations we drive past slowly. We park the car and sit to watch the light show, yet others invite you to get out of the car and walk around. You can make it however involved you choose!

As you drive from location to location, consider the following discussion points:

- The beauty of the lights, the way they illuminate the darkness, the joy they bring to people, etc.
- What does it mean that Jesus is the Light of the world? How does that relate to us?
- What does hope mean? What kinds of things do you hope for or in?
- What does it mean to hope in Jesus? How is that hope better than other kinds?



**"The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and
the leopard shall lie down with the young
goat, and the calf and the lion and the
fattened calf together; and a little child
shall lead them."**

- Isaiah 11:6



PEACE

WEEK TWO | DEC 3-9

Does the idea of **peace** as you prepare for Christmas seem unattainable? What does it actually mean to find peace and contentment in a world that is swirling all around us? The Christmas season finds us desiring peace and reflecting on the ways that this world will never truly be at peace.

Our surroundings seem to cry for peace. Peace from the hustle and bustle and peace from a world in conflict. And while the desire of our hearts longs for the tranquility that seems to be offered by peace around us, our world will never find peace in our circumstances. The peace we long for is found when the Holy Spirit is in us.

Does the pace of the season impact the peace you find these days? There is so much talk of rest and stress management in today's world, but the circumstances all around us will continue to pull at us. "Peace that surpasses all understanding" is not related to our circumstances. "Peace that guards our hearts and minds" is not dependent on our own abilities to control the details of Christmas.

Peace in the Storm

By Gordy Boner



Christmas. When I hear the word, it triggers all kinds of memories. As I have gotten older, I seem to be able to recall most vividly the Christmas when I received a hula hoop. Sounds random, but I got a lot of mileage out of that hoop. A far cry from today's hobbies for kids. My dad at the time wasn't a believer, but as my mom taught my sister and me and made sure we were in church, I understood that getting

gifts was strictly a tradition and the real meaning of Christmas was the birthday of Jesus and the free gift of salvation that He provided. As a result, I drove a stake into the ground and gave my life completely to Jesus in my teen years. Jesus had provided hope and peace.

Fast forward a few decades to Christmas of 1995. The hope and peace that is provided by the baby Jesus took on new meaning and perspective. In November of 95, my wife Mitzi had been diagnosed with cancer that had metastasized from an original tumor to multiple organs. The prognosis was bleak. Treatment would be a band-aid. A gnawing, deep sense of despair was knocking at my deepest being as I put on my strong face for Mitzi and my son Justin. This year, there would be no tree, no decorations, no celebrating with family. Instead, it was nightly nutritional infusions, pain, trips to chemo infusion, and X-rays that revealed a worsening situation. The struggle was so daily. Tis the season. Yeah, right. I struggled with fear, anger, and despair as the world around me seemed to be enjoying its annual "traditions." Christmas for us had become dealing with cancer.

Yet tucked away in my heart was the thought, “*Jesus came, and He does give hope as well as peace in the midst of this storm. God is sovereign. This whole scene did not surprise Him. God has a plan. Baby Jesus is the conduit through which the Lord provides hope and peace.*” Jesus had come and given me hope, even in the midst of cancer. Because of the baby Jesus, I was able to claim Romans 8:38-39, that tells me that *death...will not be able to separate me from the love of God.* That verse translates into hope and peace. Mitzi went home to Jesus in March of 1996.

I had been blessed with the opportunity to remarry, having met a wonderful Christian lady. Her name was Dottie. Christmas traditions had to be rebuilt as our families came together and began the blending process. Things seemed to be coming together well when, in November 2001, Dottie was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Christmas again had become a time of dealing with cancer. Needless to say, Christmas of that year felt very much like Christmas of 96. Her prognosis had been better than Mitzi’s, and surgery would mitigate any immediate threat but would prove to never eradicate the cancer, leading to a “cloud” of potential recurrence for 14 years. Each Christmas became a time of choosing to focus on the peace and hope that Jesus brought to the world when, at the same time, a cloud of potential for a recurrence of brain cancer loomed. Psalm 91 came to our memory daily, and we “*dwelt in the shadow of the Most High*”, focused on promises such as are found in Romans 8, and lived life the best we knew how- trusting, hoping, and sensing peace because of the price the baby Jesus paid on our behalf. Dottie went home to be with Jesus in February of 2015.

Fast forward to today. I have again been blessed with a wonderful wife whose name is Marsha. She herself is a cancer survivor and has reminded me how to focus on the todays the Lord gives us and recall the peace and hope we have because of what Jesus has done for us. We continue to establish our “traditions” as a couple (all the children are “out of the nest”) and look forward to this Christmas. Jesus has provided hope and peace.

