Week 2: Peace
Reordering life and relationships

Week 2 Prayer

God of peace,
In the middle of competing expectations, quiet our hearts.
Where relationships are strained, give us wisdom. Where boundaries are needed, give us courage. Where love feels costly, give us grace.
Reorder our lives so that we may live not by pressure, but by your peace.
Amen.

Day 8

"Choose this day whom you will serve . . . we will serve the Lord." Joshua 24:15

Dear Pastor,
I find myself feeling pulled in two directions every Christmas Eve, and I'm not sure how to be fully present at the family dinner and at worship.

Attending church that night feels deeply important to me. There's something about gathering for worship, hearing the story again, singing together and lighting candles that feels like the center of the whole season. At the same time, Christmas Eve is when my extended family gathers. It's one of the few times everyone is together, and I don't want to miss it. The only thing the grandparents want for Christmas is to be with everyone and take a big family photo. It seems like a simple request, but it's a challenge for me to get there to take the photo and then get to church on time. We are the only family at this gathering that goes to church on Christmas Eve.

What does it mean to prioritize faith here? Does it mean always choosing church over family? Or is there room for flexibility?

Sincerely,
Pulled in Two Directions

Dear Pulled in Two Directions,
The "center of the whole season" first showed up not as a great leader in a holy Temple but as a babe lying in a small town's manger alongside two peasant parents. Which is to say: Love arrived in the vulnerable. And I sense one reason we so cherish those Christmas Eve services is because we are deeply moved by the vulnerability of love's way and love's presence.

None of that, of course, solves your dilemma. It simply invites this reflect: No matter where we show up, the very best way to honor this season is to love with a vulnerable love. What if you go to church this year and miss the photo? What would it look like to honor your family anyway — in the honest words you share about your decision or some alternate gesture that communicates your love? Or what if you join the family photo and forgo church this year? What would it look like to worship God in a more vulnerable way than in past years: an offering done before, during or after the family gathers?

Years ago, a terrible snowstorm canceled our local Christmas Eve services and took out electricity for an hour. With hot chocolate, freshly baked cookies and a few lit candles, a motley mix of my family gathered in my mom's small living room. Some were active churchgoers, and some were not. We went around the circle and each offered a word about something we were thankful for. My uncle read from Luke, chapter 2. I strummed "Silent Night" on the guitar, and we sang the first verse twice because it was the only one we all remembered. Each person then opened a gift. No one took a photo that night, but I promise, the evening is stuck in my memory like a photo.

Following love's way,
Pastor Bobby

Day 9

"Recite them to your children. . . . Write them on the doorposts of your house." Deuteronomy 6:7, 9

Dear Pastor,
My spouse and I have been talking about our Christmas traditions, and I've realized most of what we do is simply repeating what we grew up with. I want to create traditions that actually reflect our faith, not just our habits. But I'm hesitant to disrupt something that already works. Traditions carry emotional weight, and changing them feels risky. At the same time, I don't want to confuse familiarity with meaning.

How do we discern which traditions are worth keeping and which ones we need to reimagine? How do we do that without losing the joy that's already there?

Sincerely,
Trying to Be Intentional

Dear Trying to Be Intentional,
Tradition is both a gift and an invitation. It roots us in the love, wisdom and sacrifices of those before us while inviting each generation to carry that legacy forward. The question is not simply "Should we keep this tradition?" but "How does it help us tell the story of God's faithfulness?"

Among the Akan people of Ghana and Ivory Coast, generations have told stories of Ananse the Spider, clever and sometimes mischievous. Stories of Ananse have carried wisdom across generations — and eventually across the Atlantic with enslaved Africans. They remind us that traditions are vessels of memory, identity and hope. Deuteronomy, chapter 6, offers a similar charge. Faith belongs in the rhythms of everyday life. Around tables, through recipes and in prayers, songs, stories and celebrations, we inherit ways to remember who we are and whose we are.

But inheritance does not require imitation. As we grow and learn, we can create traditions that reflect who we are now and what we know now. Tradition and innovation need not be enemies; at their best, they enrich one another.

Perhaps the old wedding guidance offers a helpful framework: that is, something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. Keep something old that roots you. Create something new that reflects where God is leading. Borrow something beautiful from another generation or culture, with gratitude and respect. And let something blue make room for the tenderness, longing and complexity that accompany every meaningful celebration.

The Akan wisdom of *sankofa* teaches us to "go back and fetch it." We honor the past not by living in it but by learning from it. So create boldly. Celebrate intentionally. Tell the stories. Write new prayers. Build traditions worth inheriting. And when someone asks, "Why do we do this?" may your answer point toward God's faithfulness from generation to generation!

