



Florida-Bahamas Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



JUST LOVE

Advent
DEVOTIONS

HOPE PEACE JOY LOVE

The JUST LOVE Team of the Florida-Bahamas Synod is pleased to offer these four Advent devotions for use by individuals and congregations wishing to explore the themes of Advent as they are experienced by marginalized communities. We encourage you to find partners from these communities with which to discuss these devotions—you could partner with an African-American, Latino, or LGBTQIA+ congregation, for example.

The devotions can be turned into a mid-week worship service or Bible study. They can also be sent out to your members for use in their daily devotions. We look forward to hearing how you have been able to use them in your faith community.

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WEEK ONE

A Reading from Biblical Wisdom: Proverbs 13: 12

Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

A Reading from Biblical Wisdom: Romans 5: 1-5

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Context for the Contemporary Wisdom

A Baptist minister from Atlanta, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a leader in the civil rights movement in the United States from the mid-1950s until his death by assassination in 1968. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, his leadership was vital to the success of ending legal segregation in the American South and other parts of the U.S.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in the summer of 1963 was not a new concept; three threatened/actual civil rights marches in 1941, 1957, and 1958 preceded this event. Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech occurred at the end of the day and was shown live on television across the country. After the March, civil rights leaders met with the White House to discuss the civil rights legislation that ultimately became part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Dr. King's Christmas Eve sermon in 1967 unfortunately bookended his speech on dreams as it was his last Christmas sermon before his death four months later in Memphis. It was the fifth of a five-lecture series called the Massey Lectures, which

were produced for the Canadian Broadcasting Company. Each lecture had a distinct theme regarding the African American civil rights struggle; this sermon's title, "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," delved into Dr. King's dream of nonviolence, reviewed the setbacks the civil rights movement had along the way, and concluded that deferred hopes could still be dreams.

A Reading from Contemporary Wisdom

Excerpt from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's "A Christmas Sermon on Peace" (12/24/1967)

- <https://onbeing.org/blog/martin-luther-kings-last-christmas-sermon/> (Full text of his sermon)
- <https://youtu.be/1jeylAH3bUI> (Audio of his sermon; the whole sermon is fantastic, but 22:50 onward is where to focus your Advent meditation this week.)

"...1963, on a sweltering August afternoon, we stood in Washington, D.C., and talked to the nation about many things. Toward the end of that afternoon, I tried to talk to the nation about a dream that I had had, and I must confess to you today that not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turn into a nightmare. I remember the first time I saw that dream turn into a nightmare, just a few weeks after I had talked about it. It was when four beautiful, unoffending, innocent Negro girls were murdered in a church in Birmingham, Alabama. I watched that dream turn into a nightmare as I moved through the ghettos of the nation and saw my black brothers and sisters perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity, and saw the nation really doing nothing to grapple with the Negroes' problem of poverty. I saw that dream turn into a nightmare as I watched my black brothers and sisters in the midst of anger and understandable outrage, in the midst of their hurt, in the midst of their disappointment, turn to misguided riots to try to solve that problem. I saw that dream turn into a nightmare as I watched the war in Vietnam escalating, and as I saw so-called military advisors, 16,000 strong, turn into fighting soldiers until today some 500,000 American boys are fighting on Asian soil.

"Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes, but in spite of that I close today by saying I still have a dream, because, you know, you can't give up

in life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of all. And so today I still have a dream.

"I have a dream that one day men will rise up and come to see that they are made to live together as brothers. I still have a dream this morning that one day every Negro in this country, every colored person in the world, will be judged on the basis of the content of his character rather than the color of his skin, and every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. I still have a dream that one day the idle industries of Appalachia will be revitalized, and the empty stomachs of Mississippi will be filled, and brotherhood will be more than a few words at the end of a prayer, but rather the first order of business on every legislative agenda.

"I still have a dream today that one day justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. I still have a dream today that in all of our state houses and city halls men will be elected to go there who will do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with their God. I still have a dream today that one day war will come to an end, that men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, that nations will no longer rise up against nations, neither will they study war any more. I still have a dream today that one day the lamb and the lion will lie down together and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid. I still have a dream today that one day every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill will be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

"I still have a dream that with this faith we will be able to adjourn the councils of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when there will be peace on earth and goodwill toward men. It will be a glorious day, the morning stars will sing together, and the sons of God will shout for joy."

Questions for Reflection

Because we live in the United States, the American dream is omnipresent in our lives. Dr. King's dream speech uses that as a starting point for how hopes of Black

Americans could be fulfilled and used to create a beloved community. Dr. King talks specifically of being “the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes” yet he continues to hope in his dreams, which are many. As he describes his dreams, they come through his faith in God’s infinite grace, which is for everyone.