Devotional Reading

Read together:

Isaiah 9:6-7

Reflection Questions

Reading the names of Jesus in Isaiah, talk about each listed. What truth of God's character is shown in each name?

Isaiah proclaims Jesus as the "Prince of Peace." This idea of royalty, one who rules over, means they have ultimate authority and say. In a monarchy, the people depend on the one in power to receive. What would it look like to seek Jesus for peace?

Take some space as a family, household, or individually to list things you've sought for peace, and pray that Jesus would help you see Him as Prince of Peace, surrendering each of these things to Him.



Prepare Him Room

By Kasey Cook



Each year, it's the same—the twinkling lights, hot chocolate warm-ups, cozy fireplaces, the making of cherished family memories, Christmas music, and cheesy movies, the chill in the air, the smell of holiday candles welcoming in the anticipation of a magical white Christmas. And then... WHOOSH, it's gone. I open my eyes, and it's December 26th with 364 more days to wait to do it all over again, and for some reason, I feel heavy, maybe even a little sad and deflated—like the thrill of hope came and skipped right over me. "A weary world rejoices"? Where was I for this? Did I miss the joy in the hustle and bustle of Christmas parties, gift buying, planning, decorating, baking, and get-togethers? Did I forget to *rejoice* in a Savior who gave this season its name and its purpose?

So often, this has been the scenario for me— my heart simply never "prepared Him room." I prepared my home and my tree, my lists, and my to-dos, but I never made enough room to invite Jesus to His own party. Some years, He would get some space, but never a full room—more like a closet that's crammed full of junk and last year's leftovers and then, hidden at the bottom somewhere at the back behind the shoeboxes of old ribbons and bows, is Jesus.

It's like setting a big dining table with your finest linens and china and then not inviting anyone over. It may look pretty, but no one was fed. There have been far too many Christmases where I seat Jesus at the "kids table"— present but off to the side so He doesn't distract from the "main" event at the big table. Thankfully, we have the Word of God to show us a better way.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

Luke 2:25-32

Read that again. Simeon was *waiting* for Jesus. He was eagerly searching for His presence. He was a man whose heart was prepared to welcome in the Savior of the world. He was focused and devout. And when Christ(mas) came, he didn't miss Him— he *held* Him in his arms! How amazing is this! Instead of feeling like I have on so many December 25th evenings after Christmas has come and gone, deflated and a little empty, Simeon says he is ready to depart in **peace**. Why? Because his eyes have seen salvation incarnate, the Light and Glory to the world. Simeon celebrated Christmas the way we were always meant to— with Christ in our hearts.

But instead of regretting so many Christmas seasons where we feel like we missed the mark and made Jesus a last-minute dinner guest, we can start afresh this season. How? We can **pray**. We can pray right now, and every morning we wake up this Advent season that Jesus is present in all we do that day. Even if it's buying gifts or baking cookies, we can recognize that it's all worthwhile and enjoyable only because we have a Savior who came to us. We can pray this individually, and we can pray this **together** as a family. There is something so powerful about praying and reading His Word **out** loud, especially where two or more are gathered (in His name). As we read the truth in scripture and pray for His active presence with us in each moment this season, we can start to bind our ever-wandering hearts to His. And as Simeon did, we can **wait** and **look** for Jesus in all our daily spaces.

There is so much pleasure to be reveled in this season once we put Jesus in the most revered place. As I sit here writing this, it's late October, and I'm sitting in a charming coffee shop sipping a hot latte while they play soothing instrumental **CHRISTMAS** music. In October. And then tonight, before bed, we played a record on the old Victrola while the kids danced around the living room with pure joy. God can show up in so many ways when we look for Him. There are Jesus joys all around us, and as we pray, read the word, and actively seek Him this Christmas, our hearts can rightly prepare Him room and, with it, the peace that surpasses all understanding.

Devotional Reading

Read together:

Luke 2:8-20

Reflection Questions

How do you think the shepherds would have felt at the sudden appearance of the angels?

The angels proclaim “fear not” in verse 10 and then proclaim “peace” in verse 14. Talk about things that may cause us to fear (often we identify by knowing that if we get angry/sad/frustrated, those are rooted in fear)

What might Jesus be speaking “fear not” to you in this Christmas season? What does peace look like here in the Christmas season focused on Jesus?



Peace. Prepositions. And Really Good Cookies.

By Brannon Marshall



Prepositions matter.

