



Panther Valley Ecumenical Church

Devotional for Advent & Christmas 2020

Advent 1 November 29 – December 5

Advent 2, December 6 – December 12

Advent 3, December 13 - 19

Advent 4, December 20 – 23

Christmas Eve

Christmastime, December 25 – January 5

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Panthervalleychurch.org

A PDF version of this devotional with links to the music and films is available.

Email the church at panthervalleychurch@gmail.com or call 908-852-5444

Our theme for Advent and Christmas this year focuses on the power of music in our lives and in the history of humanity. Song and singing together has always been a way that communities feel connected and empowered together. We certainly have been experiencing the loss of not making music together as a church for a while. So, this theme will help us dive deeper into our appreciation of music and its role in our lives.

We are also offering a suggestion of films for Advent. The films were chosen because they tell powerful stories of people who were uplifted by music in very difficult times. Some are historic, some are current. All are relevant to the times in which we live. *Please note that these films are not suited for young children because they depict some very disturbing times in history or difficult lives. Therefore, we have also included classic Christmas films for our children.*

Pastor Ninabeth will be reflecting on these films in her weekly messages.

We hope that our experience of these stories and our celebration of the power of music will remind us that we have a song to sing!

The history of humanity is fraught with pain—especially the pain that comes accompanied by fear and leads to oppression and violence of one people against another. This is the world into which Jesus was born and through which his teachings would challenge and call for transformation. Through His life, suffering, death, and resurrection we are given the *Good News* that brings great joy!

An anonymous Jewish poet, during the Holocaust, scrawled wrote, “I believe in the sun, even when the sun is not shining,” These words have been transformed into a song that we sing at our Easter Morning Sunrise service; [“I Believe”](#). We feel that the power of this song will carry us through this season bringing transformation and reconciliation through hope, love, joy, and peace.

This Advent and Christmas, let us fill our lives with music and light and affirm and act on the reasons why we can still “believe, even when” we are discouraged.

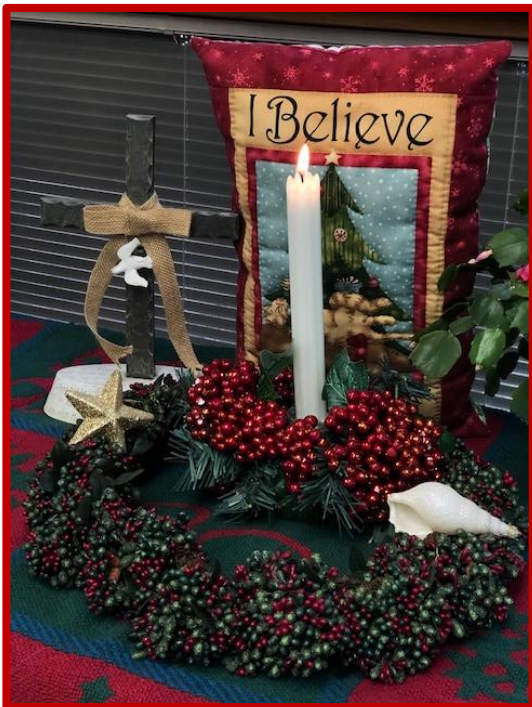
*I believe in the sun, I believe in the sun,
even when, even when I don't feel it.
I believe in love, I believe in love,
even when, even when I don't feel it.
I believe in God, I believe in God,
even when, even when God is silent.
I believe in the light, I believe in the light
That has come, that has come, and is coming.*

Create Your Own Sacred Space and Altar

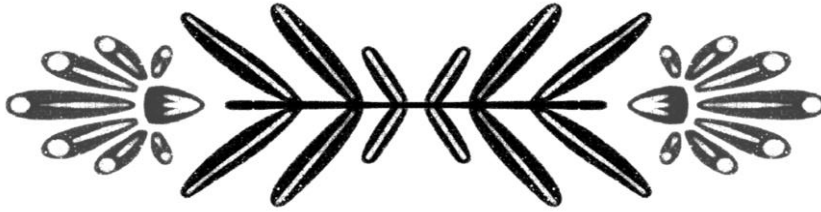
We invite you to create a sacred space in your home. A place where you can turn from worldly concerns and focus entirely on God. This space will become your home altar and it will be for your family a designated area for prayer, meditation and other forms of worship.

