



Rio Rancho
Presbyterian Church
2025 Advent Devotional:
Gifts of the Spirit

Dear Friends,

Our Advent devotional this year is inspired partly by the work of Dr. Marcia McFee, professor, worship designer, author and preacher, who has created the Worship Design Studio, a website devoted to creating liturgy for the modern world. It is also inspired by the deep sense that we need “comfort and joy” this Advent season. Because of that, each week’s prompt included the option to share a recipe, craft or tradition from one’s family. As a result, this devotional may become a cherished recipe book for our congregation! The theme for this year is the Gifts of the Spirit: the gifts of hope, peace, joy and love.

It is organized in the same way our devotional was organized last year: by week rather than by day. At the beginning of each week, we have included two Scripture passages and a selection of hymns from the Glory to God hymnal that fit the theme of the week.

The prompts we offered for each week are as follows:

Week 1: Describe a time in your life when you have been given the gift of hope in dark times.

Describe ways in which we can give the gift of hope to the people or places that need it today.

Week 2: Describe a time in your life when you have been given the gift of peace in a time of turmoil. Describe ways in which we can give the gift of peace or BE a gift of peace for the people or places that need it today.

Week 3: Describe a time in your life when you have been given the gift of joy in a time of sadness or darkness. Describe ways in which

we can give the gift of joy or BE a gift of joy for the people or places that need it today.

Week 4: Describe a time in your life when you have been given the gift of love in a time of sadness or loneliness. Describe ways in which we can give the gift of love or BE a gift of love for the people or places that need it today.

We invite you to think about and perhaps write your own reflections on the week's theme as part of your spiritual practice for this holy season.

We are so grateful to all the folks who contributed to this year's Advent devotional.

Blessings and peace,
Birgitta Gustafson &
the Worship Committee

RRPC Advent Devotional 2025: The Gifts of the Spirit – God with us

Week One: The Gift of Hope

“The gift of hope is an essential survival tool because it reminds us that the hard times do not have the last word. Hope is not simply a wish. Hope calls us into action based on a belief that things can be different. We can work to bring about the better world we hope for.” – Marcia McFee

Scriptures:

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Isaiah 40:31 "but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

Hebrews 11:1-3 "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Hymns:

Born in the Night, Mary’s Child GTG #158

Live Into Hope GTG #772

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel GTG #88

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus GTG #82

Options for Reflections: choose one

1. Describe a time in your life when you have been given the gift of hope in dark times.

2. Describe ways in which we can give the gift of hope to the people or places that need it today.

3. Give the gift of hope by sharing a holiday recipe or craft that our members can make at home.

HOPE: We Plant, We Pray, We HOPE, We Harvest

My life has been nurtured by nature. Living my childhood in rural North Dakota, my family grew most of our food needs - vegetables, fruits, grains, eggs, meat, dairy. Bread was made and after the harvest of potatoes, LEFSA was made for the holidays and frozen to be enjoyed through the winter. "Putting food by" was primarily canning and freezing.

My parents were stewards of their land - having learned much from their immigrant Swedish and Norwegian parents. We trusted God to provide moisture and sunshine and hoped for minimal damaging wind and hailstorms.

Hebrews 11: 1-3 "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

The words of the Hymn, Live into Hope, GTG #772 verse 3 speaks to me.

" Live into hope of liberty, the right to speak, the right to be, the right to have one's daily bread, to hear God's word and thus be fed."

Pastor Frank (11.09.2025) "Put your hope in God, the giver of all good gifts.

Sin, hatred, destruction do not ultimately prevail.

We never part company with hope. In life and in death we belong to God."

My RRPC and Minnesota friend Helen Pederson has also made a lot of LEFSA.

** Please contact me if any of you have made, eaten. or would like to make this hand

rolled round potato Scandinavian delicacy often eaten with butter, cinnamon & sugar.

Let us pray: As people of faith and prayer, let us remember that
HOPE is eternal through God. Amen.

-Sharon Rae Hovey



Romans 15:13 ~ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

1 John 3:1a See what kind of love the Father has given us: We are called God's children - and that is what we are!

I've had some times recently where hope was pretty distant. I looked around the world and saw nothing but despair, division, ugliness. My decades-long war with depression was engaged in a mighty battle that it felt like I was losing. I felt stuck in darkness. It was hard to have hope in anything.

