

An Advent Devotional

from Shepherd of the Valley

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Christmas with Shepherd

sov.church/christmas

Christmas Services

Thursday, December 24
11:00am *Family Service, Community Center*
1:00, 3:00, 5:00, 9:00pm *Sanctuary*
in person & online
11:00am & 9:00pm in person only

Christmas Concert

Sunday, December 20, 4:00pm
in person & online

With the Shepherd choir and musicians, plus Hudson High School choirs. No cost; come to soak in the beauty of the season!

Blue Christmas

Thursday, December 10, 6:30pm
in person only

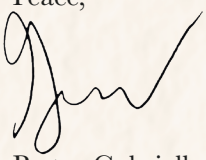
Blue Christmas is a quiet service for anyone who finds the worldly expectations of Christmas hard, for anyone who wants space or a quiet place of reflection, and for anyone for whom this might be a difficult time of year.



Merry Christmas

Advent, meaning coming or arrival, is a traditional church season beginning the four Sundays before Christmas where we anticipate the coming of Jesus. I remember making a paper chain for the month of December as a kid. Each day we'd undo one of the rings and watch the chain grow smaller as Christmas came near. That sort of anticipation is what we as the church try to capture, except instead of longing for presents under the tree or holiday traditions, as good as they may be, we direct our longing toward Christ. Traditionally, each week of Advent is focused on one biblical theme: hope, peace, love, and joy. This year, we are narrowing our focus on peace. In a world that seems incompatible with peace, how does Jesus' presence give us peace that goes beyond what we know (Philippians 4:7)? Each day you'll engage in a different spiritual practice to remind you of the Advent season we're in and the peace that is available to us all. We hope you join in.

Peace,



Pastor Gabrielle Mugglin

Daily Devotional Rhythm

Sunday: Worship & Celebrate
Monday: Prayer of Examen
Tuesday: Scripture & Devotion
Wednesday: Scripture Memorization
Thursday: Scripture & Devotion
Friday: Christmas Hymn & Devotion
Saturday: Read the Christmas Story

Sunday, November 29



Did you know that celebration is considered a spiritual discipline? As a reminder, spiritual disciplines are practices that have proven to be faith-forming for the church throughout time. As Christians, we become more like Jesus when we learn to celebrate—specifically all that God has given us. What better time is there to celebrate than Christmastime? Each Sunday you'll be invited into a simple practice of celebration. These are all best done with friends or family and are designed to help us set aside our cares as we remind ourselves that God provides us with every good gift (James 1:17). On this first Sunday of Advent, practice celebration by eating or drinking a holiday treat. It could be your favorite seasonal drink from a coffee shop or something you make yourself. As you enjoy, thank God for the good things in life and for this time of year.

Goal:

Since celebration is practiced in the context of community, think of a person you could invite to church with you during this month.

Monday, November 30

St. Ignatius created a prayer practice called the Examen out of a desire that the missionaries being sent out by his order would be able to detect the presence of God in their lives. No matter who we are, we can all struggle to sense God with us in every moment. The Examen helps us notice how God shows up during the day. The month of December flies by. We can get to the end of the Advent season forgetting that the entire season is about celebrating Christ's coming. Let this practice be one that helps you focus on how God is present with you throughout this time. The Examen helps us in our pursuit of peace as well, because our goal is to learn to have peace not just in the victories of life, but in the defeats as well.

This is how you pray the Examen:

Find a quiet moment to reflect on your day or your week. Go through the events and highs and lows of that time period. As you do, consider these questions:

When was I the most grateful today? When was I least grateful?

When did I notice the presence of God the most in my day? When did I notice the presence of God the least?

Offer these moments up to God, don't apologize or try to change your feelings. Talk to Him about them, ask Him to give you peace in every situation, and close your prayer with an acknowledgment that God is always with you.

Tuesday, December 1

Pastor Sam Dittrich

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Matthew 5:9

I can't speak for every generation, but among many millennials my age, personality and strengths assessments are just about as commonplace as hair gel was in the '90s. One of the more popular ones is the Enneagram, which correlates major personality types with a number. Number Nine is called the Peacemaker. Their core desire is for relational harmony and inner peace and one of their greatest fears is conflict. This means that a temptation for nines can be numbing behaviors, meaning that instead of making peace, they settle for avoiding conflict.

