



Simple Gifts
an advent devotional

MERCER ISLAND
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The bright silver outlined leaves of the tree, each green leaf resembling so many torches. A. 35. I saw the church stand out as distinctly as ever.

Introduction

During the Christmas holidays, many in our society and in our church find ourselves overwhelmed and stressed with busy-ness and preparations – food, gifts, parties, social obligations, etc. We are left with little energy or time to focus on what the season is about. This Advent Season, we want to offer you the gift of simplicity. The Shaker hymn, “Simple Gifts” will be our guide. Out of the busyness and rush of the holidays, this devotional will invite you to pause and reflect in simple ways. There will be Scripture, Art, Music, and Prayers. You will be offered a simple gift each Sunday. We invite you to find the quiet and stillness of the Season. We hope this devotional draws each of us into the wonder of the birth of our Savior.

~ Margaret Redman and Ben McConaughy

Week One- The Week of Hope

'Tis the gift to be simple

'Tis the gift to be free

'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be

The first week of Advent is the week of hope.

During this week, we will focus on finding hope in this season.



December 2, 2018

[Click here to listen to this version of "Simple Gifts" by Yo Yo Ma and Allison Krauss,](#)
or search for the song online, and reflect on the meaning of hope in the lyrics:

*'Tis the gift to be simple
'Tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right
It will be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained
To bow and to bend, we will not be ashamed
To turn, turn, will be our delight
'Til by turning, turning, we come round right.*

December 3, 2018

Light your votive candle and sit with this Scripture for 5 minutes:

**The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to
the house of Israel and the house of Judah.**

**In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David;
and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.**

**In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the
name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."**

Jeremiah 33:14-16

What hope do you find in this passage?

December 4, 2018

Find a moment of quiet, and pray for the gift of hope for the people in your life using this prayer:

Dear God:
I seek You, the mighty God
in the most unlikely places
as a child in a stable,
and in an empty tomb.
May You hear these prayers,
which come from the unlikely corners of my life.

[Prayers for the people in your life]

Give me ears to hear, O God,
and eyes to watch,
that I may know your presence in my midst
during this holy season of joy
as I anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ.

Amen

December 5, 2018

Sit silently for one minute, then read the following passage twice (Psalm 90: 1-2, 14-17), and finally, sit silently for one minute reflecting on where you find hope in this passage.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations
Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.
Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

December 6, 2018

[Click to watch *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*](#) or search online: O come, O come, Emmanuel
- (Piano/Cello) - The Piano Guys]
Do you find hope in the promise of a savior?

December 7, 2018

Hope is like a light shining in a dark place. In what ways do you find hope in the midst of the busy Christmas season? Reflect on that as you gaze at this picture:



December 8, 2018

Sit in front of a fire or in a bath and ponder the following passage:

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?

Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

**Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.
And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all,
just as we abound in love for you.**

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

This Scripture speaks powerfully of the hope we find in community and Christian life. What part of it will you take forward with you in your life tomorrow?

Week Two- The Week of Love

“And when we find ourselves in the place just right. It will be in the valley of love and delight.”

The second week of Advent is the week of love.
During this week we will focus on finding love in this season.



December 1, 2018

Take out the pinecone and breathe deeply of its scent.
Reflect on this image, and the question of how your love can lead you to peace:



December 10, 2018

As you savor this Scripture, consider how to encourage your “love [to] overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight”:

**I thank my God every time I remember you,
constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you,
because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.
I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will
bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.**

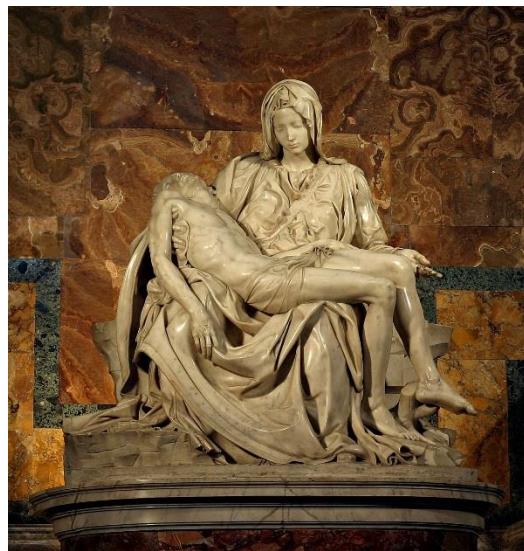
**It is right for me to think this way about all of you,
because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me,
both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.
For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.**