Locate an area in your house that is easily accessible but isn't surrounded by potential distractions. It does not have to be a large space. Gather any sacred items which you already have in your home. These might include Bibles, prayer books, a cross, rocks, shells, votive candles, prayer cards, advent wreath, and/or a nativity.

Cover the table with a cloth that is special to you. Place your sacred items on the cloth in a way that you feel would be pleasing and meaningful to God and to you.



ADVENT 1



"I Believe in the Sun: Hope for Tomorrow"

This Advent, we are looking to hear words of comfort, of challenge and of good news. The prophet Isaiah and the four Gospel authors were writing in a time when people needed desperately to hear all of these as well. This first week, Isaiah, the prophet, and Mark—the Gospel writer who published first—reassure the people that good news is beginning and yet they both say, “Make yourself ready! Raise your voices, change your hearts, get ready to be transformed, because now is the time.” Let us embrace hope that we can do what needs to be done to bring more light into the world.

Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of untiring hope. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle— even when our view is obscured by clouds of doubt, ignite the flame of hope within us, that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out.

I believe in the sun, even when... even when... it's not shining.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-15

Litany of Belief

In times when humanity disappoints, perhaps when even our own thoughts and behaviors disappoint, it is an important act to call out, name and claim, the consequences of our wrongs. And in times of distress it is a prophetic act to call out, name and claim, our belief in the hope for tomorrow.

We invite you to take some time and write out your own litany of belief.

"I believe that _____ [fill in the blank with a lament, a sorrow, a confession] _____" AND
"I believe that _____ [fill in the blank with a prophetic word of change]. _____"

Examples:

I believe that our fear of difference has robbed us of compassion AND

I believe that we can look deeper and hold onto the things that we have in common.

I believe that our fear of doubt makes us stop asking tough questions AND

I believe that asking tough questions in the face of injustice is faithful.

"I believe that _____" AND

"I believe that _____"

The Witness of Music

["I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"](#) another version by [Burl Ives](#)

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote this poem at Harvard on Christmas Day in 1863 during the heart of the Civil War. His wife had died tragically in a fire and he had just found out that his son had been injured as a soldier for the Union. He heard the sound of bells and began to write, spurred on by his sorrow at the state of humankind:

*"And in despair, I bowed my head:
'There is no peace on earth, 'I said,
'For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to [all]."*

And yet hope wins out as he pens the fourth verse:

*"Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth [not] sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to [all]."*

Pray

Dear God, enfold in your love and grace everyone who is experiencing despair. Even in places of thick shadows, may we feel your warm arms embracing, and may your light of hope shine, if ever so faintly. This we pray, in Jesus's name, Amen.



The Witness of Film

Defiant Requiem, highlights the most dramatic example of intellectual and artistic courage in the Theresienstadt (Terezín) Concentration Camp during World War II: the remarkable story of Rafael Schächter, a brilliant, young Czech conductor who was arrested and sent to Terezín in 1941. He demonstrated moral leadership under the most brutal circumstances, determined to sustain courage and hope for his fellow prisoners by enriching their souls through great music. His most extraordinary act was to recruit 150 prisoners and teach them Verdi's Requiem by rote in a dank cellar using a single score, over multiple rehearsals, and after grueling days of forced labor. The Requiem was performed on 16 occasions for fellow prisoners. The last, most infamous performance occurred on June 23, 1944 before high-ranking SS officers from Berlin and the International Red Cross to support the charade that the prisoners were treated well and flourishing.

For more information, check out <https://www.defiantrequiem.org/>
Watch the entire movie through Amazon Prime video

Reflection Questions – use these as prompts for your reflections

1. What was a particular moment or scene that surprised you or that resonated with you?

2. The conductor stated, “when common language can’t get even close to what it is we’re feeling, that’s when art begins.” Have you had an experience where art - whether it be music or another art form - has expressed what you are feeling more than words could?

3. One survivor from Schächter’s choir said that during the time of their performances they were “dancing under the gallows.” What do you think hope looks and feels like when facing such fear?

4. “Libera me” of Verdi’s Requiem includes,

*Deliver me, O Lord, from eternal death on that awful day, When the heavens and the earth shall be moved: When you will come to judge the world by fire. I tremble, and I fear the judgment and the wrath to come, when the heavens and the earth shall be moved. The day of wrath, that day of calamity and misery; a great and bitter day, indeed. Grant them eternal rest,
O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon them.*

What might these words have meant to those in Terezín?