1. What are your hopes and dreams regarding racial justice today where you live? In what ways are these hopes becoming reality?
2. Imagine a time when you hoped for something to happen in your life and it became true. How was God present during your deferment period? What sustained you in the waiting?
3. Dr. King’s faith sustains him despite the terribleness surrounding him in the world, but he does mention the pessimism that is alive and breeding despair. How do we get through the rough times?
4. How long will hope continued to be deferred in terms of racial justice? What roadblocks exist? What are some ways we can work for change together despite not knowing how things will turn out in the end?

Closing Prayer

Most gracious God, I know not all dreams are possible in the way I imagine them to be, but I also know that I am not alone in hoping for a more racially just and beloved community. Show me how to stand with my neighbors using my faith that comes through suffering, perseverance, character, and finally, hope. Amen.

PEACE

WEEK TWO

A Reading from Biblical Wisdom: Philippians 4:6-7

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.

Context for the Contemporary Wisdom

The Rev. Dr. Howard Washington Thurman (1899–1981) was an influential African American author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. He played a leading role in many social justice movements and organizations of the twentieth century. Thurman's theology of radical nonviolence influenced and shaped a generation of civil rights activists and he was a key mentor to leaders within the movement such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Thurman was Dean Emeritus of Marsh Chapel, Boston University, Honorary Canon of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, New York City, and Founder of Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, the first interracial, interdenominational church in the United States. Howard Thurman was a spiritual friend to Martin Luther King Jr., and he was considered a "Social Mystic."

A Reading from Contemporary Wisdom

Excerpt from the Foreword to *The Inward Journey* by Howard Thurman

- <https://youtu.be/y1hmQQeG790> (Vincent Harding describing Howard Thurman's spiritual journey)

"There are not many windows in these meditations; they are, as the title indicates, an Inward Journey. It may be that if there were more illustrations, the meaning could be more quickly grasped. The choice here is deliberate. It is my hope that they will make reading and rereading rewarding and sustaining. The purpose remains ever the same: to focus the mind and heart upon God as the Eternal Source and Goal of Life. To find Him as Companion and Presence is 'to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly' with Him.

“‘Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace.’ These words, taken from the prayer of St. Francis, speak to one of the most insistent conditions of the human spirit. It is not easy to be an instrument of peace because we understand so little about the anatomy of hostility and its particular kind of etiquette. Again and again, we use our words to protect ourselves, to ‘put others in their place,’ to humiliate and to wound; sometimes, quite unconsciously. Have you ever been caught in the backwash of your words which hit their mark, resulting in an injury which was not part of your intent? All of this because you were too preoccupied with your own interests, your own concerns to take into account the other person? At such a moment your good word may easily become an instrument of violence.

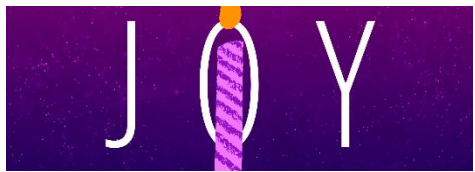
“Ask yourself, ‘Have I ever indulged in gossip which gave me an opportunity to say something uncharitable about someone else?’ Of course, if I had not heard the gossip and passed it on, then there would have been no chance for me to express my quiet hostility and, at the same time, be relieved of the responsibility for it. When I participate in the shared rumors and the gossip around me by passing them on or by refraining from stopping them with what I know to be the facts and the truth, I let my attitude and my influence become instruments of violence in my hands.”

Questions for Reflection

1. Dr. Thurman’s is not a rhetorical question and is worth pondering: “Have I ever indulged in gossip which gave me an opportunity to say something uncharitable about someone else?”
2. Where do I find peace when experiencing turmoil in the presence of injustice?
3. What does peace look like when witnessing injustice?

Howard Thurman’s Prayer:

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace.” Teach me how to order my days that with sure touch I may say the right word at the right time and in the right way — lest I betray the spirit of peace. Let me not be deceived by my own insecurity and weakness which would make me hurt another as I try desperately to help myself. Keep watch with me, O my Father, over the days of my life, that with abiding enthusiasm I may be in such possession of myself that each day I may offer to Thee the full, unhampered use of me in all my parts as “an instrument of Thy Peace.” Amen.



WEEK THREE

A Reading from Biblical Wisdom: Isaiah 49:13

Sing for joy, O heavens! Rejoice, O earth! Burst into song, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on them in their suffering.

A Reading from Biblical Wisdom: Colossians 1:12

May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light.