Then recently, I was on a Zoom call with 2 childhood friends. Which means we've been friends for about 45 years. These are the kind of friends who know every stupid crush, every high school wound, every fashion misstep in your life. Who know your entire story. Child rearing. Divorce. Death of your parents. Friends who know you better than you know yourself. Inside and out. And who know the demons you battle. And so I was relating the difficulty I find myself in. The dark cloud of depression. Constant self-doubt and self-criticism. Feeling unworthy of happiness. And then my friend Julie reminded me that I am a child of God. *A child of God!* Full stop. Breathe in and out. Think about that for a minute. I am a child of God. He calls me his own. I let that drift over me for a minute. I thought about it constantly over the next few days. And I found that the more I thought about it, the less bad I felt. How can all that self-doubt be legitimate if I am a child of God? God created me in His image. I wear the protective shield of God's love. And not only am I a child of God, but we are ALL children of God. The very same people I see in the world who are hurting, who are fighting, who are ugly to each other. We are all children of God.

And there I found my hope. For myself. For my little world. For my community. And for the larger, hurting world. There is hope in God. We are not alone. I am not alone. I *am* a child of God.

God, thank you for my life. Please help me to remember that you created me in your image and that I am your child. As we prepare for Jesus to come into the world, remind me of your infinite love and that my redemption through your Son Jesus is a gift that gives me hope for my life and for the world.

-Anne Kinney

The Gift of Hope – Birgitta Gustafson:

Hebrews 11:1-3 "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

“Live Into Hope” - #772, Glory to God Hymnal

“Live into hope of captives freed
from chains of fear or want or greed.
God now proclaims our full release
to faith and hope and joy and peace.”

This has been a year full of fear and not much hope, if I’m being honest. I have spent much time reminding myself to calm down, to not spiral and catastrophize, to take deep breaths. Some of my fears have been realized, some not (at least not yet) - and still, here I am: a living, breathing human, a child of God, called to be a beacon of hope and love and joy and peace. God gives us a vision of how life SHOULD be, how it COULD be, and how we, God’s creatures, are to act toward one another and toward the creation as a whole. So, my spiritual practice, for this time in which we find ourselves, is to live in defiance: in defiance of fear and anger and despair - by embracing hope and joy and love.

This Advent, I want to share with you a recipe that is at the core of our family’s Christmas Eve celebration. My parents were first generation Americans, the children of Swedish immigrants. They both grew up in tiny Midwestern towns during the Great Depression, members of a Swedish pietist denomination, the Swedish Mission Covenant Church. They spoke Swedish at home as kids, and English in school. My Swedish family celebrates Christmas on Christmas Eve night with a feast and the opening of gifts, and in our childhood, the singing of carols around the piano, in Swedish and English. My

favorite part of the feast is the recipe I share with you: Swedish meatballs or köttbullar.

1 ½ lbs. ground beef
1 cup mashed potatoes
¼ cup bread crumbs
¼ cup grated onions
½ cup cream
¼ cup water
1 T margarine or butter
1 egg
1 t salt
¼ t pepper

Saute the onions. Mix all ingredients. Roll into nickel-sized balls. Fry in oil (I use olive oil) for about 10-15 minutes over medium heat. Move the frying pan in a circle to get the balls rolling and keep their shape. Test for doneness. This will make many batches!

CRANBERRY RELISH

None of the measurements need to be precise. Make it at least one day ahead of time.

3 oz package of Jello (lemon, or any flavor that is red)
2 cups raw cranberries, rinsed and picked over
1 medium orange—the whole thing, except for seeds
1 cup sugar
1 medium red skinned apple (about 1 cup) finely diced
1 cup of diced celery

Dissolve Jello in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of boiling water. Put into the freezer to thicken. Cut the whole orange into chunks and place in a food processor or grinder with the cranberries. Process until not quite smooth. Stir in the sugar, then set aside. Dice the apples and the celery. Dump the cranberry and orange mixture into a container or serving dish, then stir in the apples and celery. By this time your Jello may have started to thicken. Even if it hasn't, stir it in, and put the whole thing in the refrigerator overnight. I find that if I use a whole bag of cranberries, 2 packages of Jello, $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of sugar, a large orange, a large apple and about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of diced celery it comes out about right. Taste it to see if it needs more sugar. I am not a measuring cook so all the quantities are approximate. This makes a lot, but it keeps well in the fridge for quite a few days. If you want to make a smaller quantity, any unused cranberries from the bag are easily frozen. Give it a stir before you serve it. It looks pretty in a glass bowl.

~ Margaret Crawl

HOPE:

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

When I was a child and old enough to write, my mom and dad asked me what I would like for Christmas. Now this was one of the happiest moments of my life! I get to tell them what I wanted? I really get to make a list of all the things I would like for Christmas? This was exciting!

I made my list, thinking of all the cool toys I wanted: Hot Wheels race set, a bike, “The Lieutenant Machine Gun” just to name a few. After listing about ten items I wanted I handed it over to my parents. This was the best!

Christmas Day was going to be great! The hope I had was fantastic and made me incredibly happy and suddenly Christmas Day seemed months away (though it was just two weeks away). The excitement, the imagining of all the happiness I would experience was too much for my small brain! That strong hope of opening the gifts, super early on Christmas morning, was the best feeling in the world!