Of course, you knew I'd say something like that ;-)

Prepositions are those nasty little words you learned about in eighth-grade English class. I think I even remember having to memorize a list of them at some point. They're words that express the relationship between two things, as in "the lamp on the table" and "the bread in the oven." They convey place, as in "the presents under the tree," and sometimes even time, "we'll open presents after Grandma and Grandpa get here." Thinking back, I always kinda hated that last one.

Prepositions are teeny-tiny words, but they mean a TON.

For most of this past year, Mandie has been battling through an illness that doctors seem unable to name. At this point, all we know is that it has something to do with stomach-type stuff. But everyone's still scratching their heads. Some days are hard to get through. We hope beyond what we see. We ask God to get her out of this, to take this from her.

Christmas is a time for peace. Where we fix our attention on how God moved toward us in the person of Jesus. Born in a stable, surrounded by adoring strangers on – what we're told anyway – was a silent, starlit night. The whole image is peaceful, quiet, serene, with absolutely nothing going on. (Although that line "...the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes..." always landed a little oddly to me).

God's real vision of peace is even richer than this idyllic image – inspiring though it is. God doesn't bring peace by lifting us *from*. He brings peace by being *among*.

John's gospel announces Jesus' birth with familiar words: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt *among* us." Reaching even further back, Isaiah 43:2 says: "When you pass *through* the deep waters, I will be with you." I don't think it's possible to overstate the power of those little words: *among...with*.

He's with us in the doctor's offices. With us in the hospital.
With us when we're deflated and silent. With us when we're joyful and just plain silly.
Why doesn't God take pain *from* us?
Why won't He take the crazy *away*?
Why doesn't He get us *out* of it?

He will. One day. But first, He wants to show us that He's the kind of God who – through the ups and downs – is always *with* us. For all those who trust in Christ alone, Christmas is when we remember that God brings peace by *being with*.

So here's how The Marshalls are remembering the God who is "among" this year: We're going to roll up our sleeves, heat up the oven, and crank out a few sheets of those greasy, peanut butter jobbers with a Hershey kiss plopped right in the middle. And as that little chocolate morsel sinks into the still-warm cookie, we'll remember that our God chose to be among us.

If you're up for joining us, here's the peanut-free, flourless recipe:

Family Activity

Nut Free Peanut Butter Blossoms

Nut Free Peanut Butter Blossoms are a holiday favorite made with a flourless, allergy-friendly twist! Still chewy and soft, these classic holiday Kiss Cookies are a must-make!

Nut Free, Gluten Free, Grain Free, Soy Free, Dairy Free

Ingredients

- *1 cup Organic or No Sugar Added SunButter*
- *1/4 cup granulated sugar, plus additional for rolling*
- *1/3 cup lightly packed brown sugar (dark or light)*
- *1 large egg, at room temperature*
- *1/2 teaspoon baking soda*
- *1/2 teaspoon salt*

Instructions

- 1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.*
- 2. In a large bowl beat together the SunButter, granulated sugar and brown sugar. Add the baking soda and salt. Then beat in the egg.*
- 3. Using a 2 tablespoon (1 oz) cookie scoop, scoop the dough and roll it in white sugar. Place on a baking sheet.*
- 4. Bake for 9 minutes, then remove from the oven and immediately place a chocolate kiss in the center. Let cool completely. Enjoy!*

"And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

- Luke 2:10-11



JOY

WEEK THREE | DEC 10-16

Joy has come to our world, and His name is Jesus! Joy goes far beyond Christmas day into our everyday life. Happiness is a far inferior substitute for joy that many depend on during this and every season. Happiness is wonderful. Laughing, fun, and celebration bring so many wonderful memories and precious times together with family and friends. So, how does joy go beyond the happiness of the day?

We find the Christmas season filled with many joyful occasions. Left to those occasions only, we can find ourselves very unfulfilled. Joy goes beyond the circumstances around us. Joy can be found in the midst of all seasons regardless of the day because it is rooted in Jesus.

Abiding in Jesus and staying closely connected to Him is the only way. The joy of the Lord is our strength when we understand that He is the provider and sustainer of all things. We do not have to carry our burdens, which is freeing and provides a sense of joy.

Are the circumstances of the day stealing your joy? What do you need to lay down at the feet of Jesus this Christmas season?

Joyous Traditions

By Roger Fout



Our family Christmas tradition meant making sure we were able to celebrate the joy of our Savior being born with all of our immediate family. To do this meant travel. We would have dinner and give gifts at one grandma's house on Christmas Eve. Then, as evening approached, we made our way to the Christmas Eve service at our church.

I remember holding candles and singing carols that echoed the joy of Jesus' birth. The warmth of the church's decorations and the beauty of the church service moved me, even as a child, to realize the profound significance of this night and the message of hope and salvation it carried.