Context for the Contemporary Wisdom

Biblical joy is different than what most people think of as joy. It is not just a happy emotion that we either feel or don't feel, it is a state of being that finds its source in God. The Bible is clear that joy comes from God. It joy, grounded in thankfulness for the first Advent of Jesus Christ and looking forward toward his second coming, that is a marker of faithful believers.

On the third Sunday of Advent, we light another candle, often pink as a symbol of Advent joy. Believers will read and reflect on scriptures from the Old and New Testaments about the joy of our salvation in Jesus Christ. The third Sunday of Advent is often referred to as Joyful Sunday.

When Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts wrote an essay on Black joy for the *Washington Post*, she had no idea just how deeply it would resonate. But the outpouring of positive responses affirmed her own lived experience: that Black joy is not just a weapon of resistance, it is a tool for resilience. Her book *Black Joy: Stories of Resistance, Resilience, and Restoration* is a collection of lyrical essays about the way joy has evolved, even in the midst of trauma, in her own life. Detailing these instances of joy in the context of Black culture allows us to recognize the power of Black joy as a resource to draw upon, and to challenge the one-note narratives of Black life as solely comprised of trauma and hardship.

A Reading from Contemporary Wisdom

Excerpt from the *Washington Post* essay by Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts: "My Daughter Reminded Me that Black Joy is a Form of Resistance" (June 19, 2020)

- <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/06/19/my-daughters-dancing-rain-reminded-me-power-black-joy/> (Complete Article)
- <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjn6srBq7P7AhVJRTABHW8xCuoQtwJ6BAghEAI&url=https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/culture/video/tracey-michael-lewis-giggetts-celebrates-black-joy-book-82717775&usg=AOvVaw3N78s4pXbDYBEPMd5xcQfp> ("Good Morning America" interview with Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts (February 07, 2022))

"...We laughed uncontrollably. Not a few chuckles like when we see a funny meme on the Internet. This was a guffaw. A scream-laugh. An unearthing of all the things, known and unknown, that ailed us.

"When we got back into the house, I cried. Mostly because I'd been vacillating between sorrow and rage the whole week prior, and I understood what that singular moment really meant. In my mind, we were two black girls in a backyard turning the world and white perceptions upside down with our joy.

"It was a cleansing experience for us and, in many ways, it was a demonstration of what Zora Neale Hurston once said: 'Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me.'

"Our dancing in the rain wasn't a denial of all the storms that had moved in on black people that week. It was a dare. An indignant stance of confidence in the midst of this malignant monsoon called systemic racism. Our laughter was a way to say 'you can't steal our joy' to anyone who'd dare deny our humanity. Author and scholar Imani Perry, in a recent article for the Atlantic, captured this feeling well: 'Joy is not found in the absence of pain and suffering. It exists through it. ... Blackness is an immense and defiant joy.'

“Joy as resistance isn’t as much of a stretch as some might think. We constantly hear about the alleged rioting and looting happening during recent protests and uprisings around the country. What we don’t hear too much about is the spontaneous breaks in protests when dancers and singers and artists take over where the chants and confrontations left off. The way the crowds stomp an insistent rhythm into the pavement feels like a Diasporic clarion call. The engagements and weddings that have happened in the middle of marches are too often considered anecdotal for some but are actually intentional acts of defiance. Why else would a woman dressed in ivory satin stand with her partner, eyes wide and full with liquid love, kissing fervently to the sounds of protesters’ cheers?”

“Choosing to express our joy loudly and without reservation is directly connected to bringing our *Imago Dei* (made in the image of God) humanity front and center in the movement. That’s a necessary form of resistance because it clearly punches the lights out of the pervasive dehumanization we encounter every day.

“More than even resistance, though, dancing in the rain with my sweet girl illuminated just how powerful and healing black joy can be for black people. That night, my baby girl slept more soundly than she had in months. I was able to quiet the panic that fills my chest when, long after the little one’s bedtime, I sit at my computer and prepare to write another essay about another hashtagged brother or sister.

“In the wake of George Floyd calling out for his long-passed mother as his neck was being crushed by a police officer and what I imagine was Breonna Taylor’s last dream before she was shot while trying to sleep in her bed, it’s hard not to believe that the only real and lasting weapon I have as a black mother is to circumvent these generations-long traumas with generational joy.

“My daughter will laugh and cry and dance as much as she likes with as much freedom as I can afford her. She will know that she can laugh and cry and dance in the sun *and* the rain.

“And sure, I’m a mother. So after the laughter was over and both our hair and our hearts were drenched, I might have still said, “Girl, get your tail in this house and get

those soaked clothes off!" But this time, my words were laced with some newly recovered ammunition: joy."

