



Live Give Love

TIMES LIKE THESE

Advent Devotion 2021

Regional Youth Council
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma

Commission for Children, Youth, & Young Adults

Our ministries teach the language of faith and the practice of Christianity for the Church today and tomorrow as we love and serve like Jesus.

Regional Youth Council (RYC) is made up of youth and adults from our congregations. Each member gives their talent, time, and leadership to the Region's children, youth, and adults that serve this missional ministry.

Regional Youth Council

Zaylee Skidmore-Beaney, First Christian Church Sulphur

Madeline Bell, First Christian Church Perry

Gabriel Cartwright, First Christian Church Sulphur

Eli Dew, First Christian Church El Reno

David Gillett, Western Oaks Christian Church Oklahoma City

Kyston Haines, First Christian Church El Reno

Lauren Hemm, Forest Park Christian Church Tulsa

Jasmin Pickens, First Christian Church Sulphur

Scott Stanley, Central Christian Church Enid

Paige Waldrip, Central Christian Church Enid

Adult Advisors

Travis Carlson, First Christian Church Chickasha

Shannon Cook, First Christian Church Norman

Tara Dew, First Christian Church El Reno

Eula Hledik, New Covenant Christian Church Oklahoma City



Christian Church in Oklahoma

Meet the Regional Youth Council

Zaylee Skidmore-Beaney: I attend First Christian Church in Sulphur. I am a junior at Sulphur High School where I participate in the Select Choir, SHS Drum line as co-captain, Art Club, and Academic Team. My hobbies include painting, writing poetry, and song writing. I also enjoy playing my guitar, drums, and piano. My favorite way of serving my church is through service. This is my first year of RYC, and I am excited to see what is in store for me as I continue to learn and grow with this amazing group of leaders. This is my first year on RYC.

Madeline Bell: My family has for a long time been involved in the Disciples of Christ. My father, Joshua Bell is a 5th generation pastor working for his PHD. My mother, Carman, somehow has the patience to deal with my brother and I's arguments over some geeky thing. I am a senior at Perry High School and am highly involved in the band. This is my first year in RYC and I am so excited about the many adventures I will have with this group. This is my first year on RYC.

Gabriel Cartwright: I am 17 years old. I have 5 younger siblings: Anna, Ashley, Laura, Phillip, and Alex. I attend First Christian Church in Sulphur. I am a junior at Sulphur High School and I also attend Southern Oklahoma Technology Center in Ardmore for welding. My hobbies include fishing, riding dirt bikes, and hanging out with my friends. My favorite way to help with my church is to help set up at Texoma Christian Camp. This is my first year of RYC and I am glad to have this opportunity to give back to others for my church community. This is my first year on RYC.

Eli Dew: I go to First Christian Church of El Reno. I play basketball and baseball, have two dogs, and I am a Junior in high school. This is my first year on RYC.

David Gillett: I am a member of Western Oaks Christian Church. My favorite part of being involved in the Disciples of Christ community is the fellowship. My favorite youth event is by far going to church camp and seeing friends that you don't get to see very often. I am also involved in the Boy Scouts of America in which I hold the rank of Eagle Scout. This is my second year on RYC.

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Meet the Regional Youth Council

Kyston Haines: I am 16 years old who is baptized and working to be a Junior deacon. I've spent my whole life in EL Reno. Going to school, playing sports living the typical childhood. I did move around when it came to churches. From church to church and from denomination to denomination. I eventually found my home at First Christian Church. I try to live my life as God wants and in Jesus's steps, but I am a sinner and have fallen off the path. That is the beauty of faith if you fall off you can climb back up, jump back on the horse, stand back up. I now have a job and am taking concurrent classes at Redlands Community College. I have started and am still trying to build a stronger relationship with God and grow my spiritual self. This is my first year on RYC.

Jasmin Pickens: I attend First Christian Church in Sulphur. I am a senior. I love God and all creation. I like to fish, bake, and outdoor activities. I have two dogs and a lizard. This is my second year on RYC.

Lauren Hemm: I am a junior at Forest Park Christian Church in Tulsa. I have been attending camps and conferences since 3rd grade in Oklahoma. Participating in youth ministry in Oklahoma has been fun but also spiritually rewarding. I appreciate the opportunity to be on Oklahoma's Regional Youth Council! This is my first year on RYC.

Scout Stanley: I'm a Senior at Chisholm High School and I'm a member of Central Christina Church in Enid. I like watching movies and hanging out with my friends. This is my second year on RYC.

Paige Waldrip: I am a junior from Central Christian Church in Enid. I attend Enid High School and am a part of the Concert Choir, Show choir, drama program, and the Athletic Training Program. I am an Officer for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes at Enid and their worship team. I love singing and helping others prepare for worship. Singing has helped me find a way to worship God, and I like to help others find ways to worship. This is my first year on RYC.

Adult Advisors

Travis Carlson: I grew up in the Disciples denomination, I currently attend First Christian Church in Chickasha where I am an Elder. I am married to a wonderful person, an English teacher, and have a college age daughter and son. I am lucky to teach reading and math intervention and technology in the same grade school I attended. Also, I have worked with youth and college age individuals for almost twenty years counseling and directing camps and retreats.

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Meet the Regional Youth Council

Shannon Cook: Is the Minister of Faith Development at First Christian Church of Norman. She enjoys spending time with her husband, Bart Hanna, and their pets. In her spare time, she reads and enjoys listening to podcasts and watching movies. Shannon and Bart also enjoy traveling.

Tara Dew: I am the Associate Minister at First Christian Church El Reno, mother to Eli and Jonah, wife of Curtis, I enjoy the outdoors and spending time with my family.

Eula Hledik: Is the Associate Minister at New Covenant Christian Church in Oklahoma City. She enjoys time with her family and is pursuing a MDiv degree at Phillips Theological Seminary.

Michael Davison: Is the Associate Regional Minister for the Christian Church in Oklahoma. Among his responsibilities is organizing the leadership development of the Regional Youth Council and the programmatic ministries for children and youth in the Region. Michael is married to Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison who is the Hebrew bible professor at Phillips Theological Seminary.

Guest Writers

Rev. Sarah Combs

Rev. Randy Kuss

Rev. Sei Touthang

Debora Touthang

Rev. Dr. Olivia Bryan Updegrave

Christmas Playlist

[Click here](#) to listen to the

Regional Youth Council

Christmas playlist on Spotify.

This is some of their favorite Christmas music.

TIMES LIKE THESE

Advent (def): a coming into place, view, or being; arrival; anticipation or waiting

Advent," Dictionary.com Unabridged 1 Based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2018

Members of the Regional Youth Council were asked to consider what the traditional themes of Advent (hope, peace, joy, love) can mean in times like these.

Each week of this devotion will begin with a new question.

