

⊕ LIVING COMPASS

# Living Well Through Advent 2019

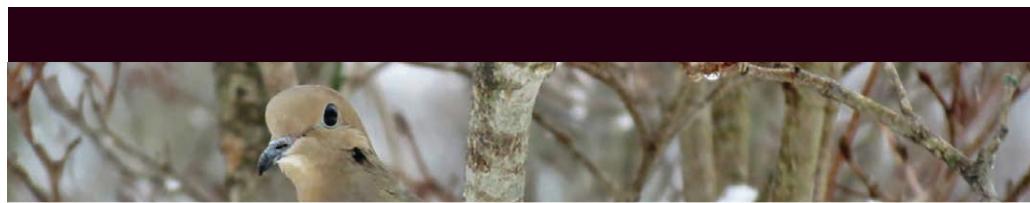


*Practicing Peace with All Your  
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

A Living Compass Seasonal Resource

## Two Advent Resource Offerings

Are there others with whom you might want to share this Advent journey through this devotional booklet? Following are two additional ways you, and others, can deepen your experience of Advent. Visit us at [LivingCompass.org/Advent](http://LivingCompass.org/Advent) to learn more or to sign up.



**Living Well Through Advent 2019**  
Practicing Peace With All Your  
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind

**Join Our Advent Facebook Group \* Sign up for Our Daily Devotional Email**

1. We would like to invite you to join our Advent Facebook discussion group. If you participate in this private group, you will be enriched by your interactions with hundreds of others who are also reading this devotional.
2. We also are offering an opportunity for you to have the reflections from this devotional emailed to you each day during Advent.

**Visit us at [LivingCompass.org/Advent](http://LivingCompass.org/Advent) to learn more or to sign up.**

# Living Well Through Advent 2019



*Practicing Peace With All Your  
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

*The Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative was created with a generous gift from Ab and Nancy Nicholas.*

*While Ab passed away in 2016, their generous support continues to inspire us and make this resource possible.*

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*Outfitting individuals, families, congregations, and communities with tools and training for the journey toward wellness and wholeness.*

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- This guide is also available as an eBook. To support group use, we offer affordable rates for congregations and other organizations. For more information or to order for your group (printed or eBook), email us: [info@livingcompass.org](mailto:info@livingcompass.org). Order individual eBooks at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).
- Find us on the web: [livingcompass.org](http://livingcompass.org)
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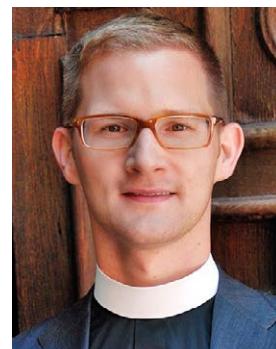
## *About the Writers*

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**The Rev. Laurie Brock** serves as the rector of St. Michael the Archangel Episcopal Church in Lexington, Kentucky. She has served churches in Louisiana and Alabama, and is also an attorney. Her most recent book is *Horses Speak of God* (Paraclete Press), and she blogs at [revlauriebrock.com](http://revlauriebrock.com). She is an avid equestrian. On her days off and most afternoons, she is at the barn riding and feeding treats to Nina, her American Saddlebred. Laurie also takes long walks exploring the beauty of nature with Evie, her rescue pup. (photo credit: Sydney Carter Photography)



**The Rev. Jadon D. Hartsuff** serves as rector of All Souls Episcopal Church, in Washington, D.C. A trained spiritual director, he is passionate about nurturing individual and communal spiritual vitality and is an active member of the CEEP conference planning committee as it works to “strengthen leaders for a changing church.” Originally from Michigan, Jadon most naturally finds peace and contentment near the water and is always looking for ways to get to an ocean, lake, or river.



**The Rt. Rev. Audrey Cady Scanlan** serves as the 11th bishop of the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania. She came to ordained ministry with experience as an executive chef, teacher, and guidance department counselor. Audrey’s seminary training took place at Yale/Berkeley and she completed a doctorate in the Theology of Disability from Hartford Seminary. She is co-founder of the Special Needs worship program *Rhythms of Grace* and author of three volumes of curricula. She and her husband, Glenn, live in a cabin in





Mechanicsburg, PA. They love to hike the AT, which runs right near their house. Audrey's blog "On the Way" can be found at [www.diocesecpa.org/blog](http://www.diocesecpa.org/blog)

**The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner**—founder of the Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative—has served his community for more than 30 years as an Episcopal priest, retreat leader, spiritual director, and author. In addition to his coaching and psychotherapy work, he leads wellness retreats for organizations and leadership teams. Scott has been married to Holly Hughes Stoner for 40 years and together they are the co-creators of *The Teen Compass* and the *Parent Wellness Compass*. In his free time, Scott loves cycling, running, and soccer, and spending time with family.



**The Rev. Mary Bea Sullivan** is an associate rector at Saint Luke's Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama. She is also a retreat leader and an author. Her most recent book is *Living the Way of Love: A Forty-Day Devotional*. She is the chair of the Commission on Spirituality in the Diocese of Alabama. Mary Bea and her husband, Malcolm, love hiking, bicycling, traveling, and evenings with family and friends. They have two adult children, Brendan and Kristin.



# Introduction

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The season of Advent, along with the thoughtful writings and reflection questions in this devotional, provides us with the opportunity to slow down so we can make counter-cultural choices, choices that will help prepare us for the true meaning of Christmas.

We are delighted that you have chosen to use this devotional as a tool to assist you on your own journey. And we are honored to include the voices and deep reflections on *practicing peace* from four featured writers.

In addition to expanding on each writer's reflections throughout the week, each Monday we introduce a weekly theme related to *Practicing Peace*. The theme for week one is *deepening our understanding of peace*; week two is *making peace with ourselves*; week three is *making ourselves instruments of God's peace*; and week four in Advent is *practicing peace as a "holy yes."*

As important as are the daily readings, the personal reflections and insights that emerge in response to the readings are what matters most. We encourage you to record them, either in the spaces provided, or in a separate journal. When possible, join or start a group where you can discuss your thoughts with others.

I would also like to invite you to join our private Advent Facebook discussion group where you will be enriched by your interactions with hundreds of others who are also reading this devotional. You also have the opportunity to have the reflections from this devotional emailed to you each day during Advent. Visit us at [LivingCompass.org/Advent](http://LivingCompass.org/Advent) to learn more or to sign up for either or both options.

It has been a joy to write the daily reflections for this devotional, inspired by our four guest writers. We at Living Compass are grateful and honored to walk with you on the journey through Advent toward Christmas.