Christmas morning, we would read the story of baby Jesus's birth from the Bible. Although the morning could be crazy with four kids, I am thankful my parents made sure we were remembering the true reason for the season.

After gifts are opened, we travel to our other grandparents' home. It's a full day of eating, sharing stories, giving gifts, and making new memories, reinforcing the significance of family and the blessing they are in our lives.

Throughout it all, our family Christmas tradition underscores the central role of family and the joy that Jesus, our Savior, brings into our lives during this special season. It's a time when we come together to celebrate not only with gifts and feasts but also with the knowledge that we have been given the gift of salvation as we celebrate the miracle of Christ's birth.

Devotional Reading

Read together:

Luke 1:39-45

Reflection Questions

This passage shows that Elizabeth's baby in her womb "leaped for joy." The baby knew that Jesus' arrival was a joyous occasion. Think back on your life and story - what seasons or circumstances do you give joy to Jesus for?

What seasons or circumstances are you sitting in expectation of joy? Where do you need to ask the Holy Spirit to help strengthen you to remember the joy is in Jesus - that He will never leave nor forsake you?

How can you share the joy of what Jesus has done in you or your household this Christmas season? Who has God entrusted you to share with?



Joy in the Ordinary

By Cassidy McCann



It's easy to feel the pressure of extraordinary, especially around the holidays. The perfect cookies, the perfect holiday outfit, the perfect gift, the perfect holiday memories, the list is endless. And with social media giving us a glimpse into everyone else's holiday highlights, I frequently find myself feeling like I'm falling short. I usually have lofty dreams for what Christmas *should* look like. My

decorations *should* be worthy of Pinterest, my family activities *should* rival any Hallmark movie, and my matching family outfits *should* make any influencer jealous. Sometimes, the gap between my idea of perfection and reality can rob me of my joy because, honestly, my family's Christmas looks nothing like that. It's busy, and chaotic, and loud, and frequently last minute, and, more often than not, pretty ordinary. But it's also filled with laughter, silliness, and fun.

We frequently hear, "Jesus is the reason for the season." But in the hustle of it all, do I remember that? Do I sit in wonder, with joy in my heart, because Jesus loved me so incredibly much that He was willing to step down from His throne in Heaven, willing to come into the world humble and lowly, so that I would have access to a relationship with Him? There is so much **joy** to be found in that.

"And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'"

Luke 2:10-11

Can you imagine being a shepherd in the field when the angel appeared? Can you hear the bleating of the sheep? Smell the crispness in the air? Can you picture the stars in the vastness of the sky? How simple. How ordinary. How mundane. But God stepped in, for ordinary people, in ordinary places, with good news of great joy.

So, this year, I'm giving myself the freedom to find extraordinary joy in the simple, ordinary moments of the season.

While my dreams might be big for holidays, finding joy in simple places is one of my favorite things. I love being able to take an ordinary moment and add a little wonder to it to make it memorable. And I find, when I ask my kids their favorite memories, they usually pick the things that were simple, where we were together and engaged with each other. Some of my family's favorite traditions over the years have been so ordinary: we put on Christmas music while putting up our tree and have a dance party, we have a board game night with hot cocoa and snacks, we watch Christmas movies while putting together our gingerbread houses (I even hot glue them together because we're too impatient to wait for the frosting to set – don't worry, we don't eat them) and a very favorite, we grab ice cream and drive through the lights at Stadium Park, sometimes they even have hay rides at the Canton Garden Center.

Jesus came, humble and lowly, to offer us joy, and this Christmas, I'm going to take Him up on it.

Devotional Reading

Read together:

Romans 15:13

Reflection Questions

Does contentment and joy connect for you during the Christmas Season?

What are the trials that Jesus wants you to surrender?



Pure Joy

By Judy McClintock



"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."

James 1:2-3 NIV

Christmas is one of my favorite seasons. As a young girl, the season was filled with family traditions, special smells and tastes, and special church services. One of my favorites was our service held the Sunday evening prior to Christmas, which included many elements. The children's play that I was always a part of & Christmas cookies to end the evening were among the festivities, but the most memorable part for me was still the candlelight caroling.

The church was small, and all in attendance could circle around the outside of the sanctuary. This memory is from when I was around 10 years old

and very excited to hold my candle and sing my favorite Christmas carols. My grandma, who lived right beside our family, had come to see the play and attend the service with us.

My grandma was a very simple lady. She was a quiet spirit in many ways. She loved Jesus and wanted us to know Jesus also. She loved well, being very kind and compassionate in her everyday life. I loved and trusted her deeply.