Well, Christmas came and went. The presents I opened were not on my list.

Socks and underwear, a couple of books, two shirts, a pair of dungarees, and in my stocking: an orange, some walnuts, some hard candy, a plastic harmonica a tiny plastic fire truck and a spinning top. Boy, talk about hope deflated. I politely said thank you and quietly played with what I got. I didn't get what I wanted, though I did get what I needed.

But that Hope! Hope was so powerful, and thank God I still had hope for next year.

About two-thousand years ago, I'm sure the Jews' hope was undergoing the same disappointing frustration of not getting what they wanted from God: the expected Messiah.

Years and years of oppression yet they still clung to that hope of the coming Messiah to "make everything new" and drive out the Romans and all of the evil-doing people.

Yet when Jesus, The Messiah, did come, they didn't get what they wanted!

They got what they needed. Someone to save them from their sins. And still to this day there are way too many people that don't appreciate the greatest gift of all...the gift of eternal life. With God. So now I am filled with Hope! Because God is the God of Hope, He has filled me with joy and peace knowing I am saved from my sins and will spend eternity with Him. Christmases just get better each year! Pray and then see what you can do to share this great Hope.

-Bill Wehner

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. – Romans 15:13

HOPE

Merriam-Webster

- a. : desire accompanied by expectation of obtaining what is desired or belief that it is obtainable
- b. : someone or something on which hopes are centered
- c. : something desired or hoped for
- d. : to cherish a desire with anticipation
- e. : to want something to happen or be true
- f. : to desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment

Hope is a funny word. It can be light of weight (I hope it snows!) Or condescending (I hope you aren't wearing *that!*) It can be deep-felt (I hope they find a cure.) Or show reliance (All hopes were with the man on the pitcher's mound.) But most importantly, hope shows the expectancy of great things from God, our Father through Jesus Christ, the Hope of the World.

The Westminster Confession of Faith lays out this Hope as available to all who trust in God (bold for emphasis):

Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation

Although hypocrites, and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions: of being in the favor of God and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish: **yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all**

good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God: which hope shall never make them ashamed.

RRPC Advent Devotional 2025: The Gifts of the Spirit – God with us

Week Two: The Gift of Peace

“The gift of Christ’s peace reminds us that we can have serenity even in the midst of non-peaceful situations. Peace is not simply the absence of conflict. Peace is an ever-present gift that we can open at any time when we stop, breathe, and trust that we are never alone. And the gift of peace we can give is to be present for those who feel alone.” - Marcia McFee

Scriptures:

John 16:33 “I have said this to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution, but take courage: I have conquered the world!”

John 14:27 “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Isaiah 9:6 “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Hymns:

Before the Marvel of This Night GTG #125

Silent Night, Holy Night! GTG #122

Make Me a Channel of Your Peace GTG #753

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel GTG #88

Options for Reflections: choose one

1. Describe a time in your life when you have been given the gift of peace in a time of turmoil.

2. Describe ways in which we can give the gift of peace or BE a gift of peace for the people or places that need it today.

3. Give the gift of peace by sharing a holiday recipe or craft that our members can make at home.

THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO PEACE

Matthew 5:9:

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God". Most people would say "Yes, peace is a good thing. I would like to see peace between nations, peace within our country, peace within our families and peace in my own heart." So why is it missing?

CONSIDER THESE THREE THINGS

1. INJUSTICE. As Genevieve and I joined the NO KINGS protesters, there were many signs that said: "No Justice, no peace". How can a people or a person experience peace when they have been treated unjustly or even when they see others treated unjustly? Acceptance of reality does not mean we have peace. Even trying to do something about injustice (even though we should, and I hope you do) will not bring peace to those who have been wronged. Why, because even though there may be truces or favorable court decisions, the hurt is still there. So, what is needed to have a more abundant peace? True Forgiveness. Do you find that as hard as I do when you or someone you care about has been wronged? Certainly, peace will be illusive if we harbor a spirit of...

2. REVENGE AND THE DESIRE TO GET EVEN. Why do we have no peace in our country today? This spirit of revenge which is rampant among our leaders is having terrible consequences. And it permeates into our own thinking. You know the temptation is there in our own lives. And even if we say "God's going to get them", we know that's not the answer. "Vengeance is mine says the Lord", though a help towards our peace, does not bring perfect peace to our hearts. Again, there needs to be forgiveness on our part. And why is forgiveness so hard?

3. PRIDE. Pride blocks our ability to give up control, and that in turn

makes it impossible to forgive. And to forgive in personal relationships goes a long way to helping those who have hurt you to find some semblance of peace. Forgiveness is a gift. The most precious gift of God through Jesus Christ. "Our only Comfort in life and in death is that we belong to Christ.....". (Heidelberg Catechism Question 1). This is the source of our ultimate peace... but to think that we will have perfect peace always is Pollyanna. If we love and care for people we will always have to work at having peace in our hearts. And, we should of course, always try to be "Peacemakers".