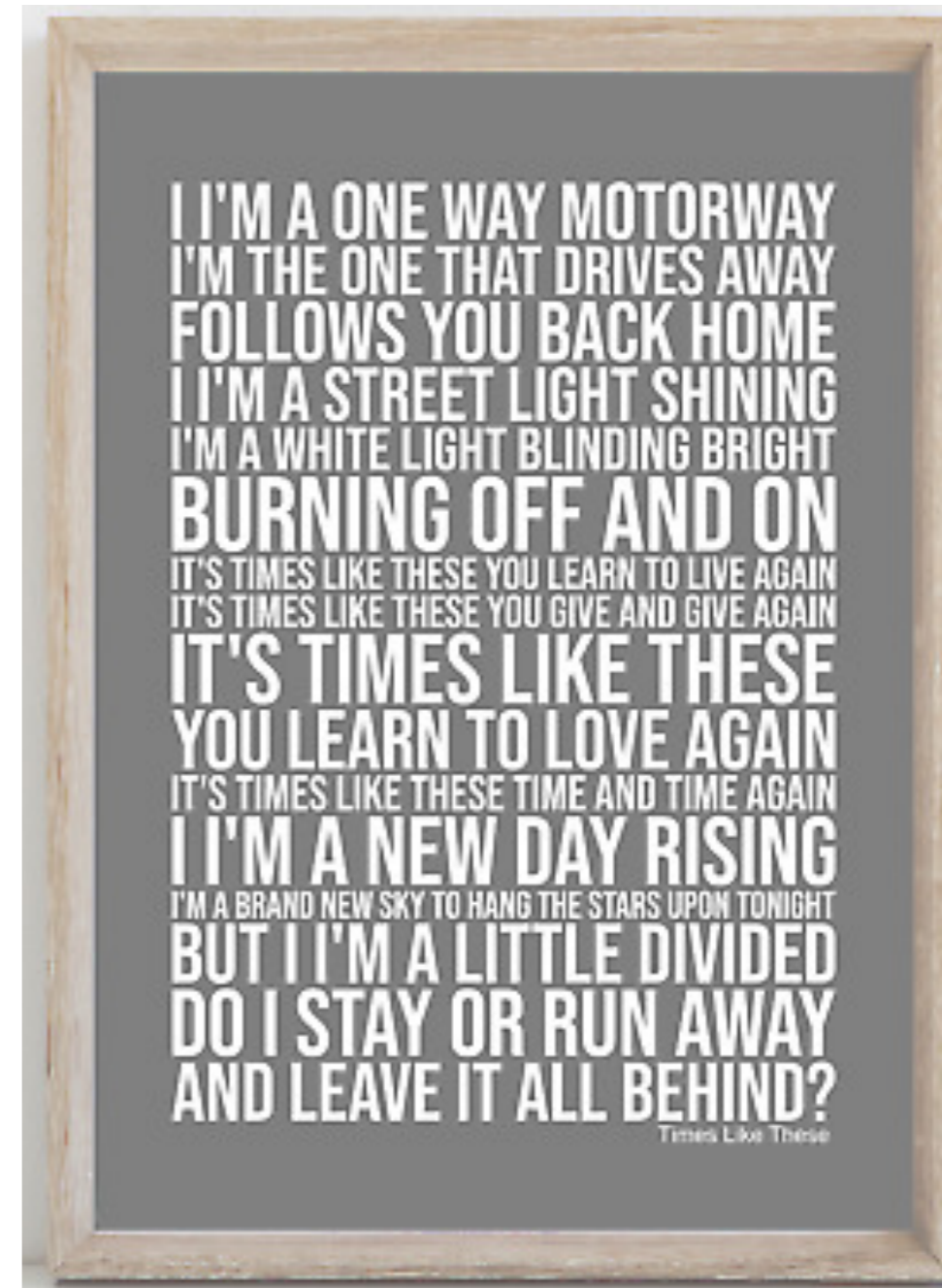
Week 1: In times like these what are you hoping for? How are you being Hope for others?

Week 2: In times like these what peace have you experienced? What Peace can you offer?

Week 3: In times like these what brings you joy? How can you offer Joy?

Week 4: In times like these how or when have you experience love? How are you offering Love?

In times like these how will you embody the spirit of Christmas?



Foo Fighters, "Times Like These." *One by One*, Roswell RCA 2003.

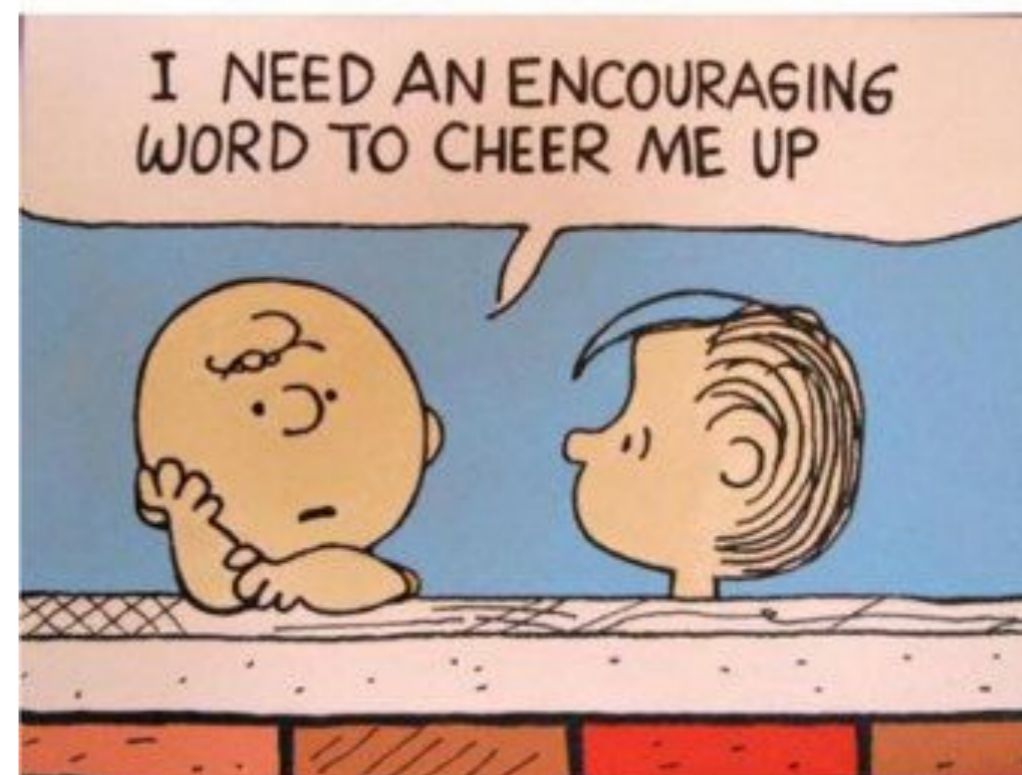
TIMES LIKE THESE

What are you hoping for?

How are you being Hope for others?