**The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner**

Director, Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative



Advent Year A	First reading	Psalm	Second reading	Gospel
First Sunday of Advent December 1, 2019	Isaiah 2:1-5	Psalm 122	Romans 13:11-14	Matthew 24:36-44
Second Sunday of Advent December 8, 2019	Isaiah 11:1-10	Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19	Romans 15:4-13	Matthew 3:1-12
Third Sunday of Advent December 15, 2019	Isaiah 35:1-10	Psalm 146:5-10 OR Luke 1:46b-55	James 5:7-10	Matthew 11:2-11
Fourth Sunday of Advent December 22, 2019	Isaiah 7:10-16	Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19	Romans 1:1-7	Matthew 1:18-25

Living Compass—working with The Rev. Pedro Lopez and The Rev. Uriel Lopez from the Episcopal Diocese of Texas—has also published: *Vivir un buen Adviento en el 2019: Practicando la paz con todo el corazón, alma, fuerzas y mente*—a Spanish Advent guide with completely original content by featured writers El Revdo. Pedro Lopez, El Revdo. Uriel Lopez, and others. To learn more or to order, contact us: [info@livingcompass.org](mailto:info@livingcompass.org).



# *The Living Compass:* *A Brief Overview*

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*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.*

—Luke 10:27, Deuteronomy 6:5

**L**iving Compass provides tools and trainings to assist individuals, families, and congregations as they seek to live the abundant life God intends for them in all areas of life—heart, soul, strength, and mind. We use these four sections as our compass points to help guide and equip us in eight areas of wellness.

## **Areas of Wellness**

### **Heart**

- **Relationships.** The ability to create and maintain healthy, life-giving connections with others.
- **Handling Emotions.** The ability to process, express, and receive emotions in a healthy way.



**The Living Compass**

### **Soul**

- **Spirituality.** The ability to develop and practice a strong personal faith, and to discover a meaningful purpose in life.
- **Rest and Play.** The ability to balance work and play and to renew oneself.



## Strength

- **Resilience.** The ability to deal positively with the adversities of life.
- **Care for the Body.** The ability to build healthy habits and practices regarding our physical well-being, as well as the ability to end unhealthy ones.

## Mind

- **Organization.** The ability to keep track of and make good use of possessions, money, and time.
- **Vocation.** The ability to align our life's purpose with the gifts and talents given by God. This includes work, volunteer service, and any educational/enrichment activities.

Creating resources grounded in the integration of faith and wellness is what makes Living Compass different from other wellness programs. Living Compass believes we all have many compasses that compete to guide our lives, often outside of our awareness. When we choose to make faith the compass that guides decisions in all areas of our lives, we are better able to experience wellness and wholeness. It is worth noting that “health,” “healing,” “wholeness,” and “holy” all come from the same root word “hal” or “haelen.”

## Trainings

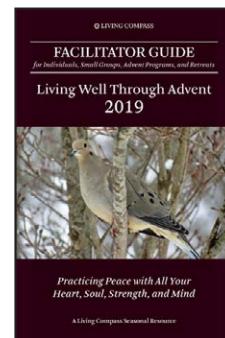
Living Compass regularly offers trainings in how to use our resources for adults, teens, parents, and families. We offer Community Wellness Advocate trainings at the Nicholas Center in Chicago, as well as around the country for larger groups. We also offer specialized trainings that focus on parent and teen wellness ministries. Contact us if you are interested in attending or hosting a training. Wellness ministries create deeper connections within a faith community, which helps that community create deeper connections with its surrounding neighbors.

## *Ways to Use Practicing Peace*

This guide is intended to be used for daily personal reflection as you journey through Advent. Each Sunday begins with a reflection written by one of our featured writers. Every Monday in Advent we introduce a theme for the week related to *Practicing Peace*. The other days of the week begin with a scripture or quote, followed by a reflection, and then space for you to record any thoughts, feelings, or insights. If you'd like to write more than space allows, we encourage you to purchase a journal to use with this guide.

*Practicing peace* can also be used by groups. Each week, people could gather—in a home, at a local coffee shop, or at church—to discuss their responses to the daily reflections. We all benefit from a community of support, and this guide can be used to form or deepen that community. If you would like to use it for a church Advent program, our Facilitator Guide (offered as a free downloadable PDF) provides guidance on how to use this devotional in a small group. Available on our website: [LivingCompass.org](http://LivingCompass.org).

A couple of other suggested uses:



- Congregations could make this guide available to its members to help keep the focus on Christ during the season of Advent.
- As the resource for a half- or full-day Advent retreat. The retreat leader could offer the daily reading as the reflection, or as a starting point for their own reflections. Following each reflection, participants could record their responses, either in the guide, or in a separate journal. Giving each person a copy of this guide would ensure that the experience of the retreat would stay with them throughout the remainder of Advent.

The seasons of Advent and Christmas are filled with the presence of peace, if only we remember to pause and open ourselves to receiving this gift. This Advent season, however you use this guide, our hope and prayer is that you feel supported in your desire to more fully practice your faith in a way that is deeply renewing.

# *The First Sunday of Advent*

December 1, 2019



## **Peace like a River**

Reflection by The Rev. Laurie Brock

*They shall beat their swords into ploughshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.*

—Isaiah 2:4

**I**'ve lived near rivers most of my life—the Mississippi, the Alabama, the Kentucky—and they continue to create remarkable places for me to explore on my days off. Waterfalls, wildlife preserves, and wetlands all hold a bounty of God's beauty.

They also hold within them power for destruction. Too much rain, too many people building in floodplains, and too confident a belief we can control nature with levees and locks, and these same beautiful rivers become unhelpful and even destructive forces.

Which is why, on a Sunday I was on vacation, as I gathered to worship in a small church overlooking a meandering river, I questioned the hymn writer's words as we sang, "I've got peace like a river in my soul."

I've seen peaceful rivers. I've sat on riverbanks and watched the sun drop slowly into the waters of life and been awed into silent prayer. I've listened to water tap softly against a limestone palisade bank. I've marveled at the rampant, almost aggressive life that lives under its surface waters.

And I've seen rivers that churn and whip across boulders to carve out grand canyons. I've touched the gooey water in swamps and watched bugs scamper across their surface while gators guarded it all.

Rivers move and twist at their rate, carving out paths for millions of years in their changes and shifts. Their waters are red, muddy, and clear, sometimes all in the same river. They trickle and rage, meander and dominate, create, destroy, and recreate.

## THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2019

Peace like a river challenges my thinking about peace. I want peace to be an easy state, free of any discomfort and anxiety. And it is, at times.