~ Russ Dykehouse

The Gift of Peace -

Being that I have been given the “Gift of Peace” multiple times in my life, I thought this would be an easy subject to touch on.

However, because the gift has been given to me so frequently it was something that I had to think about more deeply.

I have had many challenges in my life that have been extremely disruptive, hard to deal with, physically & emotionally draining, questioned my faith, left me in tears, and made me feel as though life would never be normal again.

In thinking about all of these times, I always come back to my faith in God and how prayer, talking to him, yelling at him (yes I did), and having “Peace” in knowing that God has gotten me through so much turmoil in my life, how could I doubt that he wouldn’t do it again.

The Gift of Peace to me is knowing that no matter what challenges arise in my life, no matter how big or small, I will always have God walking beside me, guiding me, and allowing me to move forward.

John 14:27 ~ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Dearest God, The peace that you give to me daily is such a Gift. I pray that you will share this gift with others who struggle with the challenges that they face every day. Please give them strength in knowing that you are with them and that Jesus our Lord and Savior died to give us Peace, knowing that we have been saved from our worldly sins.

In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

~ Karen Williams

PEACE:

John 14:27 "Peace I leave you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

This passage resonates with me today as it did in 1974 when I divorced my husband of twelve years and the father of our two children, ages ten and seven. I was both troubled and afraid of being a single, working mother. Even though my faith in God was (and is) very strong, the unknown mysteries of the future scared me. Once I made the decision to go through with the divorce and I had found a Christian lawyer, peace descended on me. I didn't feel alone anymore. I knew I was going to succeed and be able to provide for us.

I have had that feeling of peace numerous times over the past years and I pray that each and every one of you can (or have) found that wonderful peace in your lives. Just being quiet in prayer and listening with your heart as you slowly breathe in and out, may peace enter in and calm you. Today I can give of myself to others. Hopefully, I can demonstrate my faith, my peace and my love for them. There is not enough peace and love in this world today being openly shown. Let your inner light shine!

George Huggins, husband of Rev. Kay Huggins wrote the following:

"My peace I give unto you
It's a peace that the world cannot give
It's a peace that the world cannot understand
Peace to know, peace to live
My peace I give unto you"

From the song "Before the Marvel of this Night" - "Sing peace, sing peace, sing gift of peace."

This is my prayer for you.

Joan Roschevitz



Inner Peace

To achieve a positive emotional state;

One must accept yourself,

Your strengths, your flaws, and your mate.

To enhance psychological well-being;

Meditation and mindfulness,

Helping you stay focused and not misleading.

To adapt the ability to cope;

Respond to challenges calmly,

Stress can deny the presence of hope.

To connect with your inner self;

Self-reflection understands your values,

Your character, actions, motives, and thyself.

To be accepted and forgive;

Accept the present moment as it is,

Greater peace will live.

To shift your mindset;

Count your blessings,

Focus on gratitude for the best peace yet.

To achieve inner peace;

Do these things with quality thoughts,

And peace will increase.

~ Cyndi Pitts

PEACE:

My favorite memory of Christmas as a child was our family tradition of going to church on Christmas Eve and on the way home, we would drive around our small town in southwestern Wisconsin to look at Christmas decorations and lights.

The church sanctuary was always decorated with greenery, and the Christmas Eve service was always packed. The choir would process up the aisle, and we would sing all the traditional hymns and hear the story of Jesus' birth. O Holy Night was sung by the choir, and one of the most beautiful voices I had ever heard sang a solo. And in keeping with tradition, we would end the service by singing Silent Night, Holy Night and lighting the individual candles. I was not really singing because of course I could not be trusted to hold a burning candle and a hymnal at the same time, so I would just stare into the flickering light on my candle and think about the wonderful Christmas morning to come and the presents we would receive.

On this particular Christmas Eve in 1968, everything changed. My father had passed away in July, and my mother was really struggling to handle being a single mom of 5. Well, we went to church, drove around, maybe a little longer than usual, and got home to find out that Santa Clause had come to our house while we were at church. I was 10 years old and probably in-between believing if Santa was real or not, well this confirmed it, Santa was real!!

As it turned out, it was a logistical move on my mother's part because we were actually driving 60 miles that night to be with family in Madison. And on that drive, I remember thinking how peaceful and beautiful that world was that night. The moon was shining brightly on the snow-covered fields, and we were safe and warm in our car (no icy roads that night). And then of course joining

my mom's family for a Christmas celebration the next day and enjoying being around so many loved ones.

