Week 3: Joy
Meaning, practice and incarnation

Week 3 Prayer

God who comes near,
You entered our world not in power, but in vulnerability.
Help us to see you in ordinary moments, in our questions, in our grief.
Give us eyes to notice your presence and hearts open to receive your joy — not forced, but quietly given.
Amen.

Day 15

"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them." Luke 2:20

Dear Pastor,
This is the first Christmas Grandma is in the retirement home. We want to include her in family celebrations. But she is agitated when she leaves the facility, and we don't want to upset her. We've decided to bring Christmas to her and use the small activity room for a family holiday party.

We were hoping you might have suggestions for how to do a brief but meaningful churchlike experience for her. We want to read Scripture and sing a couple hymns she remembers well. What text would you suggest? And do you have a nice pastoral prayer for a family setting like this?

It's also possible she will be in a difficult mood. We might need a prayer for ourselves afterwards.

Sincerely,
Giving Our Best for Grandma

Dear Giving,
Bringing Christmas to your grandmother is a gift to her and a nod to the meaning of Christmas itself. We celebrate God's love coming directly to us where we are. You've already embodied the truest meaning of the day.

It would be disingenuous of me to pretend to know her favorites, but sometimes a starting place is helpful. Here's a traditional sequence that has shaped many of my own Christmas Eve services. Take two traditional readings (Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:1-20) and intersperse two or more familiar hymns: "O Come, All Ye Faithful," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," Angels We Have Heard on High," "Joy to the World," and "Silent Night."

As a prayer for all of you, I offer words from A New Zealand Prayer Book-He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa': "Lord, it is night. The night is for stillness. Let us be in the presence of God. What has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be. The night is dark. Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives rest in you. The night is quiet. Let the quietness of your peace enfold us, all dear to us, and all who have no peace. The night heralds the dawn. Let us look expectantly to a new day, new joys, new possibilities. In your name we pray. Amen." (Used with permission)

The good news is that Christmas comes no matter what, whether our efforts go according to plan or not.

With peace that surpasses understanding,
Pastor Jenny

Day 16

"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable . . . think about these things." Philippians 4:8

Dear Pastor,
We've never really treated Santa as something to believe in literally, and that approach worked when our kids were younger. Now that they are in school, they're starting to notice that other kids experience it differently. They're asking questions — not just whether Santa is real, but why some families pretend he is for their kids.

What I'm struggling with now is how to talk about Santa in a way that honors other families' experiences without undermining them, while also staying true to how we've approached Christmas in our home. Is there a way to frame Santa as a meaningful story without sounding dismissive? How do we help our kids participate graciously with their friends who believe in Santa?

Sincerely,
Trying to Be Thoughtful

Dear Trying to Be Thoughtful,
My family had a similar experience with our son. Like you, we had not promoted Santa Claus in our house but did not want to undermine the experiences and traditions of others. We told him the truth in words he'd understand at his age, and I offer them to you here:

More than 1,600 years ago, a man named St. Nicholas gave away all his wealth to children and those in need, leaving secret gifts for them and not getting any credit for his kindness. For centuries, people across many cultures and religious traditions have been inspired by his generosity to follow in his footsteps by giving gifts to others without the assurance that they will get anything in return. It is fun to have a Santa Claus character that helps so many people be anonymously generous.

We want to encourage this kind of behavior at Christmas and always! But we don't need to use the language of Santa Claus because we have an example of selfless giving in Jesus. At Christmas we are inspired to give gifts and help others not because we want to make it onto Santa Claus's "nice list" but because we are happy and grateful for the generous gift that God gave us all when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The best gift is love. On Christmas, we celebrate that God loves us so much that God came to us in the flesh of Jesus, so that we would know that God loves us no matter what, without expecting anything in return.

Our faith can inspire others to live a life that is generous and kind. We can find some special ways to give gifts without getting anything in return as a family!

One generous act is to respect the differences of others' way of celebrating the season and to allow parents in other families to teach their children about the joy of giving using the words and ideas that feel best to them.

With gratitude for your thoughtful hopes and efforts,
Pastor Heather

Day 17

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" Psalm 139:7

Dear Pastor,
Our kids have started asking about Elf on the Shelf, and I feel uneasy about having an "elf" monitor them and report to Santa. The idea of being watched, evaluated and either rewarded or punished doesn't sit right with me.

What complicates my discomfort is how this custom overlaps with what we teach about God. We say God is with us, present and loving. That feels very different from being constantly monitored and judged by a toy. But I'm not sure how to explain that difference in a way my kids can understand. How do we navigate this? And how do we talk about God's presence in a way that is clearly rooted in love?