I am hoping for the holy spirit to enter all and settle tensions in the world. The world today is a little chaotic and I am hoping that the divine holy spirit will flash the healing light on us. That the healing light will enter all people and bring back love, and tranquility to all.

I am being hopeful for others by trying to spread optimism and love to the community around me. I know I am not the best at this, but I do try my best. With that in mind, I watch my actions when I am around others and try to think of the best outcome for the situation. I try to see the best way to spread an optimistic and loving view of the world in my community. When people fall down or look down I try to talk to them to see if everything is ok. I ask them about their day or how they are feeling.



Sometimes they respond and other times they don't, which is ok. If they do or don't I try to leave that person a sense of love and hope that tomorrow will be a better day.

Kyston Haines

TIMES LIKE THESE

Hope is what gets us up in the morning. Hope provides us with a sense of comfort in this troubling world. Christmas brings hope of new life, and excitement for the birth of our Christ. I hope for all of us that we find one moment this Advent season, one small moment of happiness that gives us that push to prepare for our lord Jesus Christ. For some it may be putting the lights on the Christmas tree, wrapping gifts, or simply being there with each other in this time of hope. Giving hope to others is important for us as Christians. For some, that hope is all that gets them through Christmas. The hope, and the wonder that our lord, Jesus Christ, is going to be born. My dad always says that Advent is preparation, it gives hope to those that need it. I hope that we all grasp the true meaning of the Advent season and have hope for the new year. I hope that we find new ways to prepare for the Advent season and the coming of Christ.

Madeline Bell

Wow, the last couple of years have been a rollercoaster of events. The world has changed and evolved in ways that have brought us together and also split us apart. We have seen violence and compassion, care and indifference to a person's human rights. When we look back at the world, what do you see, hope or strife?

I work in a field which brings me into contact everyday with young people. I see how views in the world are not native to a child's mind and soul. A young child has no presumption of racism, sexism, or any other type of hatred. They have so much love and compassion until they learn it from those older or from those who had learned it from the adults in their lives, to look at life another way.

My hope in this teeny weeny world is that we can find that age of pure love for just a little while and realize that all of God's creations are innately good until we as humans destroy them. That is why my classroom is a place where everyone is accepted and never turned away. I care not only for those who believe the same as I do, but also for those that the world slams with either hate or agnostic contempt.

TIMES LIKE THESE

My hope for this advent season is that we can reclaim that love which a baby in the manger had for this world. May the season be full of that unbiased love for all of the divine creatures of this world.

Travis Carlson

It seems like the times that we are in are more uncertain, divisive, and stressed than ever before. Maybe it is just what I am experiencing but even in these times I am hoping for a change. When I look into the faces of our children in our congregation, I see the potential of new possibilities and know things will be ok. I try to be a ray of hope to others by just listening to what is going on with them and encouraging them through their circumstances. Usually by sharing hope with others it also brings hope to you.

Tara Dew

Covid19 Pandemic has claimed millions of lives worldwide and destroyed millions of families and communities. Life will never be the same again for countless people.

Covid19 has shattered the hope of millions of people around the world. This dreaded pandemic has rendered our lives vulnerable and our future uncertain.

In times like these, I am hoping for divine SECURITY for the word of God says, *"You will be secure, because there is hope; you will look about you and take your rest in safety"* (Job 11:18).

In times like these, I am hoping for divine CONFIDENCE because the Bible says, *"No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame"* (Psalm 25:3).

In times like these, I am hoping for divine STRENGTH for the Scriptures says, *"But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not weary, they will walk and not be faint"* (Isaiah 40:31).

TIMES LIKE THESE

I believe that God has planted hope in the heart of every believer so that we can build a strong relationship of love and trust Him. I am trying my best to instill SECURITY, CONFIDENCE and STRENGTH in the midst of many challenges and difficult situations.

Rev. Sei Touthang serves at Yale Ave Christian Church in Tulsa and leads the International Mission Fellowship.

In times like these, I am hoping for more love in the world. We've gone through some awful times with covid and our toxic political culture. I hope that we can come out of these times with more love than hate - more understanding than stubbornness - more compassion than cold heartedness. My hope is that we strive to love neighbor instead of being right.

I will try love my neighbor even when my neighbor disagrees with me. I will try to meet hate with good. And I hope others are impacted by this.

Lauren Hemm

In times like this my hope has been with people who have shown the love of Christ. If you investigate the fruit of the spirit, you can see how Christ can give you hope. The 12 fruits of the spirit accompany Christ and Christ can give you that hope. I am hoping that in these times that young adults will come more with Christ. That there will be revolutionized, and Christ will reach into their heart.

I can show hope to people by showing the fruits of the spirit and the love of Christ. I feel like when we bear the fruits of the spirit and show them the unconditional love that Christ has shown us that it will show them, they can find hope in Christ too.

Deborah Touthang is the daughter of Rev. Sei Touthang.

TIMES LIKE THESE

In times like these... take a nap.

In a world where people are using "faith" as an excuse for all sorts of behaviors that are not actually faithful; a nap IS faithful! (I don't know if you could get a school exemption to nap, but it is much more faithful than a lot of other crazy ideas out there. Really!)

Sabbath (rest) is one of the most beautiful gifts of being in relationship with God. Resting in holy and sacred ways is commanded of us in the 10 Commandments. Jesus often took time to rest in between his ministry moments. In a world where we are always busy, it is truly countercultural to allow ourselves guilt-free naps. The Bible, over and over, has examples of the importance of rest and its layers of deep spiritual importance.

You cannot bring hope, find peace, embody joy, or encounter liberating love if we are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted. And let's face it... we are ALL exhausted!

So, in times like these, give yourself a gift that can truly transport hope, peace, joy, and love to your life. Therefore, when you awaken, you can see the other gifts of Christ more clearly this Advent season.

Go... really... be like Jesus! I command you... TAKE A NAP!

Rev. Dr. Olivia Bryan Updegrove is the minister for Ministries Across Generations for Disciples Home Missions. In other words, I help all ages figure out what faith building ideas don't suck so that we are aware of God's love for life.

www.docfamiliesandchildren.org

What's the best way to take a nap?

Keep naps short. Aim to nap for only 10 to 20 minutes. The longer you nap, the more likely you are to feel groggy afterward. However, young adults might be able to tolerate longer naps.

Take naps in the early afternoon. Napping after 3 p.m. can interfere with nighttime sleep. Individual factors, such as your need for sleep, your sleeping schedule, your age and your medication use, also can play a role in determining the best time of day to nap.

Create a restful environment. Nap in a quiet, dark place with a comfortable room temperature and few distractions.

mayoclinic.org

TIMES LIKE THESE

Hope for a Little Light

This late in the year the days get shorter and nights longer, the light seems weaker, the dark seems stronger. The dark presses closely upon us in times like these. We feel the dark surrounding in jagged and broken places in our lives, worrying through relationships and health, finances and faith. The dark springs out at us in our news feeds and social media. Climate, violence, refugees, the jobless, the homeless, broken systems that fight each other and get nothing done, a pandemic that slows then climbs and slows then climbs and . . . My God, my God, is there any hope we can get out of this unending mess? Is there any hope for a little light in this darkness?