It was a tough year for my family, but we all survived and as it turned out, added 6 more siblings to my family when my mother married again in 1974. If you think Christmas with 5 kids is crazy, try having 11 kids in an old farmhouse with ONE bathroom, but that is a whole other story!

I do find peace and joy in my big family and all of the traditions we have kept going and the new ones that we make. I still look into the flame of the little candles that we hold on Christmas Eve, but now I think about the baby boy that was born that night to save the world. And I wish for Peace on Earth for everyone.

Almighty God, I pray for peace in our world, where there is often conflict and strife. Bring an end to violence and injustice. Inspire leaders to work towards the well-being of all people. May your love and compassion prevail, uniting nations in a common pursuit of peace. Let your kingdom of peace reign on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, I pray. Amen.

~ Marie Fry

Peace

Historians call the period from 27 BCE to 180 CE the “Pax Romana” or the “Imperial Peace” of the Roman Empire. Why? Because there was “relative peace” within the Empire from the time Augustus Caesar defeated Mark Antony to the death of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Now “relative” is the right word. During that time span there was the Jewish Revolt from 66-73 CE that saw the destruction of Jerusalem. It was “peace” enforced by the Roman legions, heavy taxation and colonial governors across the Mediterranean.

“Relative” is the right word, indeed.

Jesus says in John 14:27: “Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world does. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” This is a different kind of peace. It is not like the “relative peace” of the Pax Romana. It is a deeply spiritual peace within our hearts. It is the peace of our Lord in our lives. It is what Paul calls “the peace that surpasses understanding” (Phil. 4:7). It is an inner serenity in all situations, even facing the stress of danger, illness, and death. It is hard to describe to someone who has never experienced it.

Our Advent message to the world is “Peace on earth.” Something very different from Rome’s “relative peace.” Something only Christ can give us through the Holy Spirit. Something that “surpasses understanding.” The peace of Christ is truly a gift, a grace, a spiritual presence that is almost ineffable. Our message to the world at Advent is this: “May you experience the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ who came to give us peace-not as the world gives.” But a deeply spiritually inner tranquility that only Christ can offer.

~ Frank Yates

RRPC Advent Devotional 2025: The Gifts of the Spirit – God with us

Week Three: The Gift of Joy

“The gift of joy is not the equivalent of happiness, but rather the deep conviction that we are called to be present in the work of bringing about “great things” – a better world for those who need it most.” - Marcia McFee

Scriptures:

Isaiah 55:12 “For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

1 Peter 1:8-9 “Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Psalms 30:11-12 “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.”

Hymns:

Raise a Song of Gladness GTG #155

We Will Go Out With Joy GTG #539

Joy to the World GTG #134

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel GTG #88

Options for Reflections: choose one

1. Describe a time in your life when you have been given the gift of joy in a time of sadness or darkness.

2. Describe ways in which we can give the gift of joy or BE a gift of joy for the people or places that need it today.

3. Give the gift of joy by sharing a holiday recipe or craft that our members can make at home.

The Gift of Joy

Scripture: Isaiah 55:12 “For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

I was walking in the woods one early summer day and was stopped in my tracks by a small grove of young aspen trees. Their leaves were shimmering in the sun and fluttering in a breeze, making a glorious sound that sounded very much like clapping, as if they were applauding the sheer joy of being alive. I remember this moment often, it reminds me of what a gift life on God’s beautiful earth is, and it gives me joy.

Hymn: Joy to the World “Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her king! Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing!”

I love this carol, but I must admit that Christmas carols have become a little stale over the years. Then I heard Pastor Patrinell Wright and The Total Experience Gospel Choir sing this carol and I experienced it anew. It was rhythmic and exuberant, with a different flavor than I’d heard before. Sometimes we need to see and experience things from a different perspective, being open to all the different ways human beings express their joy and be willing to join in that joy. It just might refresh our own appreciation of what has become stale in our lives.

Describe a way in which we can give the gift of joy.

We take our dog occasionally to a dog park. She is so excited to go that she looks like a cartoon dog running in place on the slippery tile. At the park she runs with abandon and greets any other people and dogs who stroll by. She is joyful. We often see a fellow church

member walking his dog there and one morning he shared his optimism that things in our country will turn around; things will get better, and people will bring this about. His positive, encouraging attitude and faith lifted my spirits, giving me hope and a little peace. We can do simple, small things for one another, encourage each other and celebrate with one another, and remind one another of the meaning of this special season.

Beloved God, thank you for the bountiful gifts of your beautiful earth, and the precious fellowship of your faithful. Amen!

~ Joy Sternberg

JOY: God's voice in the here and now

MATTHEW 24:35

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Advent means arrival, but not just of the Christ child. It means we're watching for what's coming, what's next, what's new.