But the peace of God is not the peace of humans. Too often human peace comes at the expense of silencing or ignoring disparate voices. We want calm and quietude without the work of shifting and changing our own souls. We want plowshares and pruning hooks without the labor that comes with beating our swords and spears, these tools of war, into instruments of nurture and peace. And we want someone else to do the work.

The peace of God is transformative. It changes us from those who would use oppressive power to a people who nurture and tend. The peace of Christ moves us into new places. This holy peace requires that we change and move, not stay stagnant.

Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the trust that God can transform conflict into reconciliation. Peace is not calm because the disparate voices are silenced, but the courage to stand within the waters of righteous anger, hear the wails of suffering, and work for change. Peace is crossing from the bank of oppression to the side of justice, and having the faith to walk in the shifting sands and strong current that would make us turn back, except that God call us to cross to the side of love ... every single time.

Advent sits us in the holy darkness of peace and waiting and invites us to search our souls for how we experience peace. Do we settle for human peace that swords and spears inflict? Or are we as Christians willing to have this peace of God, this calm, meandering, raging, and daunting peace like a river, in our souls?



Monday, December 2, 2019

## Deepening Our Understanding of Peace

by Scott Stoner

*The peace of Christ moves us into new places. This holy peace requires that we change and move, not stay stagnant.*

—Laurie Brock

In yesterday's reflection, Laurie Brock deepened our understanding of peace by helping us to understand its multifaceted nature. She wrote how, at times, it is something that calms and soothes us, while at other times it challenges and changes us.

Peace is a word, like love and joy, that we use so often that we may take for granted that we know exactly what we mean by peace. Many churches practice the "exchange of peace" during worship where the "peace of the Lord" is shared amongst the people gathered there. While I have enjoyed the exchange of these greetings thousands of times, I have seldom paused to reflect on what I truly mean when I say those words to someone.

As we take time to reflect more deeply on what it means to practice peace with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, know that we are honored to walk with you on your journey of spiritual reflection through this season of Advent. Our hope for this daily devotional is that it will help you both to deepen your understanding of peace, and to examine how you practice peace, with yourself and with others.

"Peace on earth" is at the heart of the Christmas story and so it is our hope that making peace the focus of our Advent journey will prepare our hearts and souls to receive the Peace of Christmas more fully.

**Making it Personal:** How do you understand peace? Do you believe that peace may require you to grow and change? If you were to write a one- or two-sentence definition of peace, what would you write?

Are there others with whom you might want to share this Advent journey through this devotional booklet? Remember, you can always join our online Facebook discussion group. See the inside front cover for details.

Tuesday, December 3, 2019

## Peace Is More Than the Absence of Conflict

by Scott Stoner

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to  
you. I do not give as the world gives.*

—John 14:27

**P**eace is often thought of as the absence of conflict. While there is a partial truth to this, it is a limited perspective. For example, when a pianist performs a beautiful piece of music, we wouldn't say that what makes it beautiful is the absence of wrong or poorly played notes. We would know that what makes the performance beautiful is the presence of timing, phrasing, and the seemingly effortless playing of complex notes and chords.

The peace that Jesus offers to us and calls us to live into is not just the absence of conflict, but is the active and abundant presence of love, justice, reconciliation, and compassion. As a pastoral psychotherapist, I often work with couples who report that they feel distant and estranged from each other, while at the same time indicating that they never fight or disagree. They clearly are not satisfied with a peace that is simply a lack of conflict. They are seeking a deeper peace, one that is characterized by connection, love, and a willingness to be vulnerable with one another.

Jesus speaks of a deeper understanding of peace when he calls us not just to love people who love us, but also to love our enemies. It is important to note that he is not calling us only to have no conflict with our enemies, which we could do simply by distancing ourselves from them. Instead, he is calling us to actively practice and create a more profound, more authentic love and peace with the people in our lives we find the most challenging. As Laurie Brock wrote in Sunday's reflection, "The peace of God is not the peace of humans."

**Making it Personal:** What do you think of the idea that peace is more than the absence of conflict? What is your response to John 14:27: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives"? Do you ever feel challenged or uncomfortable with this deeper understanding of peace to which Christ calls us?



Wednesday, December 4, 2019

## Peace Deeply Rooted in Faith

by Scott Stoner

*We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God.*

—Thomas Merton

**T**his time of year, Christmas tree lots appear in every city and town across our country. Millions (more than 35 million) of trees are cut and sold each year to adorn homes, churches, and offices.

A month from now, just as they are turning brown and losing their needles, all of these trees will be tossed to the curb. Cut down and no longer connected to their root systems, the trees cannot live, which seems an apt metaphor for deepening our understanding of practicing peace.

As Christians, our desire and efforts to practice peace need to be deeply rooted in our faith and our relationship with God. If our efforts to practice peace are cut off from this rootedness, they will most likely quickly wither.

Thomas Merton makes this point in the quote above. The state of our peace with others and with ourselves will directly reflect the state of our peace with God. In order to strengthen and extend branches of peace to others, we first need to water and deepen the roots of our faith and our relationship with God. If we are struggling in our efforts to practice peace with others and with ourselves, we are wise to pause and reflect on the current state of our peace with God.

**Making it Personal:** What are your thoughts about the quote from Thomas Merton? Do you see a connection between your spiritual life and your capacity to practice peace? Does the metaphor of our spirituality being like the root system of a tree speak to you?

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Thursday, December 5, 2019

## The Risks of Practicing Peace

by Scott Stoner

*I speak not for myself but for those without voice ... those who have fought for their rights ... their right to live in peace, their right to be treated with dignity, their right to equality of opportunity, their right to be educated.*

—Malala Yousafzai

**A**s we continue to deepen our understanding of what it means to practice peace, we realize that sometimes this practice will call us to move beyond our comfort levels. When we seek to bring peace and healing to a conflicted relationship, this process will likely involve conversations that may initially be uncomfortable. Our attempts to bring peace and healing in our world by directly addressing instances of injustice and marginalization will require us to step outside our “comfort zones.”

In our Living Compass wellness programs, we teach that in order to grow, we need to risk moving out of our “comfort zone” and into our “growth zone.” We talk about how the growth zone is always outside of and beyond the comfort zone. That is why all growth is initially uncomfortable. As people of faith, God is always calling us to grow beyond the places where things are easy and comfortable. Choosing to stay safe, to ignore God’s call to grow, may give us a false notion of being at peace, but upon deeper reflection, we will eventually see that this peace is superficial; it is not the more profound expression of peace to which God calls us.