Holding my candle with a styrofoam plate wrapped around it, I began to sing the songs, one and then the other. "Joy to the world," I belted out. It was my favorite Christmas song at the time. I think we were singing Silent Night when I caught the sight of my grandmother worshipping. I was struck by her contentment and joy that seemed to fill her in an unexplainable way. My emotions overcame me, and my eyes filled with tears. I loved my grandma so much. I knew she was not going to be with us much longer, as she was having health complications, but even beyond that, it was the contentment and her ability to have joy in the moment that struck me.

My mom saw the tears running down my cheeks and immediately assumed something had happened. When she asked me if I had burned myself with the candle, I went along with it. My 10-year-old self didn't have the words to explain the moment and what God had revealed to me.

Fast forward to the current days of my own walk with Jesus. I do not want to count things as joy that are hard. My contentment is so much easier found in things that are able to be controlled, purchased, planned, and scheduled. The contentment that I watched my grandmother display in her everyday life seems so hard to obtain. Contentment and Christmas seem quite contrary for me. Can I be joyful and not consumed?

When I read this verse and think about Christmas, I am a little embarrassed that the "trials" I often struggle with are trivial things. Though I am not facing persecution, the trials of this life are very real for me. Social and economic hardships are real. Relationships that are strained. Temptations all around me, especially at Christmas with giving into the desire for more. My heart's desire is to be content, and the trials that I face are only as valuable as the willingness I have to surrender them to Jesus.

So today, I want to choose Joy. No matter what is happening around me. I choose joy.