Jesus' words in Matthew are apocalyptic, but not in the cinematic, world-on-fire kind of way. Apocalypse literally means to reveal. And in times of pain or upheaval, what we see – what is revealed – matters.

I remember when Alex, age 6 ½, was at Boston Children's hospital dealing with heart failure, respiratory failure and kidney failure. My pastor, Kyle, had been fasting and praying along with many others in my church family. Pastor Kyle kept reassuring me that, "God told me that everything is going to work out." Well, how come God didn't let me know? I'm his Momma! I was actually kind of mad. Why would God reveal reassurance to my pastor and not to me?

Then I took a breath. I had been praying for God to carry me through this time. I knew He needed me to put on a happy face, continue with my daily routine at the hospital being by Alex's side and simply encourage him. God knew this was all I could handle at the time. And God's timing is perfect. I learned to wait for God, no matter what.

After being on the transplant list for four days, we were told that they had found a heart; it was on its way from the Midwest. Then a storm delayed the operation and flight. I didn't question it; because God's timing is perfect. Alex's body probably needed a few more hours to allow his body to rest. God was in control. When this new heart

started right away and Alex didn't need the support of the ECMO machine after surgery, I knew God had answered our prayers!

When we feel unmoored by change, medical issues or heartache, we can anchor ourselves in the stories of Jesus — His words, His life, His promises. Love your neighbor. Care for the vulnerable. Walk humbly. These are the teachings that guide and serve us well. These are the words that don't pass away.

In Advent, we remember that God's voice still speaks not just once in Bethlehem, but also here and now. As Alex turns 30 on December 4th, I'm excited to see what's next for our family and absolutely astounded by how blessed we've been!

-Ginny O'Neill

The Gift of *Joy* – Christie Alison

Psalm 30: 11-2 "You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with *joy*, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever."

In 2015, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Over the course of the next year, I had six surgeries. My family helped care for me during this time. I also spent an enormous amount of time by myself, recovering from the trauma of the surgeries.

The following year, we had a new addition to our family: a 12-week-old Boxer puppy. She was a bundle of energy as Boxers tend to be. We named her Toby. She quickly assumed her place in our home. She loves playing with the kids. Absolutely loves playing *Chase Me!* She is a sweet little dog who is an important part of our family.

Toby is MY dog. If I'm home, you will know where I am based on where the dog is. She is my shadow. If I'm not home, Toby simply waits for me to come back. This dog brings me so much *joy*. In those times when I didn't feel so good, Toby was always there for me.

Today, Toby has slowed down a bit. She still has her zoomy moments. We are careful about what we say in front of her, because she listens to us. Don't ever say the word "walk" unless you intend to take her out.

Toby's Potatoes

5-8 Russet potatoes, peeled

Vegetable oil

2 tsp. salt

1 tsp. garlic powder

½ onion, chopped medium

Cut potatoes in to 1/2" cubes. Put potatoes in a microwave safe bowl. Pour 2 - 3 tbs. of vegetable oil over the potatoes. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap. Microwave for 3 minutes. Carefully remove the bowl from the microwave and shake the bowl to redistribute the potatoes (do not remove plastic wrap yet). Repeat this sequence 3 times, microwaving for 9 minutes total. Remove and discard the plastic wrap, being careful to not burn yourself with the accumulated steam. Place a skillet on the stove over medium high heat. Add 2 tbs. of vegetable oil to pan. Wait until oil is shimmering. Add potatoes to skillet. Top with salt, garlic powder, and onion. Cook potatoes for 15 minutes, turning occasionally until they are golden brown and crispy.

****When you make this recipe and Toby is at your house, make sure you have some extra potatoes that fall on the floor. She LOVES raw potatoes. Silly dog.**

JOY

Ps. 30: 11-12 "You have turned my mourning into dancing, you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you forever."

Hymn; Raise a song of gladness, people of the earth
Christ has come bringing peace, joy to every heart
Alleluia, alleluia, joy to every heart
Alleluia, alleluia, joy to every heart.

Devotional

When I was about ten years old, my father lost his job. We became very poor. We only had meat on Sunday (which was true of many people for most of recorded history). There were no food banks nor SNAP so we ate a lot of rice and oatmeal.

There was no money for Christmas. I broke a branch off of a juniper bush and we called it a "Christmas tree". My brothers and I made gifts. I don't remember what they were. As children we learned the joy of doing things for ourselves. My mother made a Dutch treat. We heated our home with a fireplace. I'm sure we were cold, but I only remember the joy of singing carols around the fire.

Since then, I've had many affluent Christmases but this is the one I remember most fondly. For many years now I have been hard-pressed to think of anything I want for Christmas.

Prayer: Our Father, thank you for the joy of our salvation. Restore the joy we have lost in our affluence. Forgive us for having many gifts when so many have none. Amen.