Malala Yousafzai, whose quote appears above, received the Nobel Peace Prize for the “struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children to education.” You and I do not need to aspire to such global recognition for our efforts to practice peace, but we do want to aspire to have the courage to practice peace even when it stretches us beyond our comfort zones.

**Making it Personal:** Can you think of a time when you risked moving out of your comfort zone and risked practicing peace in a situation or relationship that made you anxious? Is there a particular situation right now where God is calling you to grow in your capacity to practice peace?



Friday, December 6, 2019

## Practicing Peace Through Gratitude

by Scott Stoner

*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.*

—Colossians 3:15

**T**his time of year, it is especially easy to focus on what we feel is lacking in our lives. Sometimes this is due to a recent loss we have suffered, and this is our first Christmas since that loss.

This sense that something is missing in our lives is also more common during the holidays because, thanks to social media, it can look like everyone else's life is perfect. Everyone else has more than enough money and time to buy all the presents they want, an exciting array of social invitations to holiday gatherings, and has what looks like the perfect family. The often-false front of social media can cause us to feel like we are the only ones who are facing challenges.

The passage from Colossians reminds us that authentic peace and happiness do not come from material possessions or perfect families (as if these existed), but rather it comes from allowing the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts. The passage goes on to add that gratitude is also an essential component of peace. To be at peace enhances our capacity to be thankful for what we already have, however imperfect it may be. And the practice of gratitude increases our capacity to be at peace.

**Making it Personal:** Reread the passage from Colossians and note your thoughts and reactions. What do you think about the connection between peace and gratitude? Feelings of not having enough are not uncommon this time of year. To counteract these feelings, pause and reflect on what you are genuinely grateful for in your life right now. You might even want to make a list and keep it with you throughout Advent.

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Saturday, December 7, 2019

## Practicing Peace in Thought, Word, and Deed

by Scott Stoner

*The peace of God is transformative. It changes us from those who would use oppressive power to a people who nurture and tend. The peace of Christ moves us into new places. This holy peace requires that we change and move, not stay stagnant.*

—Laurie Brock

Each Saturday we invite you to pause, reflect upon, and integrate into your life what you have learned during the past week. The most important learnings from the week most likely will be personal, that emerged for you as you interacted with the reflections and the prompts.

The process of change usually happens in stages. First, we have a thought, a new idea, or insight into something that we might want to change, and then we often speak that thought out loud in a conversation with others, or in our prayers. For example, “I am starting to think that I am ready to \_\_\_\_\_ and I may need your support in doing \_\_\_\_\_.” Finally, change involves action, doing something different. We describe this three-step process as changing in thought, word, and deed.

While we have focused on deepening our understanding of peace this week, the overall focus of this Advent devotional is *practicing peace*. The quote above, from Laurie’s reflection, reminds us that “the peace of Christ moves us into new places.” Our prayer is that each of us may be open to new places that Christ may be calling us to practice peace this Advent season.

**Making it Personal:** What was the most significant insight you had this week as you read and reflected on deepening your understanding of peace? Are you aware of a new way in which Christ is calling you to expand your practice of peace this Advent, perhaps in a way that moves you out of your comfort zone?

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# *The Second Sunday of Advent*

December 8, 2019



## **Practicing Peace Through a Crucible**

Reflection by The Rt. Rev. Audrey Cady Scanlan

**W**hen I think of being in a peaceful state, I do not automatically think of broods of vipers, unquenchable fire, or snacking on locusts while stepping into my camel's hair and leather girdle. I prefer to think, rather, about scented candles and warm sunlight, ocean waves lapping softly on the shore, and whisper-traces of foam in the sand.

When I think of practicing peace, I don't imagine a wild prophet standing waist deep in the muddy Jordan telling me that what he's doing with water is only half the game—that the rest will be done through refining fire. I like to think, rather, about quiet, confidential conversations with friends in coffee shops; about offering an apology to someone whom I've hurt; or being the first one to break an estranged silence.

Yet the prophet John teaches us that sometimes reconciliation and peace are achieved by a trial or crucible. And the wisdom gleaned from this wild prophet reminds me of a crucible in my own life.

Ordained when I was 45 years old, I was also 45 years old when I made my first confession with a priest. A Franciscan friend had suggested that making a private confession might be a good idea before I was ordained. The idea of it scared me half to death. Sit in a room with another human being and talk about my lifetime of offenses? Now, it's not like I had criminal acts in my past (except for that lipstick shoplifting episode in 4th grade) but I was intimidated, nonetheless.

I waited until my pre-ordination retreat. The kindly monk who was serving as my spiritual director told me to go to my room and write down every sin that I had ever committed. I thought that he was joking. He was not. It took me all night as I scanned my life, year by year, season by season, relationship by relationship. I tossed and turned all night, getting out of bed more than once to add to the list as my memory illuminated still another trespass. I skipped breakfast in the morning, too anxious to eat.

## THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2019

The clock dragged until my 10am appointment. Sitting in a comfortable chair in the corner of his room, the dear old monk invited my recitation of the list. He sat quietly with his thumbs rubbing the soft leather of his prayer book as he listened with the ear of his heart. Handing me a folded white handkerchief, he let me compose myself before offering God's absolution. And when he did, it was a sweet gift of grace that brought with it a feeling of cleanliness, of holiness, of peace.

It wasn't fun or easy. In fact, the whole exercise felt like refining fire, but it was, perhaps, the first time that I had ever practiced making peace with myself.

What difficult road toward practicing peace awaits your footfall?



Monday, December 9, 2019

## Making Peace with Ourselves

by Scott Stoner

*Nobody can bring you peace but yourself.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Our focus for this week will be making peace with ourselves. Lest we think this is self-indulgent, it is important to note that we cannot offer peace to others if we do not have peace within ourselves. As Thomas Merton has written, “We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves.” We cannot offer others what we do not have ourselves.

While on the surface it seems obvious that we all want to be at peace with ourselves. In yesterday’s reflection, Audrey Scanlan reminds us that seeking a deeper peace within ourselves requires thoughtful, soul-searching self-reflection. It is a road less traveled. So much so that Audrey, a person who takes practicing peace seriously, concludes her reflection with the unexpected words, “It was, perhaps, the first time that I had ever practiced making peace *with myself*.”

We will structure our emphasis this week on making peace with ourselves by focusing on the Living Compass model of well-being and its four quadrants: *heart, soul, strength, and mind*. Each quadrant will be the focus for one day’s reflection, and we will invite you to model Audrey Scanlan’s practice of honest self-reflection as you pause each day to reflect on what it means to be more at peace in different dimensions of your life.

