December Weekly Reflections

He Came Down that We May Have Love

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”

– John 1:14

One of my favorite Christmas stories is Dr Seuss’s *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. I love the book and I remember watching the original cartoon growing up. My favorite part is always when the Grinch’s heart grows after he has seen how the people of Whoville choose to love each other even without all of the decorations and presents of Christmas. After he witnesses their love the Grinch’s heart grows and grows! The Grinch has to see love in practice to really understand it.

This is one of my favorite parts of Christmas too. Christmas is God’s love in practice. God chooses to send Jesus into the world as a baby and to grow and live as a human being. God chooses to become a human being through Jesus Christ. Like John 1 says, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

One of the reasons that God makes this incredible choice is so that we can see God’s love in practice. By living as a human, a friend, a teacher, a family member God shows us what God’s love looks like in those parts of our lives. Because the Word became flesh on Christmas, we actually get to see God’s love in a very tangible way, and this helps us to understand God’s love even better. Seeing God’s love in practice in our human lives can even help our hearts to grow and grow.

Jesus came down to earth that we might see the love of God in practice in our world!

* Where have you seen God’s love in practice in our world?
* What is one thing you can do this Christmas to remind yourself that Christmas is about the love of God on earth and not about decorations or presents?
* How will you share God’s love with someone this Christmas so that they get to see the love of God in practice in our world?

He Came Down that We May Have Light

“The people who walked in darkness

 have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness—

 on them light has shined.” -Isaiah 9:2

Jesus is often referred to as the light of the world. There are passages throughout scripture that remind us that Jesus brings light into our world. The theme of light is common in Advent and Christmas hymns in favorites like “Silent Night” in which Jesus is called “Son of God, love’s pure light.” We light candles on the Advent wreath and put lights on our Christmas trees, all reminders that Jesus’ light shines on us.

While this image of light brings joy for many this Advent, it is important to remember that all too often we frame light as “good” and darkness as “bad” which has led to racial discrimination and even justification of the atrocity of slavery. It is imagery we must use carefully and intentionally so that it is life-giving and loving of our neighbors of all colors.

Perhaps this advent we can expand our understanding of this imagery. Rather than seeing light and darkness in these terms, what if we saw darkness and light as two forces working together in our world? Darkness invites us into stillness, mystery, wonderment. Light invites us into hard truths, illumination, and clarity. Darkness calls us to rest, light calls us to work. We cannot have one without the other. We need dawn and dusk, day and night.

Jesus came down so that we may have light that reveals God’s love for each of us, and we are called to reflect that light. We are called to share love, to work for the good of our neighbors, and to speak the hard truth of the Gospel so that all may here. Let that be our work this Advent.

Reflection Questions:

* How does this understanding of light and darkness imagery bring comfort? In what ways does it challenge you?
* How is God inviting you into darkness: into rest, wonderment, and mystery?
* How is God inviting you into light: into truth, illumination, and clarity?

He Came Down that We May Have Peace

For a child has been born for us,

a son given to us;

authority rests upon his shoulders;

and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually,

and there shall be endless peace

for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it

with justice and with righteousness

from this time onward and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. – Isaiah 9:6-7

When I was growing up one of my favorite Bible passages was “blessed are the peacemakers.” I liked it because I really disliked conflict and in my slightly naïve Biblical interpretation I felt like Jesus was blessing all of the conflict avoiders like me! Now however, I know that peace is much more than the avoidance of conflict. True peace takes diligence, compromise, forgiveness, understanding, and a willingness to put the safety and well-being of others before our selfish interests.

Our passage from Isaiah gives us some good guidance on how true peace is achieved. True peace is achieved through the justice and righteousness of God. Justice and righteousness call us to love of neighbor, to care of the vulnerable and oppressed, to racial justice, to caring for the environment, to forgiving ourselves and others. Justice and righteousness call us to look in the eyes of every person on this earth and to see a child of God, someone worthy of love and respect. True peace as described by Isaiah is hard to come by; in fact true peace might feel impossible.

But the good news is that peace is possible. Peace is possible because Jesus came to earth as the Prince of Peace. Peace is possible because Jesus begins the process of peace by forgiving us and by teaching us how to care for our neighbors. True peace is possible when we choose to follow the teaching of the Prince of Peace.

* When was a time that you achieved true peace? Was it through compromise? Through forgiveness? Through something else?
* Have you found true peace to be a difficult thing to achieve? Why?
* How might following the teachings of Jesus help you bring peace into the world?

He Came Down that We May Have Joy

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” Luke 1:46b-49

After the angel Gabriel departs, Mary rushes off to share the good news with Elizabeth- she is going to give birth to the messiah! Mary’s joy is almost tangible as she shares the news and together, they anticipate the birth of their children. Her joy erupts in a song known today as the “Magnificat” which begins with her naming the joy within her because God has blessed her so richly. This song has served as a foundation for popular songs like “Canticle of the Turning” and is sung as part of evening prayer.

It is surprising that her song has little to do with the birth of her child but focuses instead on God’s faithfulness and the ways the birth of the messiah will radically change the world. The hungry will be fed; the rich will be sent away empty. The mighty will cast down from their thrones; the lowly will be uplifted.

Mary’s song shows that she understands the larger picture of which she now plays a part. The birth of her son will fundamentally change the world and reveal God’s power and might in new ways. Our Christmas joy doesn’t stem only from the birth of the messiah. Our Christmas joy comes from the amazing news that everything in this world is being made new, God’s transformative work is happening every day, and we are called to witness to that redeeming love.

Reflection Questions:

* How are you experiencing Christmas joy this year? What is hindering your ability to feel joy?
* Read the entirety of the Magnificat: Luke 1:46b-55. How is your joy similar to Mary’s this advent? How is it different?
* Bonus: Who is someone who might need help finding joy this advent? Send them a card or a small gift to brighten their day.

Merry Christmas

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” Luke 2:15-20

These familiar words conclude the Christmas story in Luke that we read each year. That first Christmas was very chaotic! Mary and Joseph travel far from home, they cannot find a place to stay, Mary is ready to give birth. The angels visit the shepherds and absolutely terrify them despite bringing words of peace and hope. But at the end, after the angels are gone and the chaos has subsided, we are left with the reality of the baby Jesus in the manger. After the shepherds see Jesus for themselves, they praise God for the gift of God’s Son. Mary takes a few quiet moments with her newborn baby to treasure everything that has happened and how God has fulfilled God’s promises.

Christmas can be very chaotic for us today. We travel to visit relatives, we frantically buy and wrap gifts, we stress over cooking the perfect Christmas dinner, we cover our homes with festive lights and decorations. Christmas morning is often filled with joy as we visit with loved ones and eagerly open gifts. But none of those things is needed for Christmas. At the end of the day, when the guests have gone home, when the dirty dishes are still in the sink, when the decorations are put away, when the new gifts are put aside, we are left with the baby Jesus in the manger—the wonderful gift from God of God’s presence with us on earth through a tiny, human baby. Take a few moments on this chaotic Christmas day to give thanks to God like the shepherds. Take some quiet time to treasure and ponder everything in your heart, as Mary did.

* What traditions make Christmas “Christmas” for you? How do we know God is with us even when other things might change?
* What gifts from God are you most thankful for this year? Together with your family, write or say a prayer to thank God for everything you love about Christmas—but especially for the gift of Jesus.