Each week of Advent the Worship and Wonder story rolls out a white felt road with a model city at one end. Each week's story begins with the reminder that this is Advent, a time to "get ready to celebrate the mystery of Christmas, the time we are all on the way to Bethlehem. . . But who will show us the way?"¹

Week One the answer is the Prophets will show us the Way and a wooden figure of Isaiah is placed on the road. Each week new figures appear. Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds, the Magi. Each in their own way showing us the Way to Bethlehem.

The words of Isaiah set the tone for this journey, speaking hope to a people in despair, *"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned."* Isaiah 9:2 (CEB).

A candle is lit, the candle of the Prophets. And there is a little bit of light. Each week another candle is lit, the candle of the Holy Family (a little more light), the candle of the Shepherds (a little more light), the candle of the Magi (a little more light). As we journey on toward Bethlehem, following the Way, a little more light shines in the darkness.

I wonder if you feel the dark surrounding in times like these and what that looks like for you?

TIMES LIKE THESE

I wonder if you hope for some bit of Light in the darkness and what that would look like for you?

I wonder if you have seen some Light in the darkness and what that looked like for you?

I wonder who showed you the Way toward the Light in the darkness and who that was?

I wonder how they showed you the Way and gave you hope for Light in the darkness?

I wonder how you are showing the Way and giving others hope for Light in the darkness in times like these?

Rev. Randy Kuss serves Interim Associate Pastor for the Promise Road Campus of Geist Christian Church. He serves Disciples Home Missions as Coordinator of Youth and Young Adult Consulting Services, providing support to the Young Adult Commission and the General Youth Council, and others to help organize, strengthen, and extend the ministries of Disciples youth and young adults.

Advent has always been a special time for my family. I enjoy decorating my home and having the hanging of the greens service at church. Last year was so different. I am looking forward to advent this year, yet I know it will remain different from the past. My hope in times like these is that we can work together as a church and a Nation to see an end to the coronavirus. I realize this is not an easy task. Yet, by doing our part to wear mask and protects the most vulnerable, we are hopefully able to eradicate COVID in the next couple years.

David Gillett

I am hoping that we can all just be able to accept each other for themselves and allow each other to be able to talk openly about whatever is on our minds. I try to be that hope whenever anyone needs to talk to me I fully engage in the conversation and try to be in the moment.

Eli Dew

What peace have you experienced?

What Peace can you offer?

The season of Advent is a time of hope, peace, joy, and love. I have found peace this past year while showing other people my age who God is to me. I have been able to lead worship for people at my school through the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Singing and praising God are things I can do to see God around me and show other people towards God. I find peace in knowing that I could be the reason someone starts going to more church events. This peace has helped me see how I was meant to share God's word with other people. One song that I would like to lead worship with is "So Good to Me" by Cory Asbury; the chorus of this song is "He picked me up and turned me around, He placed my feet on the solid ground, Hallelujah." This chorus is something that I believe can bring peace to others because it says that your journey with God can be him turning your life around when you least expect it.

Paige Waldrip



TIMES LIKE THESE

I have experienced the peace of self-control and inner bliss. Over time I have learned to control my feelings. I have also stopped making other people's problems my own. Learning to be calm and collected allows me to offer the peace of emotional stability and that Jesus will always love you.

I can offer the peace of okay. Feeling overwhelmed is typical today. When there is a person that seems overwhelmed or flustered comforting them and talking to them about how if they just keep moving everything will be okay. To that, it is also good to give them advice on how they can get through what they are struggling with at that time.

Kyston Haines

Peace is my responsibility. It's a walk in the forest. It's a protest for justice. It's my companion cuddled up to me on the couch. I can help create moments of stillness for the majesty of peace to be experienced in a noisy 21st century. Peace is our responsibility.

Michael Davison

Moments of peace for some are difficult to achieve. We spend all our time running around working and making sure that everyone and everything is done correctly and is all right. For me, moments of peace are often moments when I am with a group of people, and I sit and watch them interact and be happy and that gives me peace. Knowing that, I had a hand in someone's happiness and that just being there for someone gave me that peace that I needed at that moment. Advent for me is us preparing for Christ, his birth, and bringing new life to us. The only peace I can give anyone is that through all the struggles you may be facing is that God is always there, even if it is difficult for you, and you are having a challenging time. Advent for me is us preparing for Christ, his birth, and bringing new life to us.

Madeline Bell

TIMES LIKE THESE

Peace, what a concept. With all the hustle and bustle around our lives at any given moment, especially during the holidays, what is peace? Is it the absence of conflict, or time alone, or just a fantasy as the Jackalope?

Here is what peace is to me.

Peace is that time when, even though all the world seems to be crashing down, the bright clear thought comes to you and says this is the way to make it right.

Peace is listening and comforting that student who turns to you for a problem in their lives that no one else will listen to.

Peace is that overwhelming feeling of love and compassion that this season can bring.

Peace happens as long as we allow the spirit time to come over us. We must let the world be blocked out for a second. Peace is found in remembering that worried mother and father trying to find a place to sleep in a story from long ago is also right now all over the world. Peace is found in that place in time when someone doesn't have to be worried about being fed, whether it is fish and bread on

a hillside or a meal handed out in a soup kitchen. Peace is finding healing, by reading of Jesus raising Lazarus or of a miraculous drug that had come about from the many people who chose medicine as their vocation.

We are that peace. The Holy one entrusted us with a coming savior. May we be that peace that was so benevolently given to us.

Travis Carlson

The peace that I experience is often found in nature. Just this weekend after a busy day that was exhausting I took time to look at the sunset and take a deep breath. Just that act gave me such peace that extended for the rest of the day. We all need to slow down, look around us, and breathe. I offer peace when I deal with someone that drives me crazy in a loving manner rather than starting a fight or being negative to them.

Tara Dew

TIMES LIKE THESE

I experience peace in church. While I appreciated the online church experiences, I feel more at peace when I am in the church building surrounded by people. I've been worshipping with these people for over 10 years, and I feel God's peace when I am near them. The peace I experience in times like these come from church.

I can invite friends to church to experience the peace that I feel. I can take the peace I experience in church and show that to others.