**Making It Personal:** What are your thoughts about the quote from Emerson: “Nobody can bring you peace but yourself”? Do you see a connection between the practice of honest self-examination and reflection, and making peace with yourself? As we begin our focus on making peace with ourselves, take a moment to rate your own sense of inner peace. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 represents deep inner conflict and 10 complete inner peace, what number represents your current sense of being at peace with yourself?

Tuesday, December 10, 2019

## Practicing Peace with All Your Heart

by Scott Stoner

*If we have no peace, it is because we have  
forgotten that we belong to each other.*

—Mother Teresa

The *Heart* quadrant of the Living Compass focuses on *Healthy Relationships* and *Handling Emotions*. Today we will briefly reflect on what peace looks like in these two areas of our lives.

Peace in our relationships means that our connections with others are characterized by stability, trust, mutual care and respect, honesty, and integrity. Peace in our emotions means that we are comfortable feeling and expressing the full range of emotions (sadness, anger, joy, happiness, laughter, just to name a few) in healthy ways and that we are comfortable being present to this range of emotions in others. All emotions are God-given and are neither good nor bad. It is how we handle our many emotions that creates either peace or feelings of uneasiness.

It is only by first honestly acknowledging and accepting things as they are that we can begin to make changes, to make things how we want them to be. The holiday season is often a time when tension in our relationships and an uneasiness in our emotions can be more obvious or magnified. Perhaps such magnification, rather than being a source of stress, can become an occasion to make intentional changes, ones that can create a new sense of peace within us.

**Making it Personal:** Take a moment to reflect both on your relationships and how you handle your emotions. Where do you experience peace, and where do you experience feelings of dis-ease right now? What is a specific step you could take right now to create a greater sense of peace in a relationship that is tense or awkward, or in one aspect of your emotional wellness right now? Be specific, and then bravely, begin the step today. How could this make your life more peaceful?



Wednesday, December 11, 2019

## Practicing Peace with All Your Soul

by Scott Stoner

*Be still, and know that I am God!*

—Psalm 46:10

**T**he *Soul* quadrant of the Living Compass focuses on *Spirituality* and *Rest & Play*. Today we will reflect on what peace looks like in these two areas of our lives.

*Rest & Play* has to do with how we are honoring sabbath time in our lives and how we are engaging in truly re-creative activities. In a culture that overvalues busyness (especially this time of year), taking time to be purposeful about slowing down requires intentionality. Playfulness is also not highly appreciated in our culture, and yet it is both foundational to, and an expression of, well-being.

*Spirituality*, as with all dimensions of wellness, requires regular tending. A garden becomes wilted if it is not regularly watered, as do our spiritual lives. A combination of communal and personal spiritual practices is ideal for enhancing this part of ourselves. Spiritual wellness is grounded in humility, as Audrey Scanlan demonstrated by writing about her practice of honest self-examination and confession.

The season of Advent provides us with a unique opportunity to be counter-cultural by both slowing down and focusing on the deeper spiritual dimensions of Advent and Christmas. Making this counter-cultural choice will surely help us make peace within ourselves.

**Making it Personal:** Take a moment to reflect on the current levels of rest and play in your life, as well as the state of your spiritual life. In the metaphor of a garden, where do you see a need for watering? What is one thing you could do right now to “water” your spiritual life and/or your need for rest and play? How might this new thing help create a deeper sense of peace within yourself?

Thursday, December 12, 2019

## Practicing Peace with All Your Strength

by Scott Stoner

*If you don't make time for your wellness, you will  
be forced to make time for your illness.*

—Anonymous

The *Strength* quadrant of the Living Compass focuses on *Care for the Body* and *Stress Resilience*. Today we will pause and reflect on what peace looks like in these two dimensions of our well-being.

Physical well-being is far more than merely an absence of illness, as it involves proactive habits and disciplines that energize and care for the God-given gifts of our bodies. If the only time we are paying attention to caring for our bodies is when they are sick and hurting, then we are falling short of caring for these “temples of the Holy Spirit,” as they are described in 1 Corinthians 6:19.

As human beings we all experience stress. Sometimes it is of our own making, and other times it is because life is hard, or has handed us a setback. To be resilient in the face of stress is to be able to accept that hardship is a part of the fabric of life, and to then choose to work to persevere and grow through the challenging times.

This time of year can highlight whatever losses and stressors we are experiencing, as well as provide unique challenges and temptations to neglect our care for our physical health. Taking small steps to practice peace in the areas of *Stress Resilience* and *Care for the Body* can make a big difference in our overall well-being, now and throughout the year.

**Making it Personal:** What is your response to the quote above: “If you don’t make time for your wellness, you will be forced to make time for your illness”? What is one conscious, small step you can take right now to enhance a sense of peace regarding your physical well-being? Identify one particular stressor you are currently experiencing and identify one concrete step you can take to practice resilience in the midst of the stress.



Friday, December 13, 2019

## Practicing Peace with All Your Mind

by Scott Stoner

*Be transformed by the renewing of your minds.*

—Romans 12:2

**T**he *Mind* quadrant of the Living Compass includes *Organization* and *Vocation*. Making peace with ourselves in these two dimensions of wellness, as with all the other areas, involves honest self-reflection and the practice of intentional habits.

The *Organization* area of the Living Compass includes the choices we make regarding how we manage our time, possessions, money, and priorities. If we are not intentional about managing these things in our lives, we will soon find they are managing us. Feelings of not having enough time, money, or possessions are often a sign that we are not being intentional enough about the choices we are making. As the passage from Romans above points out, we can indeed find our lives transformed when we can move from a “scarcity” mindset to an “abundance” mindset, one where we redefine what it means to have “enough” time, money, and possessions.

The *Vocation* area of wellness involves showing up in our lives—at home, work, and in the community—as our true, authentic selves. Author Parker Palmer describes it well: “Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach, but accepting the treasure of true self we already possess.” The word *vocation* comes from the same root as the words *vocal* and *voice*, showing that vocation has to do with both knowing and showing up in the world with our true voice.

**Making it Personal:** Have you ever experienced the kind of transformation that Romans 12:2 describes: “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds”? Organizing our time, and our money, can be stressful this time of year. What is one specific thing you can do right now to bring more peace to how you are organizing both of these important areas?

Saturday, December 14, 2019

## Everything Is Connected

by Scott Stoner

*Love and peace of mind do protect us. They allow us to overcome  
the problems that life hands us. They teach us to survive ...  
to live now ... to have the courage to confront each day.*

—Bernie Siegel

**T**oday, as is our custom at the end of the week, we reflect on what we have learned and how best to integrate our learnings into our lives. This week we reflected on what it means to make peace with ourselves in the four quadrants of the Living Compass Model for Well-Being. While we looked at each quadrant separately, it is essential that we recognize that all areas of the Compass are interconnected.

