Joy to the World

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2017
Joy to the World (ELW 267)

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!  
Let earth receive her king;  
let every heart prepare him room  
and heav’n and nature sing,  
and heav’n and nature sing,  
and heav’n, and heav’n and nature sing.

No more let sin and sorrow grow  
nor thorns infest the ground;  
he comes to make his blessings flow  
far as the curse is found,  
far as the curse is found,  
far as, far as the curse is found.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!  
Let all their songs employ,  
while fields and floods, rocks hills, and plains  
repeat the sounding joy,  
repeat the sounding joy,  
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace  
and makes the nations prove  
the glories of his righteousness  
and wonders of his love,  
and wonders of his love,  
and wonders, and wonders of his love.
Sunday, Dec. 3
“Joy to the World” (ELW 267)

When I was in grade school, my brother and I couldn’t wait to sing “Joy to the World.” Every time we came to the refrain, we used to stomp our feet to the rhythm: “And heaven and nature sing” (stomp, stomp), “and heaven and nature sing” (stomp, stomp). Our parents would glare, our baby sister would laugh. It was great. Stomp, stomp, a kid’s foot signaling the joy of Jesus’ birth. We signaled the fun and laughter of the season, the excitement it cooked up in us. We loved the presents! The lights! Our family! The candles! The cookies! Why not? God fills this earth—the heavens and the earth—with so much pleasure and beauty that it’s hard not to burst out laughing. The heavens and earth burst with laughter and with glee at the birth of our Lord. So do we.

Your birth, dear Lord Jesus Christ, is our new birth. Thank you for this special place called earth where we can be filled and celebrate your life. Amen.

Monday, Dec. 4
Isaiah 40:1-11

God’s first words to the newly-freed nation of Israel are those of comfort. “I will take care of you in your freedom,” God says. Even today, as free as we are in America, we rarely heed God’s call. We try to build up so much in our search for eternity: our fortunes, our houses, our legacies. And yet God reminds us that all people are grass. All people are flowers. Our kingdoms will wither and fade. And yet God, the One who sees us, the One who saw all those who came before us and the One who will see all those who come after us, stoops down to inspect us like a gentle gardener inspecting tender plants, grasses and tiny blossoms. The gardener wants to comfort us, for we are not too tiny or ephemeral for God.

Lord, thank you for your holy comfort. Your word stands forever. Help us grow peacefully in your beautiful garden. Amen.

Tuesday, Dec. 5
Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13

Have you ever thought to yourself: what an injustice it was that the Lord of heaven was born in such a lowly, forsaken way? Indeed, he was not born of justice. But his birth was exactly right. In that manger in that forgotten town, God’s righteousness and steadfast love looked down from the sky. In that moment, God chose to turn the power of the world upside down. And what sprung up from the ground? Faithfulness. The faithfulness of the shepherds who were curious enough to check out this strange happening. The faithfulness of Joseph for his beloved young Mary as she labored. She could not have given birth without him. With Mary and Joseph, we see how righteousness and peace kiss each other in order to bring about God’s future for us. Perhaps Christ’s birth was the fruit of injustices. But God saw to it that it was just right.

Lord, we often find ourselves in difficult times and places. Make a path for our steps in such times. Show us you are still near. Amen.

Wednesday, Dec. 6
2 Peter 3: 8-15a

It might seem to us like Jesus is taking his time coming back. But as the author of Peter tells us, God is patient, more patient than us. God does not want anyone to perish, but wills for all to experience God’s love and acceptance. Therefore, God is taking it slow. God is waiting, constantly beckoning, constantly saving and constantly calling us. Come, follow me. I have enough room for you all. If God can be patient, so can we. We can go about living our lives of godliness and holiness because we can trust in God’s promises to us. We can strive for peace in this violent world. We have the capacity through grace, faith and the Word to wait with God for all people to understand God’s glory. If God is not ready to judge the sinner and unbeliever, we will not judge either.

Lord, it sometimes feels like the suffering and violence in this world will never end. But you see it all. Help us to work with you as you reconcile all people in Jesus Christ. Amen.
Thursday, Dec. 7

Mark 1:1-8

The Gospel of Mark is considered the earliest gospel book. Mark’s narrative is sparser than that of Matthew, Luke or John. It contains puzzling and awkward stories about Jesus and his disciples. The author of Mark anchored the account of the life of Jesus in the words of the prophet Isaiah so that its Jewish hearers could understand his noble heritage and his connection to Judaism. Mark even starts the story with the fact that fellow Judeans were flocking to John the Baptist to confess their sins and to get baptized. The author seems to be telling the audience, see, this is your people! This is a story for you! In this story we Christians today are bound to the Jews. Just as the words of Isaiah connected the Judean people to their ancient ancestors, so Mark’s words connect us to our ancient Jewish forebears.