Matthew 5:9 describes the way people live when they follow Jesus and his kingship. This description is not merely about keeping the peace but about making peace. Jesus has a higher vision of peace than the absence or avoidance of conflict. Peacemaking points to an active pursuit of peace with others.

Furthermore, Jesus goes on to say this in the same chapter: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother…" (Matthew 5:23–24).

It is easy to think that following Jesus is focused solely on one's relationship with Jesus. However, God knows the duplicity of behavior that can live in us: that we often love God while disdaining His creation. So God says not to worship him while hating someone created in his image. Real worship is to make that right first.

This season, you might have opportunities to see some people who challenge you, whether that is someone who has hurt you relationally or someone with a lifestyle, viewpoint, or philosophy that deeply bothers you. Maybe Jesus' invitation to you in those moments is to reflect on the difference between peacekeeping and peacemaking. What would it look like in your specific scenario to pursue the greatest potential for love, unity, and peace in your relationships?

Wednesday, December 2

Memorizing Scripture has not been a regular practice in our community, at least for adults. In sovKids and Circuit, students are encouraged to memorize Scripture. As a reminder, Scripture is meant to be something we read again and again over time and process slowly, so that the Holy Spirit can use it to change us. One of the best ways to do this is through memorization.

This Advent season we're asking you to memorize John 14:27. Every Wednesday, you'll spend some time working on it, with the hope that this verse can become an encouragement and tool in times of need.

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



Thursday, December 3

Pastor Gabrielle Mugglin

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:2–3

For my family, Advent is filled with holiday traditions: cookie baking, a Christmas play, Christmas Eve dinner, and much more. Then I got married and discovered my husband's family also has their own traditions. *What a surprise!* Making space for both, and negotiating between the two, is not that easy. Sometimes our peace with others is disrupted not because of bad things, but good things. Desire to be together, to create memories, to focus on what matters, all within a finite schedule.

In Ephesians 4, we're given instructions of how we ought to live together as people who follow Jesus. Humble, gentle, patient. I particularly like the image of "bearing with one another in love." That word "bear" can also mean to tolerate, endure, or put up.

How human is that? It implies that loving one another won't always come easy, and will take intention and effort. Sometimes when I think of loving one another, I think of a sort of floaty, effortless, type of love — if I am loving like Jesus loves, it should feel natural and unforced. Instead, we're called to bear with each other. This is a grit your teeth, dig-your-heels-in type of love. It is a commitment to fight for love and for peace.

We have a saying here at work: believe the best. Believe that people are trying their best, have the best intentions, and want the best outcomes for everyone. Decide to look at another person in the most charitable way possible. As we go through Advent, and whatever else this month throws our way, could we keep this at the forefront? We model Christ when we're committed to finding a way through complicated situations with love as the highest priority. When situations get tough with people we love, it is a call to double down and find a way together instead of rolling our eyes and walking away.

Friday, December 4

Pastor Gabrielle Mugglin

Every Friday, we'll invite you to listen to an Advent hymn. These are songs you may or may not be familiar with, but the invitation is to pause and hear them with intentionality. I find that music has a way to move the story of Jesus from our heads into our hearts.

This week's hymn is: *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus* (I recommend the version by Hillside Recording and Eliza King). Written by Charles Wesley in the 18th century, this hymn focuses on Old Testament prophecies and the longing we have for Jesus to come.



Two lines stand out from this song:

> *From our fears and sins release us, Let us find our rest in Thee (v. 1)*
>
> *By Thine own eternal Spirit, Rule in all our hearts alone (v. 2)*

These words remind me of what Jesus wants to do in our lives: give us freedom from the things we worry about and the errors we make, removing all that does not belong so that God might be what our hearts are captured by. Pause to consider what those words might mean for you.

In what ways might your fears and sins be creating a lack of peace in your relationships?