How might this meaning have been different from our understanding?

Please take a couple minutes to reflect and journal. Fill in the blanks with words that those in the chorus at Terezin might have used to complete this statement (and how would you?):

“I believe _____, even when _____.”

Closing Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of untiring hope. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle— even when our view is obscured by clouds of doubt, ignite the flame of hope within us,
People: ... that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out. Amen.

Family Film Festival

A Charlie Brown Christmas

This movie is now only available for streaming on Apple TV+ beginning Dec. 4th.

Theme: Hope

Bible Verses: Isaiah 40:1-2 – *Comfort, comfort my people! says your God.*

Speak compassionately to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended, that her penalty has been paid.

These words were written hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Isaiah was giving God's people hope, reminding them that, even in captivity, God was with them and that there would be better days ahead. Hope is such a powerful force. It's the belief in something happening and the confident expectation that it will.

Let's watch this classic Christmas movie that embodies hope!

Talking Points:

- Near the beginning of the movie, Charlie Brown feels certain he won't get a Christmas card...yet he looks in the mailbox anyway. Even though he's struggling with his feelings, we still see the flicker of hope in him.
- Charlie Brown goes to Lucy to talk. He's worried about not feeling happy during the Christmas season. Something feels missing.
- After Sally talks about what she wants for Christmas, this is a good opportunity to pause the movie for a moment and say: Many of the characters have things they want. What does Lucy want? Real estate What does Snoopy want? A prize for winning the Lights and Display Contest What does Sally want? \$10s and \$20s
- Charlie Brown wants to find what's missing in his life. All he knows at this point is that material things aren't going to fill the void.
- A want or a wish is different than a hope. Remember, hope means believing something could happen and having that confident expectation that it will.

[Continue watching the movie to the end. Encourage the children to pay careful attention as Charlie Brown and Linus visit the Christmas tree lot.]

After-Movie Discussion:

- The great moment of hope comes when Charlie Brown and Linus go to a Christmas tree lot and Charlie sees the small, dried up Christmas tree. He sees potential in it, even when the normally-optimistic Linus isn't sure it's a good idea.
- Charlie Brown's heart is stirred. He sees something in the tree worth saving, worth investing in.
- How do the others respond when Charlie Brown brings back the little tree? They criticize Charlie Brown, mock him, and laughed at him.
- This almost causes him to lose hope, until Linus recites the Christmas story. This is a powerful reminder that, just as we have our own hopes, so does everyone else. We must be kind in treating one another's often-fragile hopes with care.
- After Linus recites the Christmas story, we see Charlie Brown's hope once again restored. What does he do next? He takes the tree home and tries to decorate it, but it collapses.
- At this point, it might seem like all hope is lost, not just for the tree, but for Charlie Brown feeling fulfilled. But his act of hope inspired all the others. They follow him home, and what happens? They decorate the tree and it seems to spring to life. Then they all wish Charlie Brown a Merry Christmas as they sing a Christmas carol together.

Closing Prayer:

Loving God, We have you, And there is hope.

We have each other, And there is hope.

We wait for Jesus, with confident expectation, and there is hope.

Amen.

ADVENT 2



“I Believe in Love: Daring Right Relationship”

In both the Gospel of Matthew and Isaiah, a messenger appears as a sign from God, heralding a new era. In each passage, the words “do not be afraid” appear... offering a clue that the messenger—whether prophet or angel—was referencing something that induced fear in the recipient. A new way of being together, of relating and loving takes courage—eschewing the present order of things so that a new and better day can be born.

*I believe in love, I believe in love,
even when, even when I don't feel it.*

Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of daring love. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle— even when we cannot yet see a better day when we will act like the human family we are, ignite the flame of love within us, that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out. I believe in love, I believe in love, even when... even when... I don't feel it.

Scripture reading: Isaiah 7:1-14 & Matthew 1:1-25

Litany of Belief

In times when humanity disappoints, perhaps when even our own thoughts and behaviors disappoint, it is an important act to call out, name and claim, the consequences of our wrongs. And in times of distress it is a prophetic act to call out, name and claim, our belief that daring to love each other as God loves us is a faithful response.