God, please help us prevent history from getting in the way of our family ties with the Jewish people and their struggles. You have chosen them and grafted us on. Thank you for the great gift of the Jews in our Christian tradition. Amen.

Friday, Dec. 8

Mark 1:1-8

John the Baptist will be forever marked by his diet and wardrobe: locusts, honey and a camel-hair shirt. In the starkness of his lifestyle, we could easily forget that he says one of the most important things in the New Testament. Speaking of Jesus, he proclaims, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Even before Jesus begins his ministry, John the Baptist knows that Jesus’ work will extend far beyond his brief life here on earth. John knows that Jesus’ works involve the whole Trinitarian being of God. People like John the Baptist sometimes live on the margins. They sometimes don’t quite manage to learn all the right social cues. They just sort of appear in our neighborhoods. Would you have let yourself be baptized by him? Yet, people on the margins are often the ones who understand Jesus’ power the best. They often see the Spirit in ways the rest of us cannot.

God, who are the baptizers in my neighborhood? Help us to see those who continually prepare the way for Christ to come into our lives and our hearts. Amen.

Saturday, Dec. 9

“Joy to the World” (ELW 267)

“Joy to the World” is one of the few Christmas hymns that makes big assumptions. One of those assumptions is that Jesus Christ’s birth is not just for humanity. Amid this world of violence and deep need, it is easy to narrow our focus on the good news of Jesus Christ as being for us—and only for us. But “Joy to the World” reminds us that nature is much, much older and often much wiser than we will ever be as a species. Nature knows her Savior. Nature knows the Savior in ways that we never can. Nature shares in God’s glory in ways that we are often too busy to see. Yet this hymn invites us to “repeat the sounding joy” of the fields, floods, rocks, hills and plains. Christ’s birth invites us to follow the lead of nature in praising his holy name.

Lord, you are pure joy. You rejoice in the natural world around us and without us. Please help us to stop taking for granted this beautiful place we call earth, our home. Amen.

Sunday, December 10

“Joy to the World” (ELW 267)

What makes Christianity unique is the character of its ruler. Our ruler does not seek power over us or others. Our ruler does not hoard, cheat, spin the truth or conquer. Our ruler saves. It is a jarring image to sing that the “Savior reigns” at Christmas time. Our imaginations get pulled out from cooing over the baby and stretched to focus on the Ruler of the universe. We don’t ever expect Rulers to save—or Saviors to rule. But with the birth of Jesus Christ, the world gets turned upside down. The Savior rules because grace will win the day in the end. Love does win. Love does trump hate. Because God is the act of pure love, God can save and rule. We are saved by love, by our ruler and in turn, Christian love can save those around us.

Lord, help us avoid the temptation of making you into an idol king. Your rule will save the world, but we often think our rule will do that too. Turn us back to you always. Amen.
Monday, Dec. 11
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

This week we are drawn deeply into biblical texts that call us to radical compassion. A radical “com” “passio” which means, “suffering with.” We are called to suffer with the world.

Some days it can feel like there is more suffering to go around than we can comprehend, let alone enter into. But God promises us that God’s love is always there. God’s love is an infinite source in which to root ourselves like oak trees, and through which to transform our anguish into a robe of justice. We can learn to be present to suffering; our own, other peoples’ and all that is engulfing our worlds. In doing so, always remember in community that we are indeed bound into each other; we are not alone.

_Spirit of God, draw us so deeply into your love that we lose our fear of each other. Nourish the seeds of your justice in our midst, and ignite our compassion for all of your creation. Amen._

Tuesday, Dec. 12
Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b-55 (Our Lady of Guadalupe)

Today is the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a holiday celebrated throughout the world, and particularly in communities with active memories of and connections to indigenous communities. Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego in the 1500s on a mountain in what is now Mexico, bearing the clothing and symbols of indigenous people living in poverty. The miracles associated with her visitation have offered emancipatory hope and resilience to countless communities suffering deep injustice.

Here in Luke we have Mary’s song as she greets Elizabeth, a song which echoes the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel. Both songs are clear reminders that God stands with those who suffer, and that suffering cannot endure in the face of God’s deep love and mercy. They also remind us that God’s infinite compassion extended to vulnerable and anguished women, drawing them into giving birth to infinite hope.

_God, draw us out of our weeping and bring us into your joy; draw us out of our hunger for domination and into your radical love. Come to us in the darkness of our despair and doubt, and empower us to bear hope and love to all those who suffer. Amen._

Wednesday, Dec. 13
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Today’s reading urges us to pray without ceasing and to always give thanks. Some days it is very hard to remember that we are called to “suffer with,” to live in compassion. What can it mean to pray without ceasing in the midst of so much pain, despair and injustice?