What does Jesus invite us to instead this Advent?

Saturday, December 5

On the Saturdays in Advent, we're inviting you to read a portion of the Christmas story. This will allow us to stay rooted in Scripture as well as to remember the spirit of Advent, which is about waiting and longing for Jesus to come. When we read the Christmas story from Scripture we remind ourselves of that desire and remember the good news of great joy that is Jesus' arrival to Earth (Luke 2:10).

Today, read Luke 1:1–38. We invite you to read slowly and sit with the story for a while.



Sunday, December 6

Celebration and peace are good partners in life. Peace is about wholeness and flourishing, and celebration is a practice based in releasing us from anxiety and care. Celebration is one of the ways we live out peace; when we know God will provide for us we can step away from fear and into joy.

Today, spend some time listening to your favorite Christmas music (or something else you enjoy). One of the most common practices of celebration is singing and dancing. Unfortunately, not being able to carry a tune doesn't exempt you from this practice. Find a few minutes today to sing, whether that is in your car or in your kitchen. Remember the goal is to do this with someone else too. Take some time to remember why you love these songs and of course, thank God.

Goal:

Since celebration is practiced in the context of community, think of a person you could invite to church with you during this month.



Monday, December 7

Saint Francis de Sales writes this about trusting God: "The measure of divine providence acting on us is the degree of confidence we have in it." If we don't have to rely on God's providence, it's hard to believe in it. As overwhelmed as we might feel by the state of the world, it is a good reminder that ultimately, we trust God to guide the world. To make this real, we need to put it into practice. The next time you're stressed by something in the world beyond your control, can you pause and pray reminding yourself to not only trust God with the world, but that He is the only one capable of holding the world together? (Colossians 1:7). Take it one step further this month: would you offer to pray for and with a friend, co-worker, or neighbor who might be feeling overwhelmed too?

Pray the Examen:

Find a quiet moment to reflect on your day or your week. Go through the events and highs and lows of that time period. As you do consider these questions:

When was I the most grateful today? When was I least grateful?

When did I notice the presence of God the most in my day? When did I notice the presence of God the least?

Offer these moments up to God, don't apologize or try to change your feelings. Talk to Him about them, ask Him to give you peace in every situation, and close your prayer with an acknowledgment that God is always with you.

Tuesday, December 8

Pastor Sam Dittrich

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, 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 your minds in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4:6–7

In 2013, I took a group of students on a mission trip. We were traveling in vans, and during one gas-station stop, I caught a whiff of something…funky.

"What died in here?" I joked. Two days later, we discovered the source: a bag of raw chicken. Apparently, it had been used as fish bait and left behind.

For days, we had smelled something wrong but didn't know how to get rid of it. So we had to live with the stink.

Sometimes the world feels like that. We smell the stink of brokenness, injustice, conflict, and suffering. We care, but much of it is outside our control. And when we can't fix what's happening, it can rob us of peace.

Paul calls us to prayer as a way to live with peace regardless of the world around us. Is that your go-to move? Is prayer your first response? If I'm honest, often I turn to the internet for answers, to people for comfort, or to distractions in order to bring some relief to life's challenges. God is inviting us to another way: prayer.

This may seem over-simplified, but Paul is clear that consistent prayer provides the solution. The byproduct of prayer is peace that surpasses all understanding. That word "surpasses" means above and beyond what we currently have. Above and beyond anxiety, fear, feeling helpless or numb. God gives us peace.

When we stop chasing every solution, more information, or even empathy from another person, we can settle on this: while so much of life is not in our control, we know who is. The more we lean on God in prayer, the more we'll learn that we can trust the one who holds it all.

Wednesday, December 9

Continue to memorize John 14:27. As you do, consider this question: *Why does Jesus give us his peace? And how is it different from how the world gives?*

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



Thursday, December 10

Pastor Gabrielle Mugglin

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.
Isaiah 26:3–4

These words in Isaiah come to a people who are well-acquainted with a world that is out of their control. In their history they've often experienced being conquered by bigger, stronger nations. It's not something we have much reference for today. But out of the harsh reality that they are the small fish in a big pond, comes this promise from God. There is rescue and deliverance coming and an eternal guarantee of assured freedom in God. As the prophet Isaiah is writing, he declares that trust in God leads to perfect peace, because the Lord is the Rock, meaning He is steadfast and sure forever.