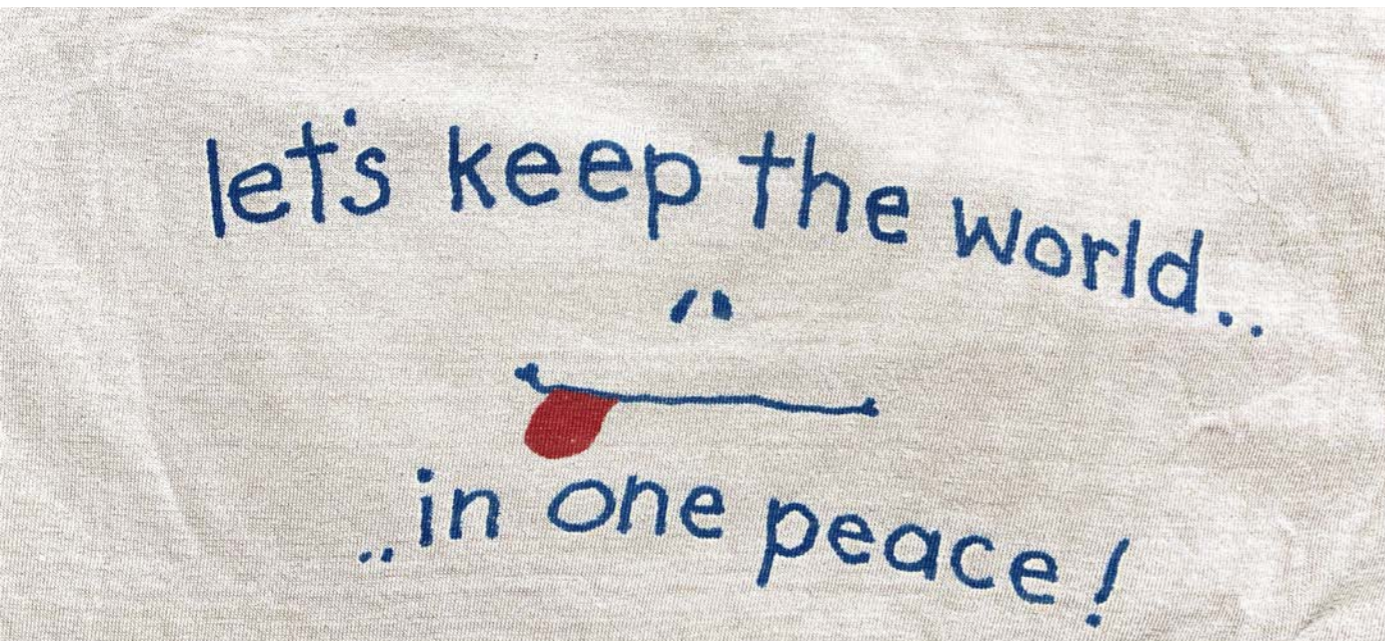
Lauren Hemm

I find peace in the natural world God has provided us. I go for walks, watch the sunset, and try to take some time and slow down. I try to bring peace to others by listening to them and encouraging everyone in their pursuits.

Eli Dew

I am inspired by those in my church who continue to find ways to bring hope to others through the Blessing Box that has been placed by our church. People in my church continue to bring food to place in the Blessing Box to share with our neighbors. We may not know their names or see them get the food, yet we are able to give some "Peace of Mind" to those who finally have a stomach. I hope as I continue on my journey, to be able to share what I have with others, just as my church has shared with our neighbors all year long.

David Gillett



TIMES LIKE THESE

What brings you joy?

How can you offer Joy?

I am grateful for the members of my church who have helped me become the person that I am today. I bring joy to others by being there for other people, and being a joyful person. I try to bring joy to people because no one wants to be sad, upset, mad or just.. don't care anymore. Bringing joy to others is a good feeling for you and whomever you may bring joy to as well. You never know what a person goes through in life being joyful can help more than you know. One of my favorite verses is, *"may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him"* Romans 15:13. A good quote is *"Joy is the holy fire that keeps our purpose warm and our intelligence aglow"* (Helen Keller). You can spread joy in many different ways: helping others, talking to someone who seems lonely, giving a homeless person some money or some food, or being there to listen to someone, and being a shoulder to lean on. Joy changes a lot in some cases. Sometimes all someone needs is joy, and you can spread joy like spreading butter on toast, be the light in someone's life and joy as God is to you.



Gabriel Cartwright

TIMES LIKE THESE

My dogs give me joy during these times. We got a new puppy this summer. She is a Great Pyrenes and poodle mix. She was smallish when we got her. She is so big now and continuing to grow. When I wake up in the morning, she greets me and is so excited to see me. She has a huge smile on her face and brings me such joy! I can offer joy by telling a funny story to someone who may just need to be lifted up or at least need a distraction from their own problems. Although this is just a temporary fix, it does help to get your mind off your own problems.

Tara Dew

In times like these I find joy when I am working with others. My friends and I helped an older person in our church rearrange her shed and attic. I found joy in working together and the laughter we shared. Sometimes in this advent time we find ourselves busy with school projects and activities. It is nice to share in the simple task. Jesus, the newborn king, shows us the way to share joy, not only with our friends, but also with those in our church community we don't get to spend as much time.

My hope is to be able to share joy by doing something for those I am not as close to, yet still have a chance to be present.

David Gillett

I have been known to be a very joyful person. This is not me trying to say that I am always happy, I have my dark days too. I have been so low I did not get out of bed for a day. However, I have felt joy in many ways such as seeing my brother's face when he succeeds at something, or when I create something with my marching band at my school. Seeing the kids be happy and proud of something they did gives me the greatest joy. Joy, during the Advent season, can be offered the many things that one does with Advent. Preparing the house with decorations, making hot chocolate, and sitting near a fire reading a chapter of the bible. Give yourself joy and allow yourself to be joyful in this Advent season.

Madeline Bell

TIMES LIKE THESE

In times like these helping people and practicing my hobbies brings me joy. Ever since I was little I always liked to help people. To see a smile on their faces when I had made their day better brings a sense of joy to my soul. It feels as if that is what God put me on this earth to do. Also when I can practice on things I have a special interest in, it helps me center myself. To do things that help bring a center to the stress of daily life is so empowering that the soul feels more powerful.

I try to bring joy to people's lives by telling jokes, being helpful, or just offering a shoulder or hug for support. Adding a spark of happiness can make anyone's day. This spark could be anything from giving a hug or giving them a ride. A spark of happiness is like when starting a fire. A simple spark grows and expands into something wonderful.

Kyston Haines

Over the last few years when getting together just wasn't prudent and advisable, I have found a lot of joy in the telling of stories through different means. Sitting around a table looking at others over a screen and telling them about a world I have created just for them. Talking about politics, money, dangers, and benevolent creatures have brought me many hours of joy not only in the telling of that world, but also in creating it. I am talking about being a Dungeon Master (DM) for Dungeons and Dragons (D&D).

I have run versions of these games from church camps, to my classroom, and even for my family. D&D has allowed me to delve into facets of myself that I have never really thought about. How would this person act under this situation? What would be the likely way the campaign would go? (Only to have the rug ripped out from under me and ending up having to think fast on my feet when the players choose a different path) It has allowed me to use my creative side by designing maps (as below) and painting miniature figures that go along with my stories. Truly, the best times are when something funny happens and we all sit around and laugh. You share that moment forever. D&D is not what most people think about during the Advent season, but it brings me joy.