"I believe that _____ [fill in the blank with a lament, a sorrow, a confession] _____" AND
"I believe that _____ [fill in the blank with a prophetic word of change]. _____"

Examples:

I believe that we have been taught to fear one another AND I believe that we are capable of learning to love.

I believe that we are afraid AND I believe that we can lean on each other and God for courage to face anything.

"I believe that _____ AND
"I believe that _____"

The Witness of Music

"It Came Upon the Midnight Clear"

This Carol was written in 1849 by a Massachusetts Unitarian minister, Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears. One verse has been left out of several hymnals over the decades since then but the new hymnal, *Glory to God*, restores this powerful verse that refers to the love-song of the angels being drowned out by our warring nature:

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long;
beneath the angel-strain have rolled
two thousand years of wrong;
and we at war on earth hear not
the love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise and cease the strife,
and hear the angels sing.*

Let us be reminded that we are to listen to the angel chorus and then join it, raising our voices with the message that love, not hate, is the answer.

Pray

Loving God, though we divide ourselves from each other, your love for us never fails. In you, we are warmed by the fire of your Holy Spirit. In you, we are sheltered from the storm. Make your love known, and give us the courage and grace to extend that love to others. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



The Witness of Film

Girls on the Wall

Available on Amazon Prime Video. [Behind the Scenes 4 min. video](#)

In this second week's film, *Girls on the Wall*, the teenage girls of Warrenville Prison are not your average delinquents. Having “graduated” from juvie to prison, these are the kids most likely to remain in the correctional system their whole lives. They are also some of the sharpest and most irrepressible young women you'll meet. When the girls of this heartland prison are given an unlikely shot at redemption — the chance to write and stage a musical based on their lives — they must relive their crimes, reclaim their humanity, and take a first step toward breaking free of the prison system.

Reflection Questions – use these as prompts for your reflections

1. What was a particular moment or scene that surprised you or that resonated with you?
2. When the girls wrote their individual stories, Whitney was reluctant to share. But she eventually wrote about her father,
*“It say, ‘broken’
which many of us are
Then I just put,
‘you’re an Indian Giver, dog.*

*You just give me money,
you take it back
That ain't cool
You give me love, you take it back
That ain't cool either
You were my life, my smile
Now all I do is think, what if you were a different man
You could've accomplished many things
But yet instead, you love that pipe first
You loved your broad the same as that
But never showed me love at all."*

How do you think Whitney defines love?
And what kind of love is she looking for from her father?
Do you see this longing for love in her behavior toward others are well?

3. Our Gospel reading for this week includes background of Jesus' family and of his birth. What do we know about the backgrounds of the girls in Warrenton Prison?

Does that affect how we hear their stories?

Does it affect how they are understood and accepted in society?

4. Mrs. Palidofsky mentions that there are risks in telling one's story. What do you think are some of the risks?

How do you think we can overcome those risks?

5. Over the course of Mrs. P's process, the girls took their own stories and together created one story for them to share in their musical. In what ways do we - in our lives, in our rituals, in our faith - blend our individual and collective stories?

Individual Reflection -

Please take a couple minutes to reflect and journal.

Fill in the blanks with how you think the girls in Warrenton Prison might complete this statement (and how would you?):

"I believe _____, even when _____."

Closing Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of daring love.

Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle
even when we cannot yet see a better day
when we will act like the human family we are,
ignite the flame of love within us,
that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out.
Amen.

Family Film Festival

Theme: Love

Movie: How the Grinch Stole Christmas (animated version)

Available on [dailymotion](https://www.dailymotion.com) or on Amazon Prime video

Bible Verse:

Ezekiel 36:26 – *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one.*

Let's watch the movie that captures the essence of this lovely Bible verse.

Talking Points:

- The Grinch wants to keep Christmas from coming. Why? His heart is two sizes too small.
- What seems to bother the Grinch most of all? The noise.
- The Grinch can't stand to hear the Whos experiencing and expressing joy. He is only concerned with what he wants.
- On Christmas morning, when the Grinch is standing in the snow, and hears the Whos singing, what happens to him? His heart grows three sizes.

After-Movie Discussion:

- The Grinch tried to keep Christmas from coming. Can anything really stop Christmas? No. Not a Grinch, not a virus, nothing can keep the great gift of love that is Christmas from coming.