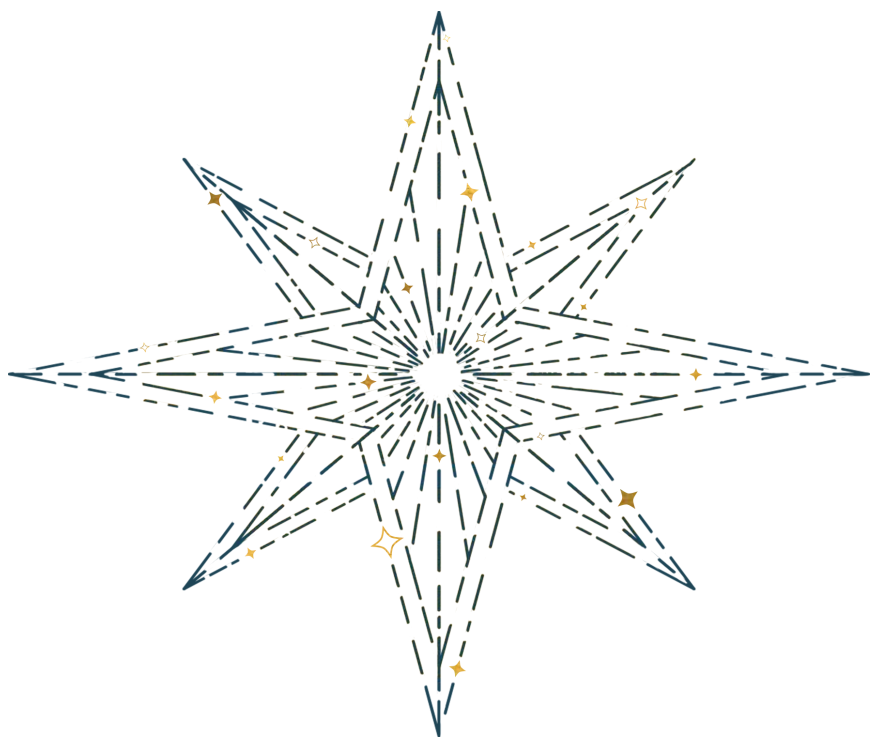
Family Activity

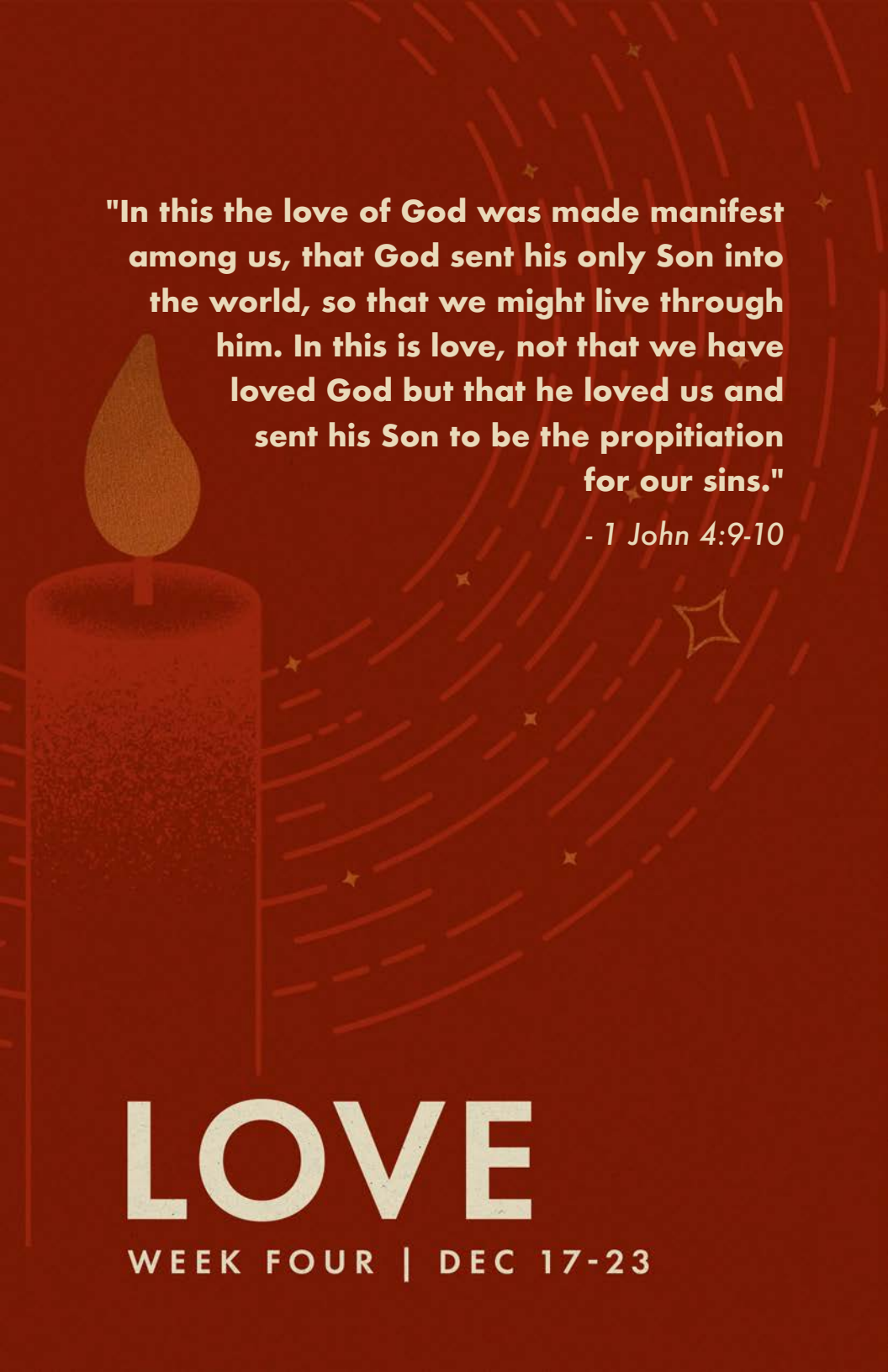
Find a way to express joy in a new way today

What would it look like to be a joy-bringer this Christmas season? Bringing joy presents the opportunity for Gospel witness of what Jesus has done to save and redeem us.

Here are some ideas:

- Gift something to a stranger today
- Share an encouragement to the first 5 people you see today
- Dance party to your favorite Christmas songs
- Reflect and make a list of the many ways God has blessed you





**"In this the love of God was made manifest
among us, that God sent his only Son into
the world, so that we might live through
him. In this is love, not that we have
loved God but that he loved us and
sent his Son to be the propitiation
for our sins."**

- 1 John 4:9-10

LOVE

WEEK FOUR | DEC 17-23

Love is a big part of Christmas. The love shared between friends and family and the love expressed to others by kind actions and gifts. Seemingly, this is the season that brings loving actions out and shows a side of humanity that is kind, endearing, and honorable. These actions, while great gestures, all point to the love that God revealed to us by sending His Son, Jesus, to be the Savior of the world.

Love is patient; love is kind. The daily actions we choose toward others demonstrate our love for them. The stranger on the street, who crosses slowly in front of your car as the light turns green. The coworker, who always empties the coffee pot without making more. The neighbor, who didn't clean up their leaves as timely as you had wished. The family who sees us at the end of a long day, and sometimes gets our "leftover love." Love is much more than a gift, it is a posture of our heart.

Christmas can present so many opportunities for displaying love that we can lose sight of the motive behind it all. Our hearts should reflect the love that Jesus shows us! Loving others who love us is fun and sometimes even easy. But what about those that are not as easy to love? What are the ways that Jesus is asking you to love others this Christmas season?

Traditions + Chocolate = Love?