I'm sharing the recipe for the bread my mother made. It means "breakfast cake" in Dutch. There are many variations.

Ontbijtkoek

1 c. raisins

1 c. water. Bring to a boil and then cool

1 c. sugar

1/2 c shortening or margarine

Then, stir in 2c. flour

Oven: 325 degrees

1 tsp. cinnamon

1/2 tsp. ginger

1/2 tsp. cloves

1/2 tsp baking powder

1/2 tsp. baking soda

Bake in a greased and floured loaf pan for one hour.

Genevieve Dykehouse

The Gift of Joy
“Christmas Chocolate Fudge”
(*Marian Flick*)

1-Mix:

- 1 can sweetened condensed milk
- 4 1/2 cups sugar
- 1/2 cup butter

2-Bring to boil, cook 6 minutes

3-Stir in:

- 1 pint marshmallow cream
- 18 oz. chocolate chips (12 oz. milk chocolate + 6 oz dark chocolate)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 1/2 cups nuts (optional)

4-Pour into buttered 9” x 13” pan

5-Chill then cut into squares

My mom, Marian Flick, only made this yummy, creamy fudge for the Christmas holidays. It was a family favorite that brought all of us, as well as our friends and relatives, a tremendous amount of joy. She used black walnuts from the tree on our farm. Picking the nuts out of the shells for this fudge was a painstaking project that my siblings and I “suffered” through, knowing this was a very important ingredient in Mom’s fudge.

Mom always stored the fudge in the same square glass dish that had a glass lid. I can envision that dish of fudge yet today. Because all of us loved the fudge so much, she “hid it” in her bedroom

closet. An “interesting” point about that square glass dish...it was the same dish in which she stored something else she made...pickled pigs feet! Thank goodness that dish did not retain those flavors!

Prayer for Joy

Heavenly Father, I come to You to ask for Your joy. I know You are the source of all joy. I ask that You fill my heart with Your presence. Help me to see the good in my life, even when things are tough. Help me to be grateful for all that You have given me. Help me to share Your joy with others. Amen.

-Victoria Flick

RRPC Advent Devotional 2025: The Gifts of the Spirit – God with us

Week Four: The Gift of Love

“The gift of love is the essence of the birth of Christ. The Holy One wanted to be so present to us that God’s Spirit became flesh in order to inhabit the gifts of touching, healing, comforting and challenging. Love is the clarion call to us as Jesus’ disciples. The more love we put into the world, the better the world will be.” – Marcia McFee

Scriptures:

1 John 4:19 “We love because he first loved us.”

John 13:34 “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Isaiah 54:10 “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.”

Hymns:

Though I May Speak (The Gift of Love) GTG #693

Love Divine, All Loves Excelling GTG #366

Love Has Come GTG #110

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel GTG #88

Options for Reflections: choose one

1. Describe a time in your life when you have been given the gift of love in a time of sadness or loneliness.

2. Describe ways in which we can give the gift of love or BE a gift of love for the people or places that need it today.

3. Give the gift of love by sharing a holiday recipe or craft that our members can make at home.

Quotes of Love

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son!” John 3:16

“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

1 Corinthians 13:13.

“We love because he first loved us.” 1 John 4:19

“A friend loves at all times.” Proverbs 17:17

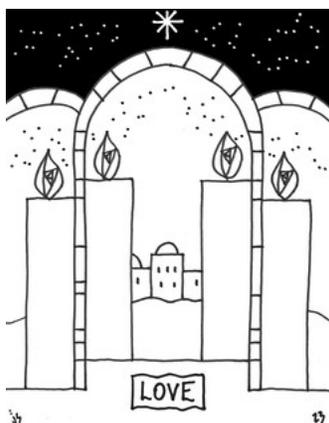
“Love begins by taking care of the closest ones- the ones at home.”
Mother Theresa

“When the power of love overcomes the love of power then the world will know peace!”

Jimi Hendrix

“In giving of yourself you will discover a whole new meaning of life and love.” Cesar Chavez

-Maria Chavez



LOVE - a word that is used so frequently but with such varied meanings. I love my husband. I love my midday cup of tea with cheese and crackers. I love going to New Mexico United Soccer games. I love singing (even though my voice is not very good anymore). Love given is the best. In my youth I gave a gift of love to my sister. She LOVED baseball and I did not. However, for her birthday one year - I was 11 and she was 10 - I took her to a Red Sox game at Fenway Park. She was thrilled and I was just happy to give her something that she would enjoy. She had her own score card and kept writing things down on it. I mostly people watched. When we talked about this game years later, I told her that I thought the best part of the game was the seventh inning stretch. She said that at the seventh inning stretch I turned to her and said "Can we go home now?" Little did I know that everybody getting up from their seats was not the end of the game! I did not even know there were nine innings for baseball. However that lack of knowledge did not lessen the love she felt for my gift to her. Love that is given comes back to you larger and better. The blessing comes with the giving. Anytime I offer myself to others I get as much or more joy and love back. (And that's no joke!)