**And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge
and full insight,
to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure
and blameless,
having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ
for the glory and praise of God.**

Philippians 1:3-11

December 11, 2018

Advent can be a time when we reflect on the love present in the birth of a babe in a manger. New life, hope, singing angels. But the Christmas story of the Christ is much less powerful without the loving sacrifice and the renewal of life that we find in Easter. Study Michelangelo's famous rendering of the Pieta. As you do, ponder Mary's love for her son and her willingness to watch Him face and encounter His sacrifice. This is not romantic, fuzzy, holiday love. This is LOVE for all humankind.



December 12, 2018

As you read this passage, reflect on God's love for you.
How will you reflect that love to others during this season of Advent?

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

1 John 4:7-12

December 13, 2018

At the heart of Christmas is the recognition that we are all loved fully and unconditionally, as imperfect as we may be. God is concerned about each of us. God loves each of us. Jesus, born into the human family of Mary and Joseph, invites all of humanity to be family too, to be His sisters and brothers, adopted children of God the Creator.

Christmas is the story of joy and beauty, peace and good will, salvation and new life in the wondrous Good News of the newborn Child of Bethlehem. In the birth of Jesus, humbly laid in the manger, God has come to dwell among us, fulfilling our deepest need for a love that is infinite, stable and sure (Luke 2:7-11, Matthew 1:23). Never again do we need to feel distant from a transcendent, invisible, infinite and spiritual divinity. By taking on flesh, God has fully entered into our humanity, taking on our wounded and limited human nature so that God might make of us a new creation – transforming us by God's redemptive love so that we might share in eternal divine life

Is there something in this reflection that especially brings the message of love to light for you?

December 14, 2018

As you listen to "Welcome to Our World," reflect on the themes of love that touch you.
[Click here for song](#) or search online.

Tears are falling, hearts are breaking
How we need to hear from God
You've been promised, we've been
waiting
Welcome Holy Child

Hope that You don't mind our manger
How I wish we could have known
But long-awaited Holy Stranger
Make Yourself at home
Please make Yourself at home

Bring Your peace into our violence
Bid our hungry souls be filled Word now
breaking Heaven's silence
Welcome to our world

Fragile finger sent to heal us
Tender brow prepared for thorn
Tiny heart whose blood will save us
Unto us is born

So wrap our injured flesh around You
Breathe our air and walk our sod
Rob our sins and make us holy
Perfect Son of God [Repeat: x1]
Welcome to our world

December 15, 2018.

Find a quiet moment to join in this Christmas prayer by Frederick Buechner:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, be born again into our world. Wherever there is war in this world, wherever there is pain, wherever there is loneliness, wherever there is no hope, come, thou long-expected one, with healing in thy wings.

Holy Child, whom the shepherds and the kings and the dumb beasts adored, be born again. Wherever there is boredom, wherever there is fear of failure, wherever there is temptation too strong to resist, wherever there is bitterness of heart, come, thou Blessed One, with healing in thy wings.

Savior, be born in each of us as we raise our faces to thy face, not knowing fully who we are or who thou art, knowing only that thy love is beyond our knowing and that no other has the power to make us whole. Come, Lord Jesus, to each who longs for thee even though we have forgotten thy name. Come quickly,

Amen.

Week Three- The Week of Peace

"When true simplicity is gained
To bow and to bend, we will not be ashamed."

The third week of Advent is the week of peace. During this week, perhaps we can all focus on finding peace in this season. The candy cane this week is sweet, and its shape reminds us of the Shepherd who looks over us and protects us from trouble.



December 16, 2018

What do these words from the prophet Isaiah mean to you as you search for peace in your life?