By Kara Short



Growing up, traditions were a very important part of our holiday celebrations. Whether it was something as simple as celebrating at the same house every year or as complex as planning how to make giving cash more exciting to the same cousin who only asked for money that I always seemed to pick for our cousin Secret Santa exchange, I looked forward to the holidays and these traditions every year. Traditions are something I hold dear in my heart and were definitely something I wanted to continue on with my own kids someday.

Dave and I have started many traditions, but maybe one of my favorites is candy-making day with my grandma. It started when we moved into our neighborhood and wanted to be more intentional with our neighbors. I was trying to figure out a way to share love and joy with our neighbors during the holidays, and one way that my grandma did that at holidays was with candy. She had a special candy set out for each holiday we spent at her house, some homemade, some not (like the spice-flavored jelly beans at Easter

that disappointed me every time. I think I held out hope that one year they would be fruit-flavored.) The special candy at Christmas is a homemade treat we call peanut butter balls.

I always wanted to learn how to make them, so I figured what better way to bless our neighbors than to bring them chocolate? My grandma was on board and agreed to teach me and our girls how to make them. We now have the tradition of going to Grandma's house the Monday after Thanksgiving to make candy. We spend the day mixing and rolling peanut butter balls and dipping them in chocolate while listening to Christmas music and just talking. It is a wonderful (and messy) day!

As I look back on our candy-making days, I can see all of the behind-the-scenes work my grandma puts in to make sure the day goes smoothly. From shopping for ingredients, preparing some things beforehand, setting up the kitchen, making aprons for the girls to wear so they don't ruin their clothes, to the clean up afterward (believe me when I say there is A LOT to clean up!), I can see the love she puts into the day. Looking back at these days also helps me to see the love she has poured into me and the rest of my family our whole lives. From the special breakfast of graham crackers and hot chocolate when we would spend the night at her house as kids to painting ceilings in not one but two of the houses I have lived in as an adult, my grandma has loved me well. I believe she has loved and served us so well because she loves and serves Jesus well.

1 John 4:19 says, ***"We love because He first loved us."*** When we know we are loved by our Creator and Savior, we desire to share that love with others. Because my grandma loves Jesus, she has loved us well by providing a way for us to bless our neighbors by helping us make candy, and we have a way to share Jesus' love with our neighbors with a simple gift of some candy and a smile. Loving others, even in the smallest of ways, can have a big impact. We have been able to build relationships with our neighbors by knocking on their door with some chocolate, and it continues to open the door for us to share the love of Jesus with them. Because Jesus loves us, we can love others with His supernatural love, and because of that, even the small things become big things.

So this Christmas, as you do the small things (like scrubbing chocolate off your kitchen floor that you keep finding weeks later) out of love for others, remember it is a way to show the love of Jesus to those around you. He loves you, and that empowers you to love others well, including using chocolate if necessary.

Devotional Reading

Read together:

Matthew 2:1-12

Reflection Questions

The Wisemen journeyed far from the East to find Jesus and worship Him. They “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”

What does worship from a place of joy in Jesus look like in your life/your household?

The passage says the Wisemen brought gifts/offerings. We give good gifts to those we love, even if it costs us.

What would that look like if you were to offer a gift to Jesus? What sort of things that cost are you offering to the Lord?



Unthinkable Love

By Austin Hovermale



January 12th, 2022. It is a date that will always hold a special place in my heart. The couple of months before were some of the hardest times in my life. I had experienced loss, hurt, loneliness, and doubt. There were many days in which I felt like there was no light in sight, but on January 12th at 11:33 a.m., my son Luke was born, and all those emotions that I was carrying seemed to go away. Currently, Luke is my only child. For you parents out there, you know how special that time is when you welcome your firstborn child into the world. Luke's birth came at a time when God knew I would need it the most. I was able to truly appreciate how love, joy, and hope can be found in a baby being born. Out of all those emotions, there is one specifically that stood out from them all: **Love**.

I remember looking down at his face and feeling an overwhelming sense of love come over me for this small human being that I was holding in my arms. I have held many newborns. While they were all swaddled and looked cute, this one was different. This time, I was holding my son. My one and only son. All I could think about was how I would do anything for this little guy just because he was my son.

As I was rocking Luke during his first days on earth, I couldn't help but think of a verse that many of us learned from a young age. John 3:16 was possibly the first bible verse you read or memorized as a kid. Christian or not, you have probably seen or heard this verse at one point in your life. To be honest, I always knew what the verse said, but the weight of the words really got to me in those first moments of rocking Luke. Check it out below:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16 ESV

I have never been a super emotional guy, but when I was holding my son and pondering these words in John 3:16, I couldn't help but think about one thing: God's love for the creation who have turned their back against Him. God, in His love for the creation that He made in His image, gave His only Son so that the creation that has turned its back on Him would be restored and reconciled back to Himself. The cost was His Son.

