

Merry Christmas

Advent Devotions 2020

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HOPE

Rev. Ray Shepard

As we enter this season of Advent, our thoughts should be directed to the true focus on what Christmas brings to each of us during this special time of year. Advent brings an unique perspective to the topics we look at during the weeks that lead up to and culminate with Christmas; Hope, Love, Peace and Joy.

Hope, as defined by Webster's Dictionary, is to expect or look forward to, with desire and confidence, confidence in future events, expectation of something desired.

A great song, 'the Solid Rock', says:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly trust in Jesus' name.

KJV Colossians 1:4-17. He has purchased us by His blood and He covers us with His righteousness. Our faith, hope and trust must have their foundation in Jesus Christ who is the firm foundation "For no other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." KJV 1 Corinthians 3:11.

Our Hope rests in our faith in Jesus Christ, and this Hope continues to grow and develop as our faith grows. During Advent, we have an opportunity and an obligation to look forward to the future promises of God.

1 Peter 1:13 Therefore, gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Merry Christmas and God Bless you All! Ray Shepard

*Unto Us
a Child is Born*



PEACE

Rev. James Markey

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

-from "Christmas Bells" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



I first learned some of the text of this poem some years back in the context of a choral setting with my school singers. At the time, I hadn't done my typical research enough to explore the full context of the poem, and apologize to those students who received an incomplete education that year. In an effort to rectify this, I will summarize that at the point in which Longfellow composed this poem, his second wife had recently tragically passed away and he had then learned of a grave injury to his son during the ravages of the civil war. Truly, there was much despair in the heart of the poet.

"...in despair I bowed my head;
'There is no peace on earth,' I said:
'For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!'"

In so many ways 2020 has been a year that has tested our faith, and stripped away our collective sense of security. In many ways it has laid bare an ugly undercurrent of acrimony, the depths of which each of us are capable would have shocked us to learn about ourselves a year ago. Truly, the world would have us believe that there is, indeed, no peace to be found on earth.

When I consider this year, yes I can understand in a small way how Longfellow must have been hurting enough to write a poem as he did. When I think back with tearful eyes on what we've lost this year, and the bitterness and ugliness that we've shared, it hurts. The world is hurting, as darkness threatens to ensnare us. But as its oft been said, the dawn follows the darkest hour of night.

This Christmas season, let us prayerfully recommit ourselves to the greater Truth: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:6-7) This year, as in every year since those lucky few were present at that Holy manger, we have much to celebrate. For we have been given the greatest gift that has ever been given: Our messiah has come, and he has promised us the security of belonging to Him, with Him. Surely some of the greatest comfort Jesus ever offered speaks to His understanding of our need for peace, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27)



Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!"

When we fix our hearts and minds on Christ, we find peace.
God has never stopped working. His Love endures. Forever.
Amen and Merry Christmas!



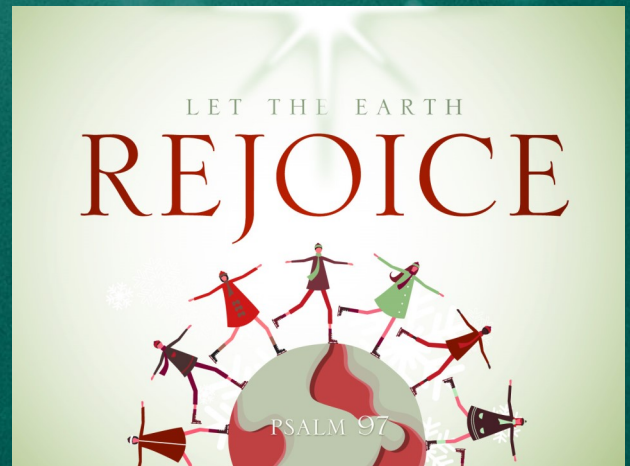
LOVE

Dr. Court Greene

John contains no nativity story, so it is rarely used around Christmas, but I am going to change that. While there is no focus on Jesus' birth in the gospel, there is more emphasis on one important word in John than in any of the other gospels. That word is love. Jesus' words in John 15 focus on love, and do so in a way that invites us to not just appreciate love, but also put it into practice.

John 15:9 says "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

When we love others, we model the behavior of Jesus whose arrival we celebrate during advent. When we accept and then share God's love instead of trying to hoard it for ourselves, we do as the verse directs us, living in a state of love. When we think of the fact that a savior was sent to us, though we had done nothing to deserve salvation, we cannot help but feel loved on some level. Therefore, love permeates every part of the Christmas season. As we continue to prepare for Christmas, let us see every step on that path as an opportunity to receive, share, and abide in the love of God.



GIFTS

Matthew 6:3-4 – "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

I started my coaching career at a rural high school in Sampson County, North Carolina in 1979. It was a school in which many were involved in the free lunch program. So, each year there would be members of my basketball team who couldn't afford new shoes, or even socks.

In 1983, I had a very good team, but my point guard couldn't come up with the money to buy the school monogrammed socks. Well, I also happened to be his French teacher. During the Christmas season, we would spend time in class singing Christmas carols, in French, of course. The students participated very well. I devised a plan which would have the students competing against one another to determine who performed best.

I solicited the help of 3 fellow teachers to be the judges and I told them who I wanted to win. Of course, the prize was a pair of Lakewood Leopard socks. The good news was that he really was the best. The song was "Il est né le divin enfant." (He is born, the divine infant).

He wore the socks proudly and led us to a 16-5 record.

Danny McDowell

JOY

"Joy is more than happiness. I think the word JOY best describes the emotion that I feel when I sense God's hand and presence in my life. Joy is not the same as fun. Fun is a pleasure for a little while, but JOY is a lasting and deep sense of well being that comes from being in a right relationship with God. Joy is what I and all believers can take with us everywhere, even into the midst of trials.

Joy comes from realizing that Jesus is in control and when we truly realize that a unique peace and sense of joy sweep over us. God made us to experience JOY. If you let God's JOY show through you, not only do others experience this joy, but yours grows as well. This joyous time of year, may you find true JOY as stated in 1 Peter 1:8-9 "Though you have not seen Him you love Him and even though you do not see Him now you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious JOY, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your soul." Merry Christmas, Lisa Ledford



Joy to the World

★ PRAYING | CARING | SHARING



Christmas Gift Suggestions:
To your enemy, forgiveness. To an opponent, tolerance. To a friend, your heart. To a customer, service. To all, charity. To every child, a good example. To yourself, respect.

Oren Arnold

Christmas Card Sayings © AllWording.com