TIMES LIKE THESE

I invite you to bring joy to those around you by telling the stories of Christmas, both of that journey to Bethlehem and the journey of your life, with family and friends. Embrace those moments that you have shared and share some new ones.

Travis Carlson



Joy in stressful time

The season of Advent is a time of hope, peace, joy, and love. A place where I have found joy in my life recently is on the football field. Last year, I joined the Athletic Training Program at my school, and out of all of the sports I help with, football is my favorite. I find joy in the van ride to games, the pregame setup we do, and when we have a moment to have fun. At football games, the players hit the field an hour before the game for pregame warmups. During this time is when I usually realize how much I love training for this sport. I think about that day and how the people I have been around brought joy to me and how I brought joy to others. Before I did the training, I had not found the thing that I would love and continue throughout high school, and after I started, I realized that Athletic Training was the thing that I enjoyed doing the most. Finding joy in stressful situations is challenging and can be a reason we do not continue doing something, but I have learned that sometimes the thing that we find the most joy in are also the things that we have to find joy in.

Paige Waldrip

TIMES LIKE THESE

Being around friends and family brings me joy. I have grown to appreciate that more since experiencing the pandemic. Now I value this time with friends and family even more. I get my energy from being a social person, and I try to gather as much as I can.

I enjoy making people laugh and have a good time. The joy I offer is friendship.

Lauren Hemm

I find joy in my two dogs, playing sports and going to the gym, and listening to music. I try to spread joy by always being there for those I care about and by always being ready with a witty comment.

Eli Dew

I'm a Senior at Chisholm High School; over the summer, we got the news that I am pregnant, so due to covid, I am in online school. I have always suffered from anxiety and depression, and times like these are no exception, but I have also found joy and love in unique ways.

As a person who suffers from anxiety and depression, joy can be in short supply. When you add covid-19 restrictions and a surprise pregnancy, joy is really hard to find or even see. One thing that brings me joy daily is the feeling of my baby kicking, letting me know that he's there and I'll get to meet him soon. Having so many people who love and support me through all of this also brings me joy. I can offer joy to anyone suffering by being there if they need to talk or anyone pregnant and still in school. I can let them know that they are not alone.

Scout Stanley



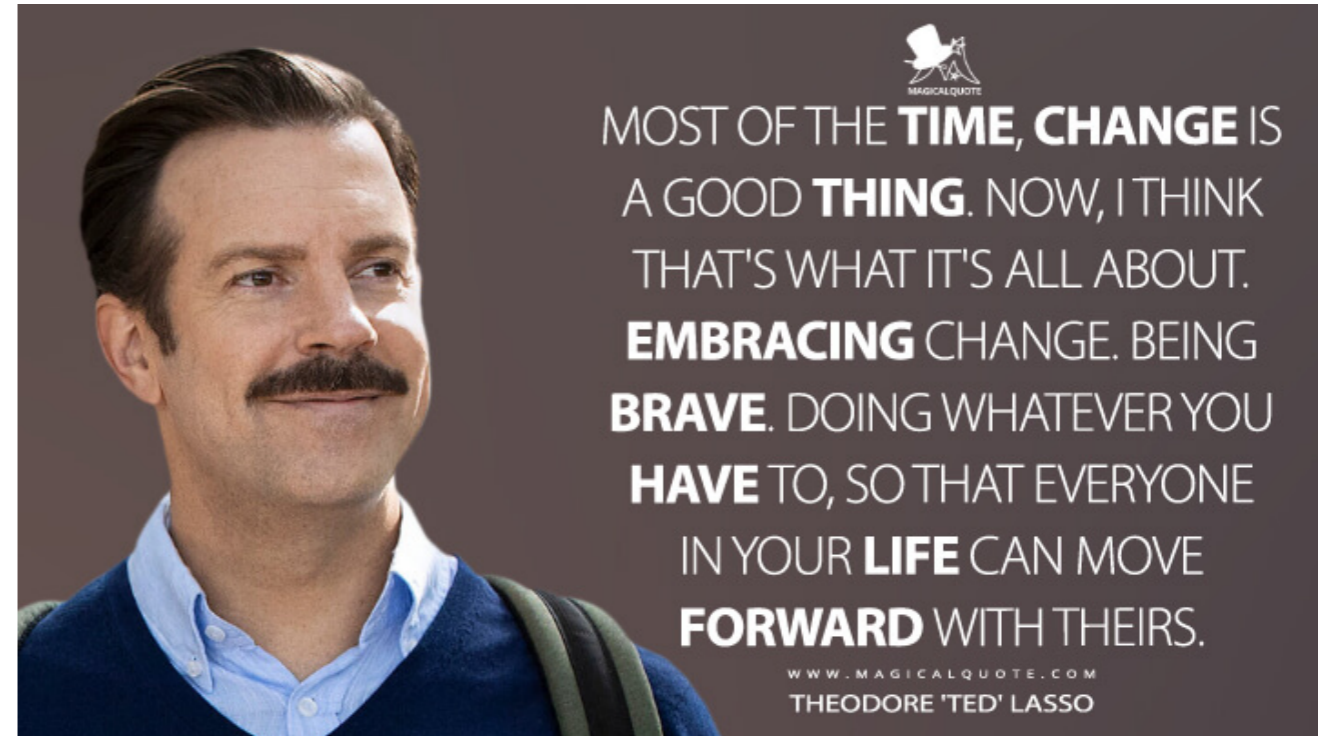
TIMES LIKE THESE

How or when have you experienced love?

How are you offering Love?

I experience love in my relationships with so many different people. Of course I experience it with my family who is always there for me, but I also experience it when others send me a text to encourage me. Or when that kind gentleman at church wants a hug. I also experience it when someone asks me how I am doing and really wants the answer. I experience love through others which I know is God working through them. I offer love by speaking up for those without a voice or whose voice often gets drowned out by others yelling over them.

Tara Dew



I have experienced love through family members, friends, and serving others. These are different experiences of love. I love gathering with friends and family, but I also really love serving others. It is a different kind of love when I am helping others. It is a love that I don't experience anywhere else.

Laren Hemm

TIMES LIKE THESE

Agape is the Greek word for love. This word, Agape, means the world to me and all that I do. My father who has studied the bible in the original Greek and Hebrew came up on this word. Agape. The purest of love, the greatest of love, godly love. So, what does this mean? Love, in this day in age, is so easy but at the same time so hard. We push ourselves, especially at Christmas, to be the best, to give the best and somehow demonstrate our love in all that. I, myself, try to show my love for people all the time not just at Christmas time. I make it a point to be there, to show and give my love to others, and show my faith through my love. I have experienced love, when I take care of the little ones at church and they give me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and when my mom gets me gummy bears because I had a dreadful day. Love is everywhere, we may not see it all the time and we may have trouble accepting it, but it is there. Give that Agape love, show it, and feel it. That is what this Advent season is all about.