Those who labor to give birth know something of how much physical pain is involved in bringing a new child into the world. Perhaps our prayer for compassion, for “suffering with” in the midst of all the pain around us, can be a prayer for being opened to allow God’s love to flow more freely into the world. In this time of Advent, as we remember again the waiting, the anticipation of the birth of our Messiah, we are invited to listen closely to prophetic speech.

_Laboring God, help us to hear your voice in the prophetic speech around us. Draw us ever more closely into the peace to which you invite us, and help us to breathe through our own anguish as we seek to embody compassion in the world. Amen._

Thursday, Dec. 14
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Those of us who live in community—particularly those of us who lead Christian communities—can all too easily fall into the trap of thinking it is up to us to be the heroic individual who rescues a community from whatever has befallen it. Today’s reading reminds us vividly that just as John was not the Messiah, so too we are not. We can be, however, a voice crying out in the wilderness. We can be a voice for those who are suffering, a voice who cries out that there is a way to deep compassion and a voice who testifies to the illuminating path of radical love.

_Spirit of God, rest upon us with the power that draws us through our arrogance and self-deception into the light of your love and the deep compassion of your mercy. Empower us to live into the questions that draw us ever more closely into your community, rather than seeking the answers that drive us apart. Amen._
Sunday, Dec. 17
“Joy to the World” (ELW 267)

The Third Sunday of Advent is known throughout the world as Guadete Sunday, or Joy Sunday. How appropriate to be praying this hymn on this day! In the midst of all of the darkness and despair around us, in our ongoing practice of compassion—of suffering (“passio” with “com”)—it is essential to remember that joy is never only, or even ever, the opposite of sadness. Joy is not simple pleasure, happiness or glee. Joy is a word which conveys a deep throated “YES” to life, a thorough-going willingness to surrender to God’s infinite love poured out into all of creation.

When we know love, we must of necessity also know suffering. To love is to risk, and in many ways endure loss. Joy and sorrow are intermingled, woven throughout the fabric of our relationships. The Incarnation reminds us that we truly can rest in God’s promise to “make all blessings flow.”

Source of all love, we thank you for drawing us into your joy. Keep us ever mindful of your blessings, and empower us to love fully and deeply. Amen.

Saturday, Dec. 16
“Joy to the World” (ELW 267)

In Advent we await the Incarnation, we anticipate once again the entrance of the Messiah into our lives. It is appropriate to notice that this hymn, which begins with such joy and celebration, comes to its third verse and plunges us into a bleak reminder that we live amidst sin and sorrow, amidst the thorny ground of our own broken relationships, our own human constructions of oppression. All those places, practices and moments have a common aspect, in which we turn away from each other and in doing so turn away from God.

Yet even here, and precisely here, in the midst of the curse—however we understand that painful word—God’s promise is that God’s blessings will flow through the heart of our brokenness.

God of love, God of joy, God of hope, meet us in the midst of the darkness which always threatens to overwhelm us. Prepare our hearts to welcome our Messiah, and draw us through your blessing into radical compassion. Amen.
Tuesday, Dec. 19
Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

The soundtrack to the hit Broadway show, “Hamilton: An American Musical” has been playing virtually non-stop in my house in recent weeks. Thus, this season’s re-reading of Mary’s Magnificat immediately brings to mind the song, “The World Turned Upside Down.” In “Hamilton,” the song describes the defeat of the British army at Yorktown, securing the victory of the United States in the Revolutionary War and changing the course of history.

Mary’s song also imagines the world as we know it upended. Yet this reversal is not one wrought by military power or political maneuverings; this is the work of God Almighty, who comes to earth as a baby, experiences the joys and sorrows of human life, shows the world power garbed in weakness and defeats death, the greatest enemy of all. Through Mary and her baby, the powers that thrive on suffering and injustice will finally be unseated. Thanks be to God!

God of all nations, as we await the coming of Jesus, help us see the fragility in the powers of the world that oppress and harm. Give us courage to proclaim the mercy and justice of your kingdom. Amen.

Wednesday, Dec. 20
Romans 16:25-27

I grew up in a family of English teachers, so perhaps it is no surprise that I like to diagram sentences. Long, convoluted sentences can be the most rewarding—if also the most challenging to diagram. The process of diagramming untangles a knotted grammatical web to reveal the subject and verb at the heart of a statement. These final verses of Paul’s letter to the Romans, which are a single sentence in both the original Greek and the New Revised Standard Version’s (NRSV) English translation, provide just such a challenge. Once we strip away the many layers of added phrases and clauses, we are left with this clear idea at the sentence’s core: Glory be to God. It strikes me that the life of faith is a lot like Paul’s sentence: full of subordinate ideas, including some that clarify and some that clutter, but with a core utterance that sustains us. Glory be to God, indeed!