Holding my son, all I could think about was how I could never do that. I could never imagine a time in which I would send my one and only son to his death on a cross. All I could ever think about was protecting my son from any hurt or pain, not sending him to it! But God does.

Reader, do you want to know how much the God of this universe loves you? He loves you so much that He did what many of us could never think of doing. He sent His one and only Son to take the penalty of sin on Himself by dying on the cross and then raising Him up on the third day. He did this so that the very creation that sought life outside a relationship with God might be restored and have access to that eternal life in and through Jesus.

Family Activity

Build Family Traditions

Something that I have wanted to start was taking my kids to grab a donut on their birth week to celebrate their birthday and have a chance to talk about some of the things I see in them and ways that I love them and to ultimately talk about the love that their heavenly Father has for them. Here is the very first one with Luke!



If you are a parent, have intentional time to talk with your kids one-on-one this Christmas season. Take time to talk about how their life is going, what are some things that they currently love doing, and share what are some things that you see in them that you love. These conversations often lead to impactful conversations down the road!

Try going out and doing an activity or a special restaurant so the conversation feels more natural.

And This Is Love

By Matt Brumfield



Have you ever seen a movie 17 times in theaters? No? Just me? As a high schooler, I loved the Lord of the Rings trilogy, and I may have seen the Two Towers more than 17 times in theaters. Yikes! Looking back now, I cringe, but we all have moments where we toss around the word **love** towards something.

We say we love our jobs. We love our puppy. (This is a friendly reminder before Christmas that animals don't stay cute forever and always cost more than you think - whether money or time). We love our new outfit. (I mean, I could go for a different color pair of Adidas shoes if I'm honest.) We love peppermint mochas (or black coffee - I see you people who are super stoic.)

Having three kids, I am learning they love the *idea* of new things more than the things themselves. I think it's the symptom of a deeper issue - all these things we toss around saying we love aren't in and of themselves bad. But so often, as followers of Jesus, we can confuse our understanding of love. We miss the beauty of the Greek that we translate love as love when there was actually a whole plethora of words based on the type of love. Because love for The Lord of the Rings (even though it seems excessive at 17 theater showings) doesn't compare to the love displayed in a manger.

We're all looking for something, drawn to something, but too often, we forget that our longings are broken and distorted. Our gaze moves toward things or circumstances instead of Jesus. Sometimes, even good things - things of Jesus - draw our affection. But the posture of our heart, if we aren't careful, can be aligned to the good results rather than the Good Savior.

I've chased a lot of things in my life. I've searched for love in a lot of things. Things of the world and things of the church. But they all fall short. We think it's too simple to say, "Just Jesus." You have to know more, do more, get more, be more.

And then in the braying of the donkey, the stink of the camels, and the whisper of the night. Love, true love, draws us back to Emmanuel: the God who is with us. Who came as a baby, born in a manger, because there was no room for Him in the inn. And the beauty of that love is that when we are in a season where we have no room, where our focus is on so many things that are other, when we don't deserve the pursuit of His love – He is there. He is present.

When our longings this Christmas overwhelm us – Jesus is there. He is with you. When you are angry at family, weeping as you spend your first Christmas alone, or exhausted from picking up the ornament your child (or dog, or nephew) knocked off the tree for the hundredth time. Remember, God is with you. He is the God who came to take on flesh, live a perfect, sinless life, and die on the cross for our sins. To display true love and to restore our wandering longings to the One we were created for: Himself.

I've witnessed it. And you can, too. No matter how you feel or what your circumstances are this Christmas, God is with you. Remember that. Do you know Him? Do you know Jesus? Don't awake Christmas morning without the assurance of His love and presence.

If you do, rest in Him. Sit in the stillness, and ask your Good Father to make the presence of the Son felt in your heart. The Holy Spirit is with you and will empower you and sustain you through whatever this season holds. For this is love: not that we loved Him, but that He loved us. And He still does.

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

1 John 4:10 ESV

Devotional Reading

Read together:

**Read Matthew 1:18-23
& John 3:16-17**

Reflection Questions

How do these verses remind us of the way in which God loved us?

We spend time with those we love. How incredible is it that God loved us enough to be “God with us” - Immanuel. As you look ahead to Christmas morning, think about those God has placed in your life. How can you be intentional with them this Christmas season?

Take time as a household/individual to thank God that He is with us, that Jesus came to save us from our sins and bring us into new life with Him.