Madeline Bell

In times like these, I experience love every day from both my mother and father, who support me. These past twenty months have been hard. Despite a significant increase in my anxiety and struggling daily with depression, they continue to love and support me.

My brother lets me know he loves me in a different way than most people. I feel love when he tells me he couldn't be more excited to be an uncle. He bought me Pokémon baby clothes for my baby shower, and I experienced a lot of love from his gifts and the joy he has when he talks about being an uncle. I give love by watching hours and hours of anime with T.J. and by our weekly phone calls. Even though I miss him while he's off at college, I know he loves me, and he knows I love him.

Scout Stanley

I experience love from my animals and by talking to everyone I can. I try to spread love by always accepting people how they are and by encouraging those around me to stop habits they know are destructive and start habits that are constructive.

Eli Dew

TIMES LIKE THESE

Gasp! I thought something like this would never happen. But... drum roll... I have come to love K-Pop music. My daughter has been into this type of music for eight years now. I haven't been able to put my finger on just what it is about it, until a couple of weeks ago. I guess that it has to be the beat. The songs sound like they could be warped back in time to the eighties and nineties. This thing that had been around, and played in my house for years that I never paid any attention to, has suddenly made me change my mind.

What have we walked past in our lives that may suddenly become meaningful to us later? We are surrounded by love each and every day, but it doesn't become important to us until we recognize it. Do I see that person who just needs a smile and that love that the Creator has given us? Whatever that has been put in front of you, look for the love. Even if it doesn't seem apparent right away.

Let the love of this advent season branch out to those who might not see it, maybe not even until further down their path of life. Even if it's around you every day, don't be afraid to accept and share the love of the one born in the manger.

Travis Carlson

I experience love in my church every week. The love that is embedded into the walls of a simple building is simply amazing. The Pastor, The Assistant Pastor, and the choir just emit love and compassion. Imagine the church as a quilt of love, compassion, and understatement sewn into the fabric into a beautiful masterpiece of the Christian faith.

I give love. When giving love the most important part is being open. When open love is allowed to flow through you and be given out into the world as it should be. Since Jesus is in everyone's heart, being open allows the heart to be seen and felt by all that needs it.

Kyston Haines

TIMES LIKE THESE

In times like these, it can be quite difficult to find love. Maybe it didn't work with our significant other, with our friends, or even within our family. However, I think the most important kind of love you can have is within yourself. It seems like the whole world is always wondering how to find this "self-love". You can try to look for it browsing through the internet, or try to seek validation from others, or even try to read magazines.

Over the course of my life though, I found out how to find this kind of love. I had to find these answers through Jesus Christ.

On December 24th of 2017, I accepted the Lord as my savior and was baptized in the First Christian Church in Sulphur Oklahoma. While I was being baptized, I felt this sense of light in my chest (it could have been because I was baptized face-first). My head had been cleared, my soul had been cleansed, and I felt like I could conquer anything that stood in my way with Him by my side. I could not find a word to describe that kind of feeling.

In 2018, I went through a difficult period of time. I was seeking validation in other people and not through God or

even myself. It was one of the darkest moments of my life. I did not know where to go. I began to hang out with the wrong kind of people and found myself going against everything I had believed in. I felt like God was unable to love me anymore because I went against my promise when I got baptized, and I didn't stay on the correct path.

However, on any ordinary Tuesday in my life, I went to church with "The Landing Bridge" in Ardmore Oklahoma, and music was playing for our worship. I was listening to the words of this particular song called "Reckless Love" by Cory Asbury. I had my eyes closed and I heard this specific lyric: "When I was Your foe, still Your love fought for me. You have been so good to me. When I felt no worth, You paid it all for me".

I started crying. I did not feel sad, or anxious, but I felt this overwhelming sense of light and warmth. I felt like I was floating. I felt a hand on my shoulder and I just knew it was Him. I knew He was giving me more strength and He was reassuring me that I was worthy of love without needing anyone else to tell me that. He had been with me this whole time. He paid with His life so that I could live with inner peace through Him.

TIMES LIKE THESE

From then on, I have always tried my best to show others love. I am very lucky and grateful to have an amazing church family. I strongly encourage everyone to find an amazing support group, or an accountability partner that can help remind you that He is still there and will always be on your side.

I show love now through service within my church. I also show love through my artwork and musicianship within my school's choir/drama class and drum line. There are many ways for you to show love to others too. You can hold the door open for someone, help take care of a family member, or even bake cookies for a new neighbor in town. Showing love to yourself can be important too. Reading scriptures, taking a walk, or even watching your favorite show or movie. Channeling love from God unto others can be the best feeling there is not only for yourself but for others as well.

I would like to thank my pastor Tim Kowalski, youth minister Kathy Standridge, and church board member Linda Tyler. Without all of you, I would not be the person that I am today. Thank you for showing me unconditional love and patience as I continue to follow God's path.

Zaylee Skidmore-Beaney

Accepted for who I am.

Challenged to be better than I am.

Encouraged, accountable, and forgiven when I am less than I can be.

It is my companion, family, friends, and colleagues that are invested in me enough to express a love that accepts, challenges, encourages, keeps me accountable, and forgives. It is tough love and a risk to accept it. And, it is a risk to invest that kind of attentive presence in others: colleagues, friends, family, my companion, and strangers. That's my love offering.

Michael Davison

TIMES LIKE THESE

In times like these, I have experienced love when someone welcomes me and includes me. Life is difficult out there and it's been a different and unprecedented kind of difficult the past year and a half. We have been physically distanced from loved ones. We haven't been able to socialize like we had before. For this (admittedly loud) introvert, it is quite tricky to navigate the new normal. Even on those rare days I feel like I needed some people around, I am still not able to do it in the ways that I was used to. I can only imagine how extroverts are faring! Yet, when I get that text or that invite...oh, what a gift! I haven't been forgotten. I haven't been kicked off the island. I do belong.

After thinking about my struggles (extremely minimal when compared with the reality some face during the pandemic), I think about how difficult life must be for those who were already vulnerable, struggling, dejected, rejected, marginalized. What must a gift of loving welcome and inclusion mean to them? Those in Jesus' day knew what it felt like for the world to disregard you. If you weren't an adult, wealthy, or male you simply weren't valued. Jesus pushed that thinking aside. He welcomed those culture had labeled as troubled, a nuisance,

immoral, conniving, too young, too sick, born the wrong sex assigned at birth. What must that gift have felt like to receive? This man who speaks of what the kingdom of heaven is like, who teaches how "you have heard it said... but I say to you...", who encouraged children into his midst...this man values all people, reminding them they are created in God's image.

This is the gift we anticipate during Advent. The gift of this life that taught us how to love one another and how to love God. How will we include someone this Advent? How will we offer dignity to someone the world has offered only disrespect? How will we see our neighbor as made in God's image? How will we offer love in relationships where there has been strife, tension, and discord? How can we bring love to places that have been broken and are now rendered unwelcome and unsafe? Jesus showed us what a gift love can be—it can heal, mend, provide hope, and bring transformation.