Imagine a mobile, like one that might hang from a child's ceiling or crib. Imagine that eight separate pieces are hanging from this mobile, analogous to the eight areas of wellness of the Living Compass. If you were to grab one piece of the mobile and shake it, what would happen to the other seven pieces? They would begin shaking, too, because the eight pieces, though separate, are connected. This is why when we experience disturbance or lack of peace in one area of our lives, it will often manifest as disturbances in other areas of our lives.

The good news is that when we choose to focus and make changes in an attempt to bring greater peace to one area of our lives, this too will radiate out to the rest of the areas of our lives. If all the pieces of a mobile are moving around and you take hold of just one piece and stabilize it, it will gradually bring stability to all the other parts of the mobile, as well.

**Making it Personal:** Can you think of a time when you made a choice to bring peace and calm to one area of your life and then noticed that your choice created greater peace and calm in others areas of your life? As you reflect on what you learned about making peace with yourself this week, what is one insight you want to be sure to remember? Is there a change or a choice that you have made this week that you want to stay with for the remainder of Advent, and perhaps beyond?

# *The Third Sunday of Advent*

December 15, 2019



## **Finding Peace Where We Are Planted**

Reflection by The Rev. Jadon D. Hartstuff

**E**arlier this year I had the chance to go to Cuba for the first time. I spent three days with Bishop Griselda of The Episcopal Church there, and her husband, Gerardo, who is the priest-in-charge of a church with whom my own parish has partnered. The church, like many other Episcopal churches in Cuba, is in need of capital investment that is not possible to raise within Cuba. As I prepared for the trip I was certainly a bit anxious. I didn't know what to expect after hearing years of news stories about circumstances from which people regularly risked their lives to flee. I wondered and worried about how I would relate to anyone.

My time in Cuba was deeply inspiring. Instead of overwhelming angst and anxiety, I found a wellspring of gentleness and patience in every person I met. I felt safer than I often feel at home and much more calm and peaceful. Of course I could also see how daily life in Cuba is difficult, in many ways, with a narrower range of options and opportunities, and a pervasive sense of vulnerability. Yet, even as the people I met hoped and worked for change and improvement, they were also doing what they could to bloom where they found themselves planted. A sense of quiet confidence seemed to animate them, in spite of their circumstances.

Today many Christians celebrate Rose Sunday, and one of the readings appointed for this day is the Magnificat, the song that Mary sings when her cousin Elizabeth blesses her for faithfully believing that there would be "a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:45). I try every Advent to really identify with Mary's story, but I often get stuck. How can I—a man of 21st-century, post-enlightenment, "first-world" America—truly relate to a miraculously pregnant woman from another time, another place, and very different circumstances? But to what of her Good News can I really relate?

## THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2019

When I was in Cuba we talked about Mary. My new Cuban friends hoped we might incorporate Mary into new imagery above the altar. “She inspires us greatly,” they reflected, “in the way she found peace and contentment in the midst of her tribulation.” And that is something I can and need to relate to. Now when I hear the Magnificat I cannot help but think of my friends in Cuba and their remarkable, quiet confidence that so inspired me.

While we often speak of “making peace” as if it is *our* doing, scripture tells us that peace is something that *God* gives and promises. Somehow it seems most faithful to think that we must actively struggle for peace, as if we must force it to happen. My experience in Cuba, on the other hand, reminded me how powerful and fruitful it can be to embrace whatever peace already exists, even in challenging circumstances. Perhaps as we nurture the ability to see and surrender to whatever peace God has already given us, we are better able to faithfully follow the compass that guides us and, like Mary and our Episcopal Cuban neighbors, find ways to bring peace into bloom wherever we’re currently planted.

How might you work to find peace by blooming where you are planted?



Monday, December 16, 2019

## Making Ourselves Instruments of God's Peace

by Scott Stoner

*Lord, make us instruments of your peace.*

*Where there is hatred, let us sow love.*

—Prayer of St. Francis

Last week we focused on making peace with ourselves. For people of faith, making peace with ourselves is not an end in and of itself, but a necessary step toward our being able to be instruments of peace for others. Tuning a musical instrument is simply the first step in being able to make beautiful music.

You may recognize the phrase “instruments of peace” as being from the *Peace Prayer*, a prayer attributed to St. Francis. The prayer begins with the words that will be our focus for this week: “Lord, make us instruments of your peace.” We will move through the entire *Peace Prayer* this week as a way to more deeply reflect on how we each are called to be instruments of God’s peace.

In yesterday’s reflection, Jadon Hartsuff wrote about two compelling examples of people allowing themselves to be made instruments of God’s peace. The first is the group of people he and his parishioners encountered on their trip to Cuba. He describes the people he met in this way: “I found a wellspring of gentleness and patience in every person I met.”

The second group of people we see being instruments of God’s peace are the people from his parish who risked moving out of their comfort zones to travel to Cuba, to serve, work alongside, and learn from, the people who are practicing peace there.

**Making it Personal:** Who have you known that inspires you by their ability to be instruments of peace and to sow seeds of love in the midst of challenging circumstances? In what ways might you be called to move outside of your comfort zone right now to be an instrument of God’s peace?

Tuesday, December 17, 2019

## Let Us Sow Pardon and Union

by Scott Stoner

*Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness forces  
you to grow beyond what you were.*

—Cherie Carter-Scott

**T**here is often a connection between the next two lines of the *Peace Prayer*: “Where there is injury, [let us sow] pardon,” and “where there is discord, [let us sow] union.” Discord is often found in the experience of one or both parties feeling injured by the other.

When you are experiencing difficulties in a relationship in your life, have you noticed how easy it is to believe that the other person is responsible for the injury that has created the dissonance? I know for myself that it is so much easier for me to see the speck in my brother’s or sister’s eye than the log in my own (Matthew 7:3). If I persist with this kind of self-righteous attitude, I am perpetuating injury, sowing seeds of hurt and anger, both within myself and in the relationship with the other person.

Our faith calls us to a different attitude, one of pardon, forgiveness, and, when possible, reconciliation. In the end, it doesn’t matter “who started it.” What matters is our commitment to sowing seeds of pardon and union so that we may begin the healing process.