**The wolf shall live with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the kid,
The calf and the lion and the fatling together,
And a little child shall lead them.**
Isaiah 11:6

December 17, 2018

Offer up the following prayer:

Lord of peace and mercy. In a season when every heart should be happy and light, many of us are struggling with the heaviness of life—burdens that steal the joy right out of our stockings. Tragedy arrives as innocent victims suffer, and an inner voice whispers, “Be afraid!” We need your peace, Jesus.

We confess that our hearts are too often filled with wonder of a different kind: wondering when the bills will be paid, when the terror will stop, when rest will come. Is the message still true? In a world where worry, not peace, prevails, stir up that good news again.

This Advent, make it real in our hearts. Never have we needed Your joy and peace more than now. Thank You for the gift of Jesus, our Immanuel, the Word made flesh. Your name is still called “Wonderful,” “Counselor,” “The Mighty God,” “The Everlasting Father,” and “The Prince of Peace.”

We know that peace on earth can only come when hearts find peace with You. You are still our Joy. You are still our Peace. You are no longer a babe in the manger. You are Lord of lords and King of kings. And we still celebrate You as Lord—this Christmas and always.

Grant us your peace,

Amen

December 18, 2018

The story of the shepherds and the angels encourages us to find peace in God and to not be afraid. What are some of the areas in your life where you have anxiety of which you can let go?

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Luke 2:8-14

[Click here to hear the same reading](#) or look up online "Linus's Christmas Monologue"

December 19, 2018

[Click here to spend some quiet moments with Allison Krauss and Yo Yo Ma listening to the Wexford Carol](#) or search for the song online. The music is peaceful in and of itself. Consider whether the lyrics of this carol also provide you a measure of peace – "to Bethlehem, be not afraid."

Good people all, this Christmas time
Consider well and bear in mind
What our good God for us has done
In sending His beloved Son

With Mary holy we should pray
To God with love this Christmas day
In Bethlehem upon that morn'
There was a blessed Messiah born

Near Bethlehem did shepherds keep
Their flocks of lambs and feeding sheep
To whom God's angels did appear
Which put the shepherds in great fear

"Arise and go", the angels said
"To Bethlehem, be not afraid
For there you'll find this happy morn'
A princely Babe, sweet Jesus born"

With thankful heart and joyful mind
The shepherds went that Babe to find
And as God's angel had foretold
They did our Savior Christ behold

Within a manger He was laid
And by his side the Virgin maid
As long foretold upon that morn'
There was a blessed Messiah born.

December 20, 2018

What element of peace do you find in this photo? Is there something in it that produces anxiety? Where do peace and anxiety co-exist for you?



December 21, 2018

"Peace on earth" is a phrase we see everywhere around Christmas. Many of us wonder where that peace is. We struggle with the uncertainty of tomorrow and the turmoil going on in the world around us. War, violence, illness, addictions, hatred, prejudice, injustice.

Where is the peace on earth?

In our own lives, we struggle to find peace with ourselves. We regret past mistakes, struggle with our present weaknesses, and worry about the future. We try to "find ourselves" in different ways and search for our purpose in life through relationships, work, leisure, and travel pursuits.

We miss and long for peace in our relationships with others. In our present relationships, sometimes we avoid conflict and run the other way in fear of doing something we'll regret. We take for granted those closest to us and experience the not-so-nice daily realities living in close proximity with them. We become frustrated and angry over the mistakes of others. Jesus came to earth in a peaceful way as a baby in a humble circumstance of a manger and proceeded to live a humble life. Many believe that Jesus came to restore our broken relationship with God so that we could first experience wholeness and peace with ourselves, and then extend it to others around us.

Our identity is based on who God has made us to be, not on the things that we do. We remember that God first loved us, and we grow in wanting to extend love to others. We begin to see hope for change in others and the world around us. How can you find peace on earth in this season?

December 22, 2018

A Prayer for Peace

May today I experience peace within.

May I trust God that I am exactly where I am meant to be.

May I not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May I use the gifts that I have received and pass on the love that has been given me.

May I be content knowing that I am a child of God.

May I let this presence settle into my bones
and allow my soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love.