Rev. Shannon Cook

TIMES LIKE THESE

How will you embody the Spirit of Christmas?



Dr. Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. (Random House: New York 1957).

TIMES LIKE THESE

The spirit of Christmas is what keeps Christmas going. It's the energy of it, the drive. How will I embody the spirit of Christmas? How does anyone embody the spirit of Christmas? We can be cheerful and show our love for Christ. We can show our hope by simply decorating and giving hope to those that need it most. Christmas spirit like I said is the energy of it all. Giving peace and calm and being there for people that's embodying the spirit of Christmas. You don't have to be all hugs and cheerful to embody the spirit of Christmas. All you have to do is act and be a true Christian. Feed the hungry, cloth the naked, heal the sick, all simply things that us humans make so difficult. I am going to sound like my dad who is a 5th generation reverend, but I am going to challenge you to help someone this advent season. It doesn't have to be something super big but something small. I will embody the spirit of Christmas by becoming involved in my community. Showing my faith through my love for service.

How will you?

Madeline Bell

In times like these, to embody the spirit of Christmas is sacrifice. Christmas is not about receiving, it is about giving. To make a sacrifice in a way that would help others in a long-lasting way. Giving hope, joy, love, and peace our long-lasting present that can last with somebody forever.

Kyston Haines

I will embody the spirit of Christmas by being there for others, and providing joy when joy is lacking. I will not take gathering with friends and family for granted. I will not let negativity ruin the season of hope, peace, joy, and love. Christmas is a time to be less selfish and love more, and I hope to carry that forward well into the new year.

Lauren Hemm

TIMES LIKE THESE

Psalm 25:5, 10a. (NRSV)

Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness.

In his work *Hope and Other Superpowers*², John Pavlovitz urges us to cultivate our ordinary superpower of hope. So often we think of hope in God as a grand dream or vision of faith: we'll one day go to a far-off heaven; one day we'll fight a very obvious devil and win; I can place my hope in certain people because they use the name of God even though their actions seem questionable. But what if hope is something smaller, less grand, not a thing we hope in but a thing we practice and experience every day?

The Psalmist notes hope is not just a dream for the future but something we are lead to in truth all day long, a path of steadfast love and faithfulness. The Psalmist encourages us to think of where we base hope, encourages us to see that hope is forged in trust. We often forget that our scriptures urge for faithfulness and hope based in a trust in God. To trust is not to pledge blind allegiance, but trust is something built in safety and based in shared relationship. In fact, God never tells the people to trust without

evidence of trustworthiness, rather God consistently shows up for the people in relationships they can trust. Hope itself is to be found through embodied experiences of safety and trust, embodied experiences of truth. How would our perspective on hope change if we took more seriously that hope is based in such qualities?

Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann observes this about hope: "There can be no hope until truth is told. Our temptation, of course, is to do the work of hope without the prior work of truth."³ Advent is a great time to ask ourselves how much of my relationships are based in truth? Do I know others enough to trust them? Do people know me enough to trust me? There is a call of authenticity and presence necessary in relationships of hope. This authentic presence means that truth, even when truths are difficult and disruptive, is a necessary foundation for trusting relationships that provide hope. If Advent awaits the embodied Jesus, the Jesus who came into this world to experience all the human joy and heartbreak, then our call may be to acknowledge where the embodied Christ, the bodies of Christ are being put in harm's way, are not being seen, valued, and heard.

TIMES LIKE THESE

When we are present to these truthful realities, even when they're painful, we just might open the door for trust and imagination, things each of us are called to embody. In times like these, maybe we can hope for ways to be bodies of truth in this world, bodies that share our own truths and embrace the truths of others. Maybe if we cultivate truthful embodiment with steadfast love and faithfulness then all the paths of the Lord WILL cultivate the everlasting hope this season invites. Maybe hope really is our ordinary superpower, one to be found in our ordinary authentic and truth-seeking lives.

Rev. Sarah Combs is the Director of Family Life Ministries at Southern Hills Christian Church in Edmond, OK. She aspires to be a professional nerd. Sarah shares life with her wife, two energetic kids, and the sweetest Labrador retriever.

In times like these I will embody the spirit of Christmas by trying to give hope, share peace, joy, and love to those around me this Christmas season. I will also try to give myself a break so I can absorb the hope, peace, joy, and love that is swirling around me.

Tara Dew

Christmas stinks! That is how I felt for most of my life from 14 to 28 years old. I worked in retail in those days, and there are two times a year when I hated to go to work. Inventory time and Christmas. Christmas: which went from Black Friday through the 3rd of January. People somehow went crazy during this time. Grandmothers were cussing each other out because that was the last pair of jeans. People were stealing because they couldn't afford something or just for the thrill. People were lying to you because they thought you wouldn't accept their returns. I just found that humanity was so awful to each other. So I hated Christmas time.

TIMES LIKE THESE



My wife called me “The Grinch”. I didn’t want to go anywhere, be around anyone. I didn’t even want to go to church, and I definitely avoided anything related to Christmas. I was not pleasant to live with, even more back then.

I will embody the themes of Christmas by always pushing those around me to strive for better and by trying to bring God’s kingdom to Earth.

Eli Dew

After I got out of the retail business, I decided to be different. I will not go out on Black Friday or return things on the Day after Christmas. I will always politely address a sales person by their name on their name tag. I will always let someone go before me in line if I can. So, I choose to soak up the spirit of Christmas in the way I act while in a store. If I can show one person a kind gesture, maybe it might bring Joy to them. I understand how difficult the season can be on that side of retail.

The more I live, Ebenezer’s words ring out a truth like the bells that announce Christmas. “I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.”⁴

It is how I’m living the spirit of Christmas. It is a way. Maybe it is the best way in times like these; or any time.

Now, I Love this time of year to spend with family and friends. I find Peace in the holiness of this time, Joy in the sights, sounds, and smells. Hope in humanity can and will make a difference on this earth. I pray this journey will bring you those emotions as well.

Michael Davison

Travis Carlson

End Notes

1. Sonja M. Stewart and Jerome W. Berryman, *Young Children and Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), p. 130.
2. John Pavlovitz, *Hope and Other Superpowers: A Life-Affirming, Love-Defending, Butt-Kicking World-Saving Manifesto* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2018).
3. Walter Brueggemann, *Truth & Hope: Essays for a Perilous Age* (John Know Pres: Louisville, 2020), xiv.
4. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol. In Prose being a Ghost Story of Christmas.* (Chapman & Hall: England 1843), Stave 4.

Thank you for reading with the Regional Youth Council this Advent and Christmas season. As you journey in faith following Jesus of Nazareth, we pray and trust that God will continue to give you ministry to do and gospel to be.

The story goes that the shepherds returned to the field giving thanks for all they had heard and seen as it had been told to them.

The story continues through you.

Merry Christmas