During the holiday season we often see people we rarely see throughout the rest of the year. This may mean that we will be spending time with people with whom we are currently at odds. In these situations, we have the choice to continue to nurse our resentment and injury, or to be instruments of peace and to sow at least a small seed of pardon. And if others offer such seed of pardon to us, we are wise to let go of our sense of injury and to receive it with an open heart.

**Making it Personal:** Is there a relationship in your life in which you have been injured, in which you would like to sow a seed of pardon? Is there someone that you know you have injured, with whom you would like to sow a seed of forgiveness? In both cases, what is a specific step you could take now to become an instrument of God’s peace?



Wednesday, December 18, 2019

## Let Us Sow Faith and Hope

by Scott Stoner

*Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone's face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions. I must trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will bear many fruits, here in this world and the life to come.*

—Henri Nouwen

**T**he next two lines of the *Peace Prayer* are: “Where there is doubt, [let us sow] faith; where there is despair, hope.”

I recently heard a story about a high-school girl who was part of a card ministry at her church. This ministry involved taking turns sending cards of encouragement to people who were facing challenges, such as a health crisis or the loss of a loved one. Suddenly, the young girl developed a serious health condition herself and found out she would be having major surgery within a few days. Waiting in her hospital room the day before her operation, she received a surprise she would never forget. Her family, and several other members of the card ministry group, arrived with a large box. She opened it to discover over two hundred cards from members of her church, offering her hope and encouragement. After she read each card, her parents and friends taped them on the walls, covering almost every inch of available space. The hospital staff reported they had never witnessed such a tangible outpouring of love and hope. The surgery went well, and the girl brought all of her cards home to help keep her spirits up during what they anticipated to be a somewhat painful recovery.

When someone is experiencing doubt and despair, there is no greater gift we can give them than our faith and hope. There are countless meaningful ways we can offer these things to others, from simply sitting with someone, to providing a simple encouraging call, text, letter, or card to say you care about them and are thinking of them.

## THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT 2019

In a world full of trouble and fear, we are called to be God's instruments of faith and hope. The opportunities for doing so are all around us.

**Making it Personal:** Can you think of a time when you were experiencing doubt or despair and someone sowed a seed of faith and hope in your life? Is there someone during this season to whom you might be called to offer these gifts? As you think about your answer, don't limit your thoughts to only people you know, but also think of those in your wider community, those who could benefit from some seeds of faith and hope in the midst of their struggles.



Thursday, December 19, 2019

## Let Us Sow Light and Joy

by Scott Stoner

*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

**T**he next two lines of the *Peace Prayer* are: “Where there is darkness, [let us sow] light; where there is sadness, joy.”

The quote from Martin Luther King, Jr., is a powerful reminder that God’s call to us to be instruments of peace extends to confronting injustice in our society, wherever and whenever it occurs. Darkness and hate are always at the core of racism, discrimination, and marginalization, in whatever ugly form it takes.

Jesus is our model for confronting systemic injustice. He regularly confronted and unmasked the political and religious authorities of his day by lifting up and empowering the oppressed, the poor, the sick, and the powerless. He worked to shine the light of Truth into the darkness of despair. As Jesus’ followers, we are called to do no less.

On Christmas Day, many churches will read from the first chapter of the Gospel of John: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:3-5). Whenever we encounter darkness in our world, the light we are called to shine is not our own; it is the Light of Christ that we are called to shine into the darkness of injustice whenever we encounter it.

**Making it Personal:** What is your response to the Martin Luther King, Jr., quote: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that”? Where might God be calling you to stretch yourself and become an instrument of peace and light in the face of some expression of injustice and darkness in your family, community, or the world?

Friday, December 20, 2019

## Grant That We May Not so Much Seek to Be Loved as to Love

by Scott Stoner

*Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness  
without which no one will see the Lord. See to it  
that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.*

—Hebrews 12:14-15

**T**he Prayer of St Francis continues with these words: “Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.”

The question of “whom and what do you seek?” is a question that Jesus asks throughout the Gospels. It is an insightful question because the answer, in many ways, defines who we are. We have a core teaching in our Living Compass wellness programs that similarly speaks to this: “Whatever we pay attention to, is what will grow.”

One of my favorite hymns is *Seek Ye First*. The first line, based on Matthew 6:33 is: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and God’s righteousness; and all these things will be added unto you.” These words echo for me the prayer to not so much seek to be consoled, understood, and loved, as to console, understand, and love.

In addition to the *Peace Prayer*, “Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words,” is a quote also attributed to St. Francis. We can’t be sure if he said these words, but we can be sure that he worked to live by these words in his daily life, always seeking to be an instrument of God’s peace and consolation to the poor and to all whom he encountered. May we be inspired to do likewise.

**Making it Personal:** As we approach the end of Advent and the coming of Christmas, how would you answer the question, “Whom or what are you seeking?” What is your response to the quote, “Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words”? How do you, or might you, apply this wisdom in your life, now and throughout the year?



Saturday, December 21, 2019

## For It Is in Giving That We Receive

by Scott Stoner

*I have found that among its other benefits,  
giving liberates the soul of the giver.*

—Maya Angelou

**T**he Prayer of St Francis concludes with these words: “For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.”

At last year’s Christmas gathering, our five-year-old grandson surprised us all. Rather than opening his gifts first, he wanted us to open the special gift that he had made for each of us. His new-found delight in the giving of a gift was as precious as the gift itself.

“Remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive,’” says Acts 20:35. Joining these words with the quote from Maya Angelou, we see that giving of ourselves to others not only blesses them, but blesses and liberates our souls, as well.

Jadon shared with us in his reflection last Sunday about the group from his church who went to serve and support members of a church in Cuba. They clearly received more than they gave. As you read his reflection, you can feel the spiritual gifts Jadon received from the people he met there who taught him what it means to bloom where one is planted. He was also blessed when they told him that Mary, the mother of Jesus, “inspires us greatly in the way she found peace and contentment in the midst of her tribulation.”

Such is the paradoxical truth of the Gospel. “It is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned. And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

**Making it Personal:** Can you think of a time when you gave to someone and yet received more back than you gave? Can you think of a time when you forgave and pardoned someone, and gained a sense of forgiveness and peace within yourself at the same time? Is there anyone to whom you’d now like to offer forgiveness, or a conversation you’d like to have, or an intention you want to make to offer forgiveness to another?

# *The Fourth Sunday of Advent*

December 22, 2019



## **“Holy Yes”**

Reflection by The Rev. Mary Bea Sullivan

*Say a quiet yes to God and he'll be there in no time.*

—James 4:8, *The Message*

“**M**y son died a year and a half ago,” the stranger on the other end of the telephone said. “And I want to inter his ashes before I have to bury my wife.” A week later Stuart walked into my office and took up residence deep in my heart.