Jacque Philippe in his book, *Searching for and Maintaining Peace,* writes of a peacemaking practice he calls an "attitude of detachment and abandonment." In isolation this sounds a lot like apathy. Is that the solution to a world beyond our control; choosing not to care about anything at all? Philippe is referencing a way of being akin to the writings of Isaiah. Instead of detachment that says "nothing matters," this is abandoning our cares to Jesus. Leaving them in the place where they can actually be dealt with.

One of the keys to maintaining our peace is the practice of giving our cares to God and leaving them there! How easy is it to offer our cares to God and then continue carrying them? Philippe says that the most peaceful people are good at giving God their cares and then trusting that they are the safest in His hands, not their own.

I can't help but think of the privilege we have compared to those hearing Isaiah's words for the first time. They were sitting on the other side of history, wondering what God was going to do to bring rescue and the assurance of peace. They had to trust not knowing how it would happen. In Advent we lean into the waiting season while also celebrating that we know how peace comes to us: through Jesus.

Friday, December 11

Pastor Gabrielle Mugglin

This week's Advent hymn is *Joy to the World* (I'm partial to the Nat King Cole version, although he does skip verse three). Joy to the World originally started out as a poem written by Isaac Watts, adapted from Psalm 98. Read Psalm 98 after you listen and see the parallels between the song and the Scripture. The Psalm speaks of joy, of the Lord's righteousness, and how all of heaven and earth respond to Him.

As we consider peace in our world, beyond the things we can control, I'm reminded of these words from the song:



He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove

The glories of his righteousness, And wonders of his love.

In just a few short words, we're reminded that God is the ruler of the world. There are many others who will claim or appear to rule the world, but only God does, and He rules with truth and grace. Pause to consider these words.

In what ways do we forget that God rules the world?

How might we remind ourselves this is true in this season?

Saturday, December 12

We return to our reading of the Christmas story. As a reminder, when we left off, the angel Gabriel had just visited Mary to tell her that she will give birth to Jesus. We also return to Zechariah and Elizabeth as she gives birth to John, who will become the one who prepares the way for Jesus. Together we get to see how these people react to what God is doing.

Today, read Luke 1:39–80. We invite you to read slowly and sit with the story for a while.



Sunday, December 13



Richard Foster, author of *Celebration of Discipline*, says: "But if we fill our lives with simple good things and constantly thank God for them, we will be joyful." Many times we want joy to be big, loud, and obvious, but oftentimes lasting joy is found in the small moments of life. These moments can be the things that bring us joy even in hard times. Today make a list of all the small things in life that bring you joy. Some for me are making a cup of tea, the view from my living room window, or getting to sit down with a good book. Try to thank God every time you think of one of these things today and commit to doing at least one of them!

Goal:

Since celebration is practiced in the context of community, think of a person you could invite to church with you during this month.

Monday, December 14

Reverend Jacque Philippe, reflecting on our response when we sin, suggests that it is not one of guilt, but of resolution, to quickly regain our peace. Philippe says this is not because we don't care, but because we believe that it is God who changes us. The bad feelings we feel when we sin could be revealing a confidence in our strength rather than a dependence on God. Perhaps that is an invitation for us this week, to release the urge to be focused on ourselves, our successes and failures, our strengths and our insecurities, and instead turn more of our attention to God. Keep that in mind as you pray the Examen today. Take it one step further: would you ask the friend, co-worker, or neighbor you're praying for if they have any prayer requests?

Pray the Examen:

Find a quiet moment to reflect on your day or your week. Go through the events and highs and lows of that time period. As you do consider these questions:

When was I the most grateful today? When was I least grateful?

When did I notice the presence of God the most in my day? When did I notice the presence of God the least?