Sincerely,
Trying to Be Intentional

Dear Trying,
I want to start by naming how beautiful it is that you're taking this so seriously. Your child's understanding of God at this tender age is important and your instinct to protect it is spot on.

You do not have to participate in every Christmas tradition. When my own kids were little, we never participated in the Elf on the Shelf. We were very up front with our kids that the Santa myth is a lovely story, but Santa is not a real person. My kids' Christmases were no less special; they had many church and family traditions to find wonder in.

Children can find it helpful to contrast the conditional Elf's surveillance with God's unconditional grace. The Elf watches for misbehavior to see whether we deserve gifts, but God our Creator knows us intimately. God loves, protects, and gives to us regardless of our slip-ups.

In Psalm 139:7, we don't see a guilty person trying to escape a spy watching for them to mess up. The Psalmist is expressing awe that God's comforting presence is inescapable. Our identity and worth are found in the One who is always with us, not in a "naughty or nice" behavioral evaluation.

It is perfectly okay to abandon or avoid traditions that cause stress or don't align with your faith. If you do try out the Elf on the Shelf custom, you could tell the kids it's a game of hide-and-seek to remove the disciplinary element. Or try having the Elf give the kids a "good deeds" challenge to shift the focus from presents and self to helping others.

Keep asking good questions, and remember the important thing is remembering that God's loving presence is the true magic of Advent.

Blessings,
Pastor Charissa

Day 18

"Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith . . . ?" James 2:5

Dear Pastor,
My child asked me why some kids get bigger, more expensive gifts than others. They noticed that their good friend got a few small toys, and the class bully got a Nintendo Switch. They're noticing something real. There are differences, and they aren't always fair. The kindest kids don't always receive the best gifts, and unkind kids rarely receive coal in their stocking.

I don't want my child to think their friend is hiding a sin that makes them less deserving than someone else because of what they receive. How do we talk about this honestly? How do we help our children understand generosity and compassion in the midst of inequality?

Sincerely,
Caught Off Guard

Dear Caught Off Guard,
Children may begin to notice wealth inequality among their peers for many reasons — whether it is apparent through the quantity of gifts on special occasions, the niceness of houses or clothes, or the elaborateness of vacations and other extracurricular activities. The culture around us celebrates wealth, and Christians can easily get sucked into the mentality that admires material possessions and abundant financial resources.

One of the great shortcomings of secular Christianity's Santa tradition is that it often equates receiving gifts with being good, especially for children. This messaging is rather contrary to the truth we encounter in Scripture. The biblical Christmas story itself is about how a family with few resources bears Christ into the world, and Jesus' teachings often point us toward the dignity and generosity of those who are poor.

Your child has offered you a great opportunity to push back on the messaging that equates wealth with goodness, so you can instead emphasize that love and compassion are the qualities that make us truly wealthy.

Be honest. Acknowledge that wealthy people can sometimes be mean and dishonest, while folks with few resources may be very good, hardworking people. Take stock of the family and friends close to your family. If socioeconomic diversity isn't represented there, consider how you might diversify your family's experiences of the larger world's realities. Your daily life is the easiest way to show your child that you value people by their character and kindness, not the size of their bank accounts.

Blessings to you in this Advent season!
Pastor Lindy

Day 19

"Every generous act of giving . . . is from above." James 1:17

Dear Pastor,
My child asked me why we give gifts at Christmas, and I realized I didn't have a clear answer. I started with tradition, generosity, celebration, but none of it felt complete.

Is gift giving today about us giving presents to one another to mimic the wise men presenting Jesus with gifts? Is it about reflecting God's generosity? Or has it just become something we do because of capitalism?

I want to connect this practice to our faith in a meaningful way, but I'm not sure how to explain it without oversimplifying. What are we really doing when we give gifts?

Sincerely,
Trying to Answer Well

Trying to Answer Well,
God's generosity fascinates me. I think about one of the names for God in Islam: Al-Karim, or the Generous One. Perhaps you have heard other Christians refer to God in song as "Jehovah Jireh, my provider." It is good to have confidence that God will provide, and I believe that God calls us to participate in that generosity by how we treat each other.

Scripture tells us that people look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. I lift this up to say that our intention behind gift giving matters even more than the gift. Christmas can bring up a lot of different intentions for us. Some of us feel an obligation to give a gift. Others may give because it feels good to see their child's reaction to the gift — less about the warmth of their happiness, but perhaps about the feeling of power that comes from knowing they are the reason the child is happy. Some of us are so caught in the cycle of consumption that we buy things because we like how we ourselves feel when we make a purchase. It is really easy for us to lose the plot!