As Paul wrote in I Corinthians 13:4-7:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

Dear Lord, may we always love in the way that you have shown us how to love. Amen.

~ Hazel Lathrop

The Gift of Love – Christie Alison

1 John 4:19 "We love because he first loved us."

I received the call in the late morning in June of this year. My brother was dead. His daughter, my niece, was on the phone. We knew this day would come, yet we were unprepared. She sobbed uncontrollably on the phone. She told me she would be flying to Washington state that afternoon. Without hesitation, I assured her I would do the same. We met up in the airport late that same night. I was only 10 years old when my niece was born. Not long after that, her parents divorced. She and I were never close. Years went by but I never made the effort to be a good aunt. My brother often spoke of his daughter, keeping me up to date on her life. And now this. We spent the next four days together, dealing with this tragic death. We cried. We hugged. We bonded. It was a horrific moment in my life, one that will stay with me forever. In the end though, I lost my brother but found a deep and lasting love for my niece.

I love the hymn Love Has Come. Below is verse 3 of the hymnal in the Glory to God hymnal, page 110.

Love has come, He never will leave us!
Love is life everlasting and free.
Love is Jesus within and among us.
Love is the peace our hearts are seeking.
Love! Love! Love is the gift of Christmas.
Love! Love! Praise to You, God on high!

This is an old recipe my grandmother would make during Christmas. I used to sneak into the kitchen to secretly grab a cookie. So yummy.

Fruitcake Squares

2 ½ cups firmly packed light
brown sugar
1 ½ sticks butter
3 eggs
1 cup unsifted self-rising flour
1 tsp. vanilla
1 lb. candied cherries
1 lb. candied pineapple
1 lb. (2 cups) pecans, coarsely
cut

Grease and flour 12 x 18”
cookie sheet. Sprinkle
chopped nuts over bottom of
pan. Chop up fruit and sprinkle
over batter after it is poured
over nuts. DO NOT press fruit
into batter. Bake at 250 degrees
for 1 ¾ - 2 hours. Cut in squares
before it gets cold.

LOVE

“For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you. Isaiah 54:10

O Come, O Come Emmanuel
O come, Desire of nations, bid
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and discord cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.

I have always strived to be a loving and joyful presence (God knows I do fall short!).

Reflecting on Love, I turn to the instances of when I felt this gift in my life. What comes to mind first is somewhat recent.

Several years ago, my ears (to hear) were closed: suffering from depression, I felt lost and alone, doubting why I was here. I was working and not wanting for anything, but felt a void and was not consciously listening to God’s guidance or feeling God’s love. I had been attending a Lutheran church which wasn’t quite right for me. I then attended several other churches, but still nothing felt right. I needed help and asked for it. Then, little by little, my ears were opening and letting God’s voice enter.

I prayed for guidance, and let go of the depression, worry and stress. At this point, my aunt invited me to attend Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church. God’s presence and the Love I felt here solidified the message that this was the place! This church was filled with Love, and the first Sunday

I attended, I knew being here would help me reestablish my relationship with Jesus and God.
Ever since, I have been a member of the music at RRPC, and am thankful to sing God's praises every week. I live every day listening, praying, and feeling God's love through this church. I am so thankful and blessed to have found this home!

Father, help us to love all others, as you love them: to know we are all your children and hear your guidance to help where there is need. Give us a greater understanding of what it is to love our neighbors as ourselves. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Peace to all,
Lisa Wengerd

When Pat and I first married we spent Christmas Eve with his parents and 6 brothers and sisters. We would spend Christmas day with my family.

I would make wassail as a gift of warmth and love. It became a tradition every Christmas Eve.

Wassail:

A warm holiday drink that fills the house with a wonderful holiday smell.

3 TBS dark brown sugar

¼ tsp ground ginger

½ tsp ground cinnamon

¼ tsp nutmeg

¼ tsp allspice

½ gal apple cider & 1 small navel orange sliced

5 whole cloves

1 lemon sliced

1 star anise pod

2 cups cranberry juice cocktail

Core apples and slice into 8 pieces. Place in large pot, add brown sugar and ground spices. Add 1½ of the apple cider put lid on pot and simmer

Ice the orange and lemon. Slice the whole cloves into the spices.

Add to the pot. Put the remaining apple cider and cranberry juice, simmer on low for 10 minutes. Let cool a little and serve warm, with a stick of cinnamon. You may add a little brandy if you like.

Dear Lord,

As we enter this Season of new life be with us and remind us that your love is for everyone, and help all those who struggle to know that they are not alone that your love goes with them.

Blessings, Leah Gerlach