Offer these moments up to God, don't apologize or try to change your feelings. Talk to Him about them, ask Him to give you peace in every situation, and close your prayer with an acknowledgment that God is always with you.

Tuesday, December 15

Pastor Sam Dittrich

For he himself (Jesus) is our peace…He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Ephesians 2:14–18

When I was in 8th grade, my older brother and his friends called me "UNI." Due to an excessive amount of hair, my two eyebrows blended together into one beautiful and unique brow. Although I can honestly say it didn't hurt my feelings (it was funny), I still to this day give considerable attention to the hair that gathers below my forehead.

Is there something about your appearance that bothers you? Is there a certain weakness you wish wasn't in your DNA? Is there a certain "ER" you'd like to change: smarter, skinnier, taller, richer? Do you find yourself wishing you were more athletic, more personable, or more handy? No matter how old we get, we all still tend to struggle with who we are.

I could say the solution is to love yourself more, accept your flaws, make a change. It's possible these things can contribute to your well-being. However, I believe the Gospel offers a better solution. In Ephesians 2, Paul is describing people who were not of the Jewish faith and were on the outside looking in when it came to God. He says that Jesus has made a way for all of us to come to Him. The solution was not for these new believers to change themselves to fit in, because Jesus had already called them part of the family, exactly as they were.

Paul tells us that peace is not found in how we feel, improve, or modify ourselves. Peace is found in Christ because he gives everything we need. The Advent season points us to that reality, as the Father sends the Son to Earth giving us full access to God. Knowing this has helped me find peace with myself. Knowing how loved, forgiven, and free God says I am reminds me that I don't need to get it all right or please everyone else. Jesus has given me peace and welcomed me in. Not the more impressive, more effective version of myself, but me, imperfect as I am.

Wednesday, December 16



Continue to memorize John 14:27. See if you can say it in full. As you practice, consider this question: *What does Jesus' peace look and feel like? How does it calm our hearts and ease our fears?*

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

Thursday, December 17

Pastor Gabrielle Mugglin

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.
2 Corinthians 4:16

Growing up, whenever I got a cut or scrape, I would get it bandaged up nice and tight in whatever Disney themed band-aid we had at that time. Then at night, the band-aid would come off to air out the cut. Staring at the pruny, shriveled skin, it seemed that what would bring the most healing was some exposure to air. As it turns out, that pruny skin is not evidence that my scrape needed air, but signs that it was healing the right way: from the inside out.

We get a similar picture in this Corinthians verse. We see the years having an effect on our bodies, we feel the weariness from our restlessness, we notice what gets on our nerves and grates against us. The natural progression of everything, including us, is toward decay. But we're encouraged to not lose heart and resign ourselves to this fate. Even though our bodies wear away, we have a source of renewal. This renewal is not something we generate ourselves, it happens to us. If we were to read the rest of 2 Corinthians 4, we would see that it comes from Jesus and the Holy Spirit. That since God raised Jesus from the dead, we have the same assurance. God brings dead things to life.

Let that be an invitation to peace in this season—that dead doesn't mean done. This is not a promise that everything will work out the way we want it to, but it is a promise that nothing is wasted. That every part of our lives and our stories can be renewed just as we are. Finding peace does not come from living an easy life, it comes from the assurance that there is more than meets the eye. Advent points to the truth that even in our waiting, God is working.

Friday, December 18

Pastor Gabrielle Mugglin

O Come, O Come Emmanuel is our Advent hymn for this week (try listening to a choral version like The Choir of the Cathedral Church of Advent). This is the oldest hymn that we'll listen to, tracing all the way back to the 7th century where it was used as a monastic chant. Since then it has been adapted into a song, but it sounds notably different from the cheery Christmas music we're used to hearing. This song is designed to follow the longing of God's people for a Savior, in moments where they didn't see much light and much hope. Sometimes rejoicing is noisy, big, or bold. Sometimes it's a quiet resistance when there doesn't seem much reason to have joy.