With Christmas, we get a chance to model God's generosity when we let love become the reason for our giving. Can we give a gift without terms and conditions? Can our generosity be inspired by a sincere desire to see our loved ones experience joy? When we model generosity in this way, we get to participate in the limitless generosity of God: the kind of giving that spills into the lives of others and inspires them to be generous as well. There's nothing wrong with gift giving as long as we are loving and we sincerely want the best for others.

Peace,
Pastor Chris

Day 20

"Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect." 1 Peter 3:15-16

Dear Pastor,
I'm a college student living with a roommate who is Jewish. As the holidays approach, I want to honor my traditions while respecting theirs. I would love to put up a small Christmas tree and Nativity set, but I don't want to make them uncomfortable. I'm not even sure how to ask in a way that doesn't seem insensitive.

What does it look like to live my authentic faith but also be respectful of my roommate's need to live their own authentic faith? I think this could be an opportunity for us to learn from each other. Living with someone of another faith has made me think more intentionally about what I believe and why. And I want this experience to help me make interfaith friendships throughout my life.

Sincerely,
Learning Through Living Together

Dear LTLT,
First, I want to commend your intuition about this tricky situation. Your respectful attitude and sincere intentions reflect the "gentleness and reverence" the Scriptures call for in disciples of Christ. This approach already gives me confidence that you can (and will!) navigate this in a faithful way.

As in most situations, honesty is the best policy. "Living your authentic faith" requires being transparent about where you stand. If a Christmas tree or Nativity set is important to your expression of faith, then the most loving thing you can do – for God, self and neighbor – is to let your roommate know that. Better to communicate your needs and desires and deal with potential awkwardness than to let resentment fester in secret. If you approach your roommate with the same humility and sincerity that you display in your letter, you will come across as anything but insensitive!

This is a great opportunity to invite your roommate to share their own traditions with you. You could encourage them to put up personal decorations because your room is a shared space. If they are amenable, you could ask them to walk you through the rhythms of their holiday observances — both to satisfy your curiosity and to show that you value their faith. Above all, impress upon your roommate that your relationship with them matters more to you than the traditions themselves.

Trust that the light of Christ shines uniquely through your roommate in the fullness of who they are, which includes their religious identity. Being honest about your faith, expressing genuine curiosity in the faith of others and being eager to learn about and celebrate the goodness of faith traditions all offer the recipe for fruitful interfaith relationships. You seem well on your way to making many more!

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Gavin

Day 21

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it." John 1:5

Dear Pastor,
This will be my first Christmas without my spouse. Everything feels different. Traditions feel heavy instead of comforting.

There's an absence that I feel in every part of the season. I opened the Christmas decoration box and cried when I saw our matching stockings. Each year we went to the holiday symphony performance, but the idea of listening to the joyful music makes me feel even more alone. During the candlelight service at church, we would hold hands in the dark, and I know my pew will feel empty this year.

How will Christmas still be Christmas when so much of what made it meaningful has been taken away? What does it mean to say "God is with us" when someone I love is no longer here?

Sincerely,
Grieving This Season

Dear Grieving This Season,
Let me say I am saddened by your loss. How difficult these days must be for you. Let me also say that your question has many answers, as many as there are people who grieve. We each find our own way through the darkness, and no two paths are the same.

"God is with us" can sound hollow when all we feel is absence, not presence. It is hard to see the light that darkness supposedly cannot overcome when the darkness is so overwhelming.

Perhaps I can offer two thoughts that may help. One is that darkness need not be terrifying or even bad. The Christian mystics say that spiritual darkness can be generative, even healing. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us that to find the Holy One, Moses had to enter the "cloud of thick darkness" at the top of Sinai. Maybe your darkness is the place where you will encounter the Holy One in ways you cannot now expect or even imagine.

The second thought may sound a bit esoteric, but it is of great comfort to me. The mystics teach us that within the Holy One is a radical unity: All things are one thing. That means that the things we experience as separate and separating – light and dark, life and death, being and nonbeing – are not separate but are one within the Holy One. I don't think a barrier separates the living and the dead; I think all are one within the Holy One, and nothing and no one is lost.

Perhaps this Christmas Eve, when you light your candle in the darkened sanctuary, you might think about the unity of darkness and light, of living and dying. Without the darkness, there would be no light. All things are one thing.

In unity,
Pastor Paul