Despite the great grief he had experienced during the last five years, he was joyful and grateful. Both of Stuart’s children had died and he was now caring for his wife, Rose, who was in the late stages of dementia. Marriage vows were being fulfilled in new ways as Stuart lovingly met Rose’s ever-increasing needs.

Whenever I mentioned my concern about the burden of caregiving on him, Stuart always responded, “This is exactly where I am meant to be.” A faith-filled peace pervaded his choice to empty himself completely in love.

Eventually, Stuart couldn’t continue alone. With no biological family to assist, his neighbors Scooter and Susie stepped in—a natural progression in their ever-deepening relationship. Years before, Scooter and Susie noticed their octogenarian neighbors were frequently alone for holidays and began including them in family gatherings. That first “holy yes” to expanding the definition of family preceded an incalculable number of others. Happiness and shared faith permeated Christmas dinners and barbecues as the two families melded into one.

Every morning at 4am Stuart would switch on his lamp, and Scooter would come over to clean and dress Rose for the day. Each evening, Scooter would return to help prepare Rose for bed. Susie cooked meals. Grandchildren provided hugs and smiles. This ecosystem of love grew as Scooter’s and Susie’s unselfish care called forth the better angels of others who were also inspired to assist.



When I complimented her on their sacrificial love, Susie affirmed the peace that pervaded their costly desire to love expansively. "We never gave it a second thought. We needed them, too. They are like parents and grandparents for us."

Responding “yes” to the Spirit is contagious—it goes viral! Mary’s “yes” to carry the Christ child precipitated Joseph’s “yes” to protect and care for them. And their “yeses” led to millions more, thus transforming the world.

Responding “yes” to the Spirit is often costly. For Mary it meant bearing the Christ Child under less-than-ideal circumstances and witnessing his crucifixion. Joseph took on the shame of Mary’s unwed pregnancy. Scooter and Susie faced increased responsibilities and reduced free time. And yet, there is peace in making a right and loving decision—and knowing that God’s kingdom comes to fruition through all of our brave, costly, and contagious “holy yeses.”

Thankfully, our yeses are not carried out alone. Emmanuel—God with us—gives us the grace not only to bear the cost, but also to experience the new life that can only come from accepting divine invitation.

## THEME FOR WEEK FOUR

Monday, December 23, 2019

### Practicing Peace as a “Holy Yes”

by Scott Stoner

*And yet, there is peace in making a right and loving decision—and knowing that God’s kingdom comes to fruition through all of our brave, costly, and contagious “holy yeses.”*

—Mary Bea Sullivan

In our Parent Wellness resources from Living Compass, we talk about how love is much more than a feeling. We make the point, as many experts do, that love is instead primarily a decision that we make each day. Emotions ebb and flow, but love as a decision, an act of the will, remains steady.

We learn from Mary Bea Sullivan in her reflection yesterday that peace is also more than a feeling. In the inspiring story she shares, we learned about the deep peace that comes from a husband’s decision to care for his ailing wife, and from a neighbors’ decision to help in that care.

To stretch ourselves to love in ways, as Mary Bea writes, that are, “brave, costly, and contagious” is to decide to offer a “holy yes” to both our neighbor and to God. Mary and Joseph, as Mary Bea also reflects, made the same brave decision to say “yes” to God’s call to them, without possibly knowing where their “yes” would lead. And that seems to be how it goes when God invites us to stretch ourselves to give in ways we may not have thought possible. We do not know exactly where our “yeses” will lead, but we do know that God’s peace will be our guide and our companion wherever our “yeses” make take us.

**Making it Personal:** Can you think back to a time in your life when you decided to offer a “holy yes” to God’s calling you to give in ways that were beyond what you might have imagined? If so, did you experience peace in that decision? Is there any way in which God is asking you to say “yes” to a decision to love extravagantly right now?

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# Saying “Yes” to God’s Gift

Christmas Eve



by The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner

*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

—Philippians 4:7

**H**ave you ever had the experience of being hurt by how someone responded to a gift that you had given them? Perhaps this person opened your gift, looked at it, and realized it was not what they wanted or expected, then quickly put it aside and never showed interest in it again. If we are honest, we have probably all been on both sides of this gift-exchange scenario. One of the real and often-overlooked blessings and gifts we can give to others is to be a good receiver of the gifts we are given, appreciating the other person’s effort and intent to bring us joy.

Whatever material gifts we may or may not receive this Christmas, we will all be given the most valuable gift of all: the birth of Jesus, the birth of the Word made flesh. As with all gifts, this gift, too, needs to be opened and received with mindfulness and loving attention. To do otherwise would diminish the full potential for the transformation of our lives.

Each day in this devotional we have reflected on choices we can make to be well and whole and to foster greater peace within ourselves and in the world around us. As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, it is a time to not only focus on these choices, but on the most crucial one of all: the decision that God has made to become fully incarnate in our lives. Making room in the inn of our hearts to receive this gift from God with gratitude and appreciation is the true foundation for the peace that passes understanding.

**Make it Personal:** In general, how thoughtful are you about receiving gifts and expressing gratitude for what you are given? It is common to have expectations of how Christmas is supposed to unfold, and then to be disappointed when it doesn’t live up to those expectations. Are you aware of any expectations you have that might get in the way of fully receiving the Peace of Christ this Christmas?

# *The Gift of Christ: God's "Holy Yes" to Us*

Christmas Day

by The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner



*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth  
peace among those whom he favors.*

—Luke 2:14

**C**hristmas blessings to all today as we celebrate the birth of Christ, God's "holy yes" to us. A priceless gift to assure us all of God's love and of God's desire for us to each do our part in creating peace on earth.

We began our Advent journey with Laurie Brock's reflection, *Peace like a River*, which helped us gain a deeper understanding of peace. Audrey Scanlan was our guide in helping us to practice making peace with ourselves. Jadon Hartstuff helped us to focus on making ourselves instruments of God's peace. And finally, Mary Bea Sullivan has inspired us to offer our own "holy yeses" in response to God's love for us.

I speak for all of those who have worked to create this devotional when I say it has been an honor to walk this journey of Advent with you. Our prayer is that we all have experienced a deeper understanding of the peace of Christ, and have also been inspired to work on growing toward being a more intentional instrument of that peace for others.

We would like close with a blessing from the Book of Numbers. While not typically thought of as a Christmas blessing, it perfectly captures the grace that God desires for us this day, and always.

*The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

—Numbers 6:24-26

⊕ BRÚJULA DE VIDA

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