With ancestral wisdom and Advent hope,
Pastor Winterbourne

Day 10

"Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together." Colossians 3:14

Dear Pastor,
This will be our third Christmas as a blended family, and our only shared tradition is matching pajamas. One set of our kids is used to regular weekly church attendance, and the other set has only attended church sporadically and never on Christmas Eve. At home, one set of kids is used to lighting the Advent candles and reading Scripture before dinner, and the other is used to a candy-filled Advent calendar that they open after dinner. So now we do both.

It feels like we are layering one set of expectations on top of the other. Big decisions like going to church and small decisions like candy-filled Advent calendars can feel loaded. What does it look like to create a shared life of faith in a family where not everyone starts from the same place? How do we intentionally cultivate meaning that we will grow into together?

Sincerely,
Trying to Hold It Together

Dear Trying to Hold It Together,
Kudos to you for being sensitive to the needs and traditions of your kids. It can be tricky to bring two families together and to navigate the rhythms and traditions they are used to. Your care and consideration of their feelings is the right place to start. I'm glad to hear everyone agrees on the PJs tradition, at least! You have found some common ground there. And there's nothing more wholesome and adorable than kids in matching jammies.

It might be helpful to call a family meeting — for the important purpose of unveiling the family Christmas pajamas, of course, and also for talking through the rest of your Advent plans. If the kids feel they're part of the planning process, they might come up with some decisions or alternatives together. Who knows? This approach could be a good way to model discussion, respect and shared decision making. You're creating a shared life together, and that takes time.

You aren't the first family to discover that different people have different ideas about how things should be done. The church is a blended family, too, in some respects. We don't always agree. We don't always like change. Sometimes we hold too tightly to traditions that have given us comfort and meaning. That's where Paul's encouragement to "clothe yourself in love" is so helpful. Love doesn't mean that we all have to agree. It means that we approach one another with patience, kindness, humility and a willingness to listen.

At Advent, we celebrate that God comes among us and makes something new — not by erasing what came before, but by making us into something we couldn't have imagined on our own.

You're doing great, my friend. Keep putting on that love each morning. You may not be holding it all together perfectly, but you're learning how to hold it together in love.

Grace and peace,
Pastor Elizabeth

Day 11

"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Romans 12:18

Dear Pastor,
I've been thinking about whether to reconnect with my family this Christmas. We've grown distant because of political disagreements that became deeply personal. What started as conversations turned into arguments and eventually silence. I haven't seen them since the Fourth of July family picnic. Part of me misses them. Another part feels guarded. I don't want to pretend everything is fine. But I also don't want this distance to become permanent.

What does reconciliation look like when we still fundamentally disagree? Is it possible to be in a relationship without resolving everything?

Sincerely,
Cautiously Hopeful

Dear Cautiously Hopeful,
It is hard to know how to be in community with people when we disagree, and it is even more difficult when those we disagree with are our family.

In the spirit of Advent as a time of preparation and hope, I recommend that you talk with your family ahead of time, or at least communicate via email or text, to plan together how you want Christmas to go. Ask for what you need: that those topics you disagree about not be addressed, that Christmas be focused on the gifts of the holiday. Ask that the family focus on the beauty of the story of Christ being born, on the time spent together and on sharing hospitality and your specific family traditions. Perhaps even add a schedule and let them know that you will be there for a few hours instead of the whole day, so that you limit how much time there is for conversation to wander into areas that might lead to further hurt and distance.

Family gatherings can be times when we set clear expectations of how things will go, even if they have not gone that way of things previously. Let your family know that you ask this so that you can feel safe and hopeful in your relationships on Christmas and so that your love for one another can be the primary thing you all experience. And if they cannot join you in that hope, perhaps prepare them and yourself for what it will be like if you are not with them, and find a way to honor your family's Christmas traditions on your own. Remind your family and yourself that we can always love and pray for one another, even when we don't spend time together.

In Advent Hope,
Pastor Jessica

Day 12

"Unless you change and become like children ..." Matthew 18:3

Dear Pastor,
This is the first Christmas when my kids no longer believe in Santa, and I didn't expect it to feel like such a loss. Christmas morning will be quieter. The kids now sleep later. They will still enjoy the gifts and say thank you, but something has shifted. The anticipation, the surprise and the wonder seem different, like we have lost something magical. I wonder if what we are missing is Santa or something deeper that I don't know how to name or nurture now that the kids are older.

Is there a way to grow into a deeper wonder that doesn't depend on childhood imagination but still feels alive and meaningful?

Sincerely,
Missing the Wonder

Dear Wonder,
Lots of us yearn for the magical anticipation that filled our childhood Christmases. My brother and I left a plate of cookies and listened for reindeer and tried earnestly to figure out the chimney travel system. And we did all that well past the point when we knew that belief and make-believe were two different things entirely.

But maybe they're not. A jolly man in a red suit traveling the world in one night, flying reindeer, elves in a toyshop and all the rest — it's all impossible. That's part of its magic. It suspends the reality around us and invites us to imagine the world through the lens of "what if."