Consider these lines:

> *O come, O Bright and Morning Star,*
> *and bring us comfort from afar!*
>
> *Dispel the shadows of the night and*
> *turn our darkness into light.*

This hymn reminds me that sometimes peace and hope are complicated. Sometimes the situation doesn't resolve how we'd like it to, and we must trust in God's restoration and redemption that we're promised in the future. We lean into trusting God who brings light to every darkness.

Where might God need to bring light into darkness?

How can we embrace resilient joy?

Saturday, December 19

Last week, we read about Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah's response to what God is doing in their midst. Today, we get to read about the moment the promise is fulfilled and Jesus is born.

Today, read Luke 2:1–21. We invite you to read slowly and sit with the story for a while.



Sunday, December 20



As a reminder, celebration is a discipline best done in community. That is why we placed this practice on Sundays, with the expectation that every worship service together could be a time of celebration.

While that may not always be your experience of church, every week we gather to celebrate that God has sent his Son to Earth to die for our sins and give us new life. As you attend church this week, walk in with the mindset of celebration.

Begin all of your gatherings this week with a prayer of thanks and a mindset of joy (even if it's with your weird cousins). Celebration is contagious, and more joy is always a good thing.

Goal:

Since celebration is practiced in the context of community, think of a person you could invite to church with you during this month.

Monday, December 21

As we pray the Examen, we are reminded of how much we change and God stays the same. Day to day we have different experiences of gratitude and varying levels of awareness of God's presence. These things are set up against the backdrop of our varying thoughts, emotions, energy, and stress levels.

Yet everyday God is present with us in the complexity of life. His presence doesn't change. What if the secret to finding peace is growing our awareness of God's presence? He isn't distant or uninterested, but is intimately involved in the goings on of the world. That is the promise that is fulfilled through the birth of Jesus: He will be Emmanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23). Take it one step further: would you follow up with the offer to pray for a friend, co-worker, or neighbor you are praying for?

Pray the Examen:

Find a quiet moment to reflect on your day or your week. Go through the events and highs and lows of that time period. As you do consider these questions:

When was I the most grateful today? When was I least grateful?

When did I notice the presence of God the most in my day? When did I notice the presence of God the least?

Offer these moments up to God, don't apologize or try to change your feelings. Talk to Him about them, ask Him to give you peace in every situation, and close your prayer with an acknowledgment that God is always with you.

Tuesday, December 22

Pastor Sam Dittrich

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6:10–12

I distinctly remember turning thirty. For the first time, I was measuring where I was in life and it bothered me. I was juggling three young kids, finishing my master's degree, and feeling unsettled about where I was financially and vocationally.

Have you heard the phrase, "If the devil can't make you bad, he'll make you busy"? Isn't it true that we often answer the question "How are you?" with "I'm busy!?" Distraction is a tactic the Evil One uses to keep "good people" so busy that they aren't available for the God-things we're being invited into. For example, Advent might have your schedule filled to the brim, which can leave out space to hear from God and recalibrate to His way.

Paul writes in Ephesians about living in a world where we experience resistance from the Evil One. One of those ways is by stealing our peace. If Satan can get you tied up in shame of the past or anxiety of the future, he can keep you from living in the present. So Paul's encouragement is to arm ourselves with things that will aid us to be who and where God is calling us.

Paul writes about shoes from the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15). Pastor Rick Warren shares that Roman soldiers had hobnails on the bottom of their shoes. These little nails helped them get grip with their shoes, like cleats for football players. With them, soldiers would be able to hold their ground.

The good news of Jesus grounds us in the fact that we are completely loved right where we are. This groundedness quiets voices pulling me somewhere else. The reality is, I can only be faithful to God in the present. Everything else takes us from where God wants us to be: right here, right now.

Wednesday, December 23

This is your test! See if you can recite John 14:27 by memory. If you can't, flip back a week and continue to work on it.

Repeat it a few times today, especially in the moments where you might experience stress in your day.



Thursday, December 24

Pastor Gabrielle Mugglin

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.
2 Thessalonians 3:16

Do you ever find yourself wanting to capture a moment? Walking through the woods in fresh snow, looking around your house filled with people you love, taking a bite into your favorite comfort food—those moments in life when everything just comes together.