Questions for Reflection

Tracey sees joy as a weapon. That is an unusual thought when we think about joy. Her thought is when we think of Black Joy with love, joy is the pathway and love is the answer. Black Joy is united by love. Regardless how bad the tragedy or situation, when we respond in love no one can steal your joy. She encourages everyone to be intentional about creating joy in their day. Joy is embodied and tells you what your body needs.

1. How can anyone experience joy when racial justice is not just for marginalized people?
2. Joy is easy to express when everything is going well in your life. Consider joy when life comes at you hard and heavy. How can you focus on joy and live a joyful life despite the challenges around you?
3. Listen to the song Joy by the Georgia Mass Choir.
(<https://music.apple.com/us/album/joy/350362129?i=350362163>) Can you feel the Joy the choir expresses as they sing from their souls? Why do you think the experience of Joy is so intense in this song?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we come before you with joy in our hearts, minds, and souls. When it's hard to live a joyful life, as hard times and racial injustice plague our land, give us the strength to stand strong on your word. To stand on truth and justice and never let anyone steal our joy. May our joy resonate to our brothers and sisters in Christ and the world. In the name of Jesus, we pray Amen.

LOVE

WEEK FOUR

A Reading from Biblical Wisdom: 1 John 4:7-12

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

Context for the Contemporary Wisdom

In the fourth week of Advent, we celebrate the unearned and unconditional love of God that will come among us in the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. We ponder the conditions that we place upon our love and our loyalty, as well as our sin of declaring some people outside the reach of God's love.

Toni Morrison's 1998 novel, *Paradise*, is about a paradise lost because of fear and suspicion. It describes events that cause nine men from an exclusively African-American town in Oklahoma to kill a group of women, black and white, who have taken refuge from abuse and violence in an old mansion just south of town; the men are convinced that the presence of these women has caused the deterioration of their community. Halfway through the novel, at the long-awaited wedding of two townspeople, an elderly preacher offers words that please some people and offend others.

A Reading from Contemporary Wisdom

Excerpt from Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise*

- <https://youtu.be/DIJI3vjs-KI> (A video from the New York Times, honoring Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winning author Toni Morrison)

"Let me tell you about love, that silly word you believe is about whether you like somebody or whether somebody likes you or whether you can put up with somebody

in order to get something or someplace you want or you believe it has to do with how your body responds to another body like robins or bison or maybe you believe love is how forces or nature or luck is benign to you in particular not maiming or killing you but if so doing it for your own good.

“Love is none of that. There is nothing in nature like it. Not in robins or bison or in the banging tails of your hunting dogs and not in blossoms or suckling foal. Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it is easy you are a fool. If you think it is natural you are blind. It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God.

“You do not deserve love regardless of the suffering you have endured. You do not deserve love because somebody did you wrong. You do not deserve love just because you want it. You can only earn - by practice and careful contemplations - the right to express it and you have to learn how to accept it. Which is to say you have to earn God. You have to practice God. You have to think God-carefully. And if you are a good and diligent student you may secure the right to show love.

“Love is not a gift. It is a diploma. A diploma conferring certain privileges: the privilege of expressing love and the privilege of receiving it. How do you know you have graduated? You don't. What you do know is that you are human and therefore educable, and therefore capable of learning how to learn, and therefore interesting to God, who is interested only in Himself which is to say He is interested only in love.

“Do you understand me? God is not interested in you. He is interested in love and the bliss it brings to those who understand and share the interest. Couples that enter the sacrament of marriage and are not prepared to go the distance or are not willing to get right with the real love of God cannot thrive. They may cleave together like robins or gulls or anything else that mates for life. But if they eschew this mighty course, at the moment when all are judged for the disposition of their eternal lives, their cleaving won't mean a thing. God bless the pure and holy. Amen.”

Questions for Reflection

According to one reviewer, the novel "Paradise" explores "the dangers of excessive love--for children, mates, or God. It also addresses a question that has always intrigued Morrison: 'Why paradise necessitates exclusion.'"

1. Does love come naturally to us, or is it a skill that we must learn?
2. The men of the town blame a group of women for the loss of their "paradise." How do we blame others for our misfortune?
3. The love of their community causes the men of the town to commit a horrible crime. Are there other examples of loving "excessively" or in a way that is harmful?
4. Morrison's preacher says that, while we cannot earn love, we must earn the right to express our love and learn how to accept love from others. Do you agree with him?
5. How can we offer the same kind of love that God offers to us?

Closing Prayer

God of justice and love, we thank you that your Word took flesh and dwelled among us, showing us the humble and self-sacrificing love that is your very nature. Help us to be ambassadors of that love and tireless workers for your justice, that all may know the peace, the joy, and the hope you desire for them. Amen.