God of glory, as we sift through the layers of our theology and our moments of faith and doubt, remind us that you are our center, and help us do everything to your glory. Amen.

Thursday, Dec. 21
Luke 1:26-38

When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, Gabriel makes a lot of theological proclamations about this extraordinary baby she will have. Mary’s interest, though, is not primarily in why her baby would be called “Son of the Most High” or how he could have an everlasting kingdom. She, as the one whose body will birth this holy child, wants to know about the mechanics. How will she have a baby if she is a virgin?

God takes on a human body in Jesus Christ, experiencing all the beauty, joy, messiness and pain that having a body brings. Mary’s concern about the mechanics of her body is not peripheral to the theology of the Christmas story, but central to it. When we suffer in our bodies, worry over a diagnosis or watch our skin start to wrinkle with age, we can rejoice that God too, has experienced the delights and agonies that our human bodies bear.

Incarnate God, thank you for our bodies, in all their messiness and beauty. Remind us that you care about our whole selves, in body and spirit. Help us to love and care for our bodies. Amen.

Friday, Dec. 22
Luke 1:26-38

With what tone of voice do you imagine Mary answers Gabriel in verse 38? We often assume that Mary is docile, acquiescent, pious; that is certainly a fair reading. But what if we imagine that Mary’s tone is defiant, holding the angel and God to account? “Let it be according to your word—all of it! If this is true, let it all come out okay in the end”! After all, such a pregnancy would be an epic scandal, endangering the future of Mary and her child.

What did Mary glimpse in Gabriel’s announcement? “Mary, did you know?” as the popular Christmas song asks. We know the end of the story—there will indeed be the glory and triumph of resurrection, but first will come the heartbreak, torture and death of Good Friday. As we celebrate Jesus’ birth, we also call to mind the rest of his story—his life, death and resurrection.

Saving God, help us to see the fullness of Jesus’ story, from birth to death to resurrection. Give us the courage, like Mary, to embrace your call on our lives, whatever that may bring. Amen.
Saturday, Dec. 23
“Joy to the World” (ELW 267)

“Why do the nations so furiously rage together?” This question posed in Psalm 2 and echoed in Handel’s “Messiah” is as much a lament in our world today as it was in ancient Israel. In a fractured and fraught political landscape, I can hardly even imagine what it means for anyone, including Jesus himself, to rule the world “with truth and grace.” And yet, that is the promise of Christ, and this beloved hymn will not let us lose that hope. Rather than showcasing humanity’s greed, violence and exploitation, the nations of the world will bear witness to the “glories of his righteousness” and “wonders of his love.” The world stage will be transformed from a showcase of conflict to a sanctuary for praise and worship. Whatever this morning’s newspaper brings, we hold on to the hope of transformation on its way to us in a manger in Bethlehem.

God of hope, turn the hearts of the world’s leaders toward peace. Show us how to work for the glory of your kingdom, and give us a relentless hope in the promises of Christ. Amen.

Sunday, Dec. 24
“Joy to the World” (ELW 267)

Where have you seen the wonders of God’s love in your life? On this Christmas Eve, consider making the phrase “wonders of his love” a central part of your prayers. Repeat it, reflect on it. Who are the people who bring to you the wonder of Christ’s love? In what moments have you wondered, amazed, at the presence of the Holy Spirit?

The last time my husband and I visited with my grandmother, she was non-responsive. My husband held her hands and said, “Etta, you are safe in God’s hands.” She opened her eyes, looked at him, and nodded. The wonders of God’s love—that in her death she would bear witness to the faith for all of us!

Perhaps you have experienced deliverance from danger, or a kind word when sorely needed or a feeling of peace in a sea of chaos. Hold those wonders close to your heart today.

May the wonders of God’s love surround us all this night, and may we continually call them to mind. Amen.

Monday, Dec. 25
Luke 2:[1-7], 8-20

Another Christmas Day has arrived! The preparations are over, many of the gifts have been opened, perhaps a turkey is in the oven. Perhaps there are children who went to bed too late and got up too early dashing around your house. Perhaps there is a conspicuous silence. Perhaps your heart is heavy with bittersweet memories of Christmases past. Perhaps your heart is full of hope for the future. Perhaps you identify with the shepherds, who have seen the wild sights of bright lights and singing angels and rush to find the Christ-child. Or perhaps you identify with Mary, who is exhausted, watchful and quietly trying to make sense of it all. In whatever state this Christmas Day finds you, remember that our Savior comes to us all exactly where we are, to live life among us, to offer us hope and to surround us with a grace in ways we cannot yet imagine.

Jesus Christ, light of the world, enter our lives again this day. Enliven us, free us, make us new. Amen.

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