As much as we wish our life would only consist of those sorts of moments, we know that they are brought into focus, clarity, and appreciation because they're rare. Most of the time we're doing the best we can, getting pulled from one thing to the next, or living in a perpetual state of half gratitude, half anxiety. Those moments might also be more rose-colored than we remember. Looking at a family photo recently, I recalled how the joy of that moment was quickly followed by crying toddlers, sickness on my part, and a lot of adults working out the logistics of getting home and returning to "real life."

When Paul is writing to churches, he starts most of his letters with some sort of combination of offering grace and peace. In 2 Thessalonians, he ends his letter with a blessing of peace. These churches found themselves in all different sorts of situations: in celebration, in crisis, or some mixture of the two. Still Paul sticks with his same well wishes: grace and peace to you. He believes peace is accessible in every moment.

Might that be an invitation for us? Even if our picture-perfect moments aren't entirely perfect, we don't need them to be. We can still experience peace, true peace from God that includes flourishing and life as Jesus meant it to be, within the mess of our real life. After all, that's what Jesus showed us when he came to Earth as a human. That a life of peace was possible. Not some day in heaven, but in the middle of a chaotic world. Not from an accumulation of perfect moments, but from God's presence transforming the mundane into the meaningful—let that be a reminder to you this Advent.

Friday, December 25

Merry Christmas! Today is meant to be a day of delight and joy as we celebrate that the wait is over. God is here and is with us. Today's devotional is designed to be done with others, whether with family or a friend you call. Celebrate the joy of Jesus' coming with someone you love.



Read: John 1:1–18 (the Message is a great option if you're reading with kids). Read as a group, alternating the verses.

Discuss with your group: Why is Jesus described as the light of the world? How is Jesus the light of the world for us today?

Listen: Light of the World (Sing Hallelujah) by We the Kingdom

Pray: Together say a prayer thanking God for coming down to us and being the light of the world.

Saturday, December 26

Last week we read about the birth of Jesus and the great joy that his birth caused. For most of us, we can see Jesus' birth as the end of the birth narrative. However, the first few days of a baby's life were very important as they were dedicated to the Lord. The Gospel of Luke includes this account and the first glimpses of who Jesus is and will become to the people outside of his family.

Today, read Luke 2:22–39. We invite you to read slowly and sit with the story for a while.



Thank you for spending Advent with us. Our prayer is that you noticed a greater sense of peace in this time, that your longing for Jesus brought you and others joy in this season. *Merry Christmas!*

May what you gained in this month go with you into the next.
May your awareness of the Prince of Peace continue to grow.
As you go into 2027, know Jesus has already gone before you.
Amen.



This Christmas Season

Others First | Darara, Ethiopia

In April 2026, Shepherd participated in *Chosen,* partnering with World Vision to sponsor children in Ethiopia. This Christmas, let's continue that spirit of generosity by helping create meaningful connections with these children. Sponsors, we encourage you to reach out to your child through a letter, photo, or message of encouragement. For those of you who didn't sponsor a child, we encourage you to pray for the children and their community of Darara, Ethiopia. Find community updates at *my.worldvision.org/community/?ID=221211.*

For the One

Our five-year *For the One* vision is: *Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we will walk with each one in our communities so together we experience life as Jesus meant it to be.*

A 2026–27 *For the One* goal is that each of us at Shepherd would take simple, intentional steps to invite family, neighbors, or coworkers into the way of Jesus and the life of our church. The Advent season is a perfect time to practice seeing who is right in front of us.

Pray for a neighbor, friend, or coworker. Tell them that you are a praying person, and you'd be glad to pray for them as your church is learning about God's peace this Christmas season. Ask specifically what you can pray for, and offer to pray with them. Follow up with them in a week or two about what they're noticing regarding their prayer request.

Invite someone to church. Tell them that they matter, they are welcome, and there's a spiritual home for them. Invite them by letting them know what day and time you'll be at church, and that you'll wait at the main entrance so you can sit together. Don't give up inviting if at first the response is uncertainty or hesitation.

SHEPHERD
OF THE VALLEY