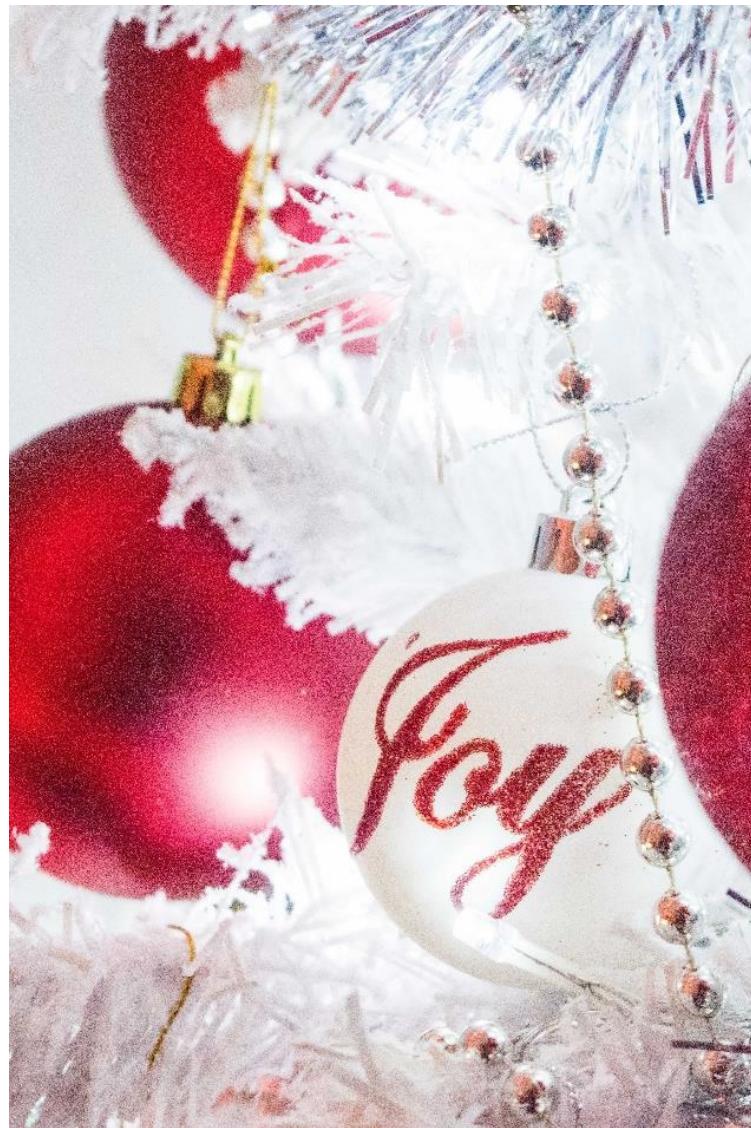
I pray these things in the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Amen

Week Four- The Week of Joy

"To turn, turn, will be our delight
'Til by turning, turning, we come round right."

The fourth week of Advent is the week of joy.
During this week joy enters our world. Part of our task is to catch it.
Ring the mini-bell this week as a reminder of the coming joy.



December 23, 2018

[Click here and enjoy this video](#) or search "Carol of the Bells (for 12 cellos)- The Piano Guys" online – the joy is contagious!

December 24, 2018

A carol to celebrate Christmas Eve. Sing it on your own or [click and listen to Celine Dion's version](#):

**O holy night the stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new glorious morn
Fall on your knees
O hear the angels' voices
O night divine
O night when Christ was born
O night divine o night
O night divine
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new glorious morn
Fall on your knees
O hear the angels' voices
O night divine
O night when Christ was born
O night divine o night
O night divine**

December 25, 2018

As we reach the end of this devotional, consider a reminder to carry forward Christmas into the rest of the year.

**"When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:
 to find the lost,
 to heal those broken in spirit,
 to feed the hungry,
 to release the oppressed,
 to rebuild the nations,
 to bring peace among all peoples,
 to make a little music with the heart...
 And to radiate the Light of Christ,
every day, in every way, in all that we do and in all that we say.
 Then the work of Christmas begins."**