At one time, the idea that the Creator of the Stars of Night would come to dwell not just on earth, but in a human body, was so far beyond impossible that we couldn't have imagined it as human beings. But Christmas – the Incarnation – changed that. It's not magic. It's better than magic. It invites us to imagine the world through the lens of "what if," but in a way that is more about peace and justice, about all that's wrong being made right. It's the promise that the world is about to turn.

I imagine that part of what made Christmas magical for you as a parent was watching your children experience it. What if all of you now create little moments of "what if" for someone else? Not abstractly, either; part of the miracle of Christmas is God becoming tangible. What tangible signs of presence might you share with your neighborhood? Their classmates or your colleagues? In childhood, we don't just believe something amazing happens. We believe something amazing happens and we are directly, personally involved in it. Santa comes to us.

Thanks be to God – literally – love always comes to us. Make that awareness of Christ with us tangible to others, and Christmas will always be magical.

With wonder and joy,
Pastor Jenny

Day 13

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Matthew 6:21

Dear Pastor,
I've been feeling uneasy about how much Christmas revolves around buying more: more gifts, more decorations, more ugly Christmas sweaters. Even when I try to keep things simple, I feel pulled into the same patterns of equating joy with more over-the-top spending to make each year more spectacular than the last. I don't want to reject the joy of giving but I don't want to participate uncritically either.

How do we celebrate fully and live simply? Or does choosing simplicity mean stepping away from some of the festivities? How can we practice generosity in a way that aligns with our faith?

Sincerely,
Trying to Live Differently

Dear TTLD,
I hear you. I'm stressed and exhausted just thinking about all of the time, money, and energy it takes to celebrate what is now a *trillion-dollar holiday season* in the US!

Jesus had a lot to say about our relationship with money. Spending and budgets reflect our values and priorities, and it's helpful to take an honest look at our habits to see if they align with our faith. Jesus also connected consumerism with heightened anxiety. How much stress do we create for ourselves in pursuing the "best Christmas ever"? If we look at what most stresses us out — money, time, expectations — we will see where to scale back. It's okay to step away from some festivities and discontinue certain traditions.

Thankfully, we have many ways to practice generosity, hospitality, and joyfulness at little to no cost. My kids and I have a tradition of placing four gifts under the tree: a want, a need, something to wear, and something to read. We've also enjoyed going to our favorite thrift stores with a set budget to shop for gifts. Handmade, repurposed, and regifted items can be given from the heart for free. Within a budget, gifts of experiences, time together, or charitable donations can be meaningful and lasting.

This shift can feel like we're disappointing others or unable to participate fully in the season's festivities. Before the season is in full swing, let people know you intend to celebrate differently this year. You can adjust expectations and give them permission to do the same. At the end of the day, give yourself and others grace as you make your way through the season. Christ will still be born, bringing hope, peace, joy and love — and there is no greater gift!

Simply,
Pastor Stephanie

Day 14

"God loves a cheerful giver." 2 Corinthians 9:7

Dear Pastor,
As a younger church leader, I've noticed that every Christmas, people become incredibly generous. It's beautiful, but it doesn't seem to last. By January, much of that energy fades. It makes me wonder whether we're seeing lasting transformation or just seasonal emotion. Are we as church leaders unintentionally reinforcing this pattern by asking people to contribute to charity along with their gift giving during Advent and Christmas?

I'm hoping to learn from your experience about how the formation of generosity works. What practices and approaches actually cultivate generosity as a way of life, not just a moment? How do we balance the church budget without relying on a Christmas miracle?
Sincerely,

Learning to Lead

Dear Learning,
In many ways, this is "the most wonderful time of the year"! Our people can be generous, and the culture amplifies that generosity in December. As you suggest, however, sometimes the church unintentionally reinforces generosity as something seasonal and even whimsical. Lamenting the task of balancing the budget resonates with me. We are not called to balance budgets. We are called to participate in the mission of Christ. Church leaders are not curators of spreadsheets; we are, Paul writes, "stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Corinthians 4:1).

A few things I've learned along the way:

- Don't put every egg into the Christmas (or Easter) basket. Too many congregations pull out all the stops twice a year at key times when the culture says faith is important. Instead, celebrate all the seasons. Emphasize the splendor of Pentecost, and honor the dark weeks following Epiphany. Craft meaningful worship weekly using varying voices and mediums throughout the year.
- Speak with your congregants about intentional and planned giving. Highlight mission opportunities, and invite the congregation to consider intentionally funding that mission.
- Connect with givers, and celebrate the mission their faithfulness makes possible! I send quarterly personalized letters to those who make pledges or gifts. These messages celebrate all their giving has enabled by highlighting specific impacts in the congregation and community. Our financial secretary closes this letter with a list of what the specific recipient has estimated to give (if applicable) and their total given year-to-date. I add a personal note to each, thanking the givers for their generosity and faithfulness.

Invite your people to join in a year of faithfulness and generosity as together you wonder at what God does in and through you.

Gratefully,
Pastor Dave