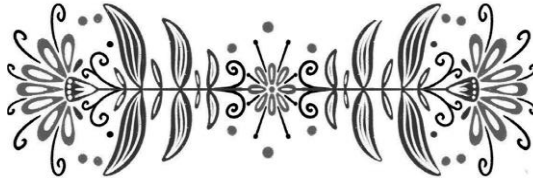
- When the Grinch's heart grew, what else changed? He found the strength of ten grinchies...plus two!
- Love is the strongest force in the world. When we open our hearts to love, and then share that love with others, we find a strength we never knew we had.
- Christmas is not about things. When we let go of what we think Christmas is "supposed" to look like, what Christmas is "supposed" to sound like, we open our hearts to what Christmas already is – an amazing gift from a God who loves us very much.

Closing Prayer:

Loving God, Thank you for the gift of Christmas.
Thank you for the gift of love. Thank you for the gift of you.
Amen.



ADVENT 3



"I Believe in God: Ode to Joy"

This week, we turn to Luke's writing, which is an account in two acts: the Gospel biography of Jesus and then the story of the early church—the "Jesus community." Whether you were a Jew or Gentile in those days, deciding to become a part of this illegal early Christian movement could bring punishment for your allegiance. Surely the message in both Luke and Isaiah that the downcast, lowly, and oppressed would rise up is a welcome and inspirational account. Like the Jewish exiled people of Isaiah's time and like the early Christians, we also sometimes wonder where God is in our suffering. We long to hear the promise that a reason for joyful praise is the good news on the way!

*I believe in God, I believe in God,
even when, even when God is silent.*

Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of the depths of joy. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle— even when we are not sure of your presence, ignite the flame of joy within us, that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out.

I believe in God, I believe in God, even when... even when... God is silent.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 57:14-19 & Luke 1:1-4, 26-56

Litany of Belief

In times when humanity disappoints, perhaps when even our own thoughts and behaviors disappoint, it is an important act to call out, name and claim, the consequences of our wrongs. And in times of distress it is a prophetic act to call out, name and claim, our belief in the promise of joy.

"I believe that _____ [fill in the blank with a lament, a sorrow, a confession] _____" AND
"I believe that _____ [fill in the blank with a prophetic word of change]. _____"

Examples:

I believe that sometimes we wonder if we can make a difference AND I believe that small acts of kindness and help do make a real difference.

I believe, even when we are discouraged. I believe, that when we are discouraged, raising our voices for justice will offer us joy!

"I believe that _____" AND
"I believe that _____"

The Witness of Music

"Ode to Joy"

Here is a flashmob version of the original [Ode an die Freude](#)

As you will witness in our documentary this week, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which is the basis of the tune for our hymn "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," has been a powerful witness to the human spirit to overcome adversity in many instances around the globe. British punk rock star, Billy Bragg, once wrote an alternative translation of the original German choral score for a school teacher to teach the children in her classroom, and it soon became a popular anthem, even being performed for the Queen. In these words you can hear the call to resist division, to raise our voices, to "furnish every heart with joy and banish all hatred for good."

*"See now like a Phoenix rising
from the rubble of the war
hope of ages manifested
peace and freedom evermore.
Brothers, sisters stand together,
raise your voices now as one.*

*Though by history divided,
reconciled in unison.*

*Throw off now the chains of ancient
bitterness and enmity.
And in hand let's walk together
on the path of liberty.
Hark...a new dawn is breaking;
raise your voices now as one.
Though by history divided,
reconciled in unison.*

*What's to be then all my brothers,
sisters; what is in your hearts?
Tell me now the hopes you harbour,
What's the task and where to start.
... Those speak ten million voices;
every word is understood.
Furnish every heart with joy
and banish all hatred for good."*

Pray

Dear God, you are the ultimate source of joy in this shadow-filled world. Make us nooks and beacons of that same joy. Carry our feet to the farthest reaches so that we might extend your warmth to everyone we meet. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



The Witness of Film

[Following the Ninth](#)

Filmed on four continents, this documentary film looks at the global impact of Beethoven's hymn to humanity, his battle cry of freedom, his Ninth Symphony.

The Ninth was at Tienamen Square in the Spring of 1989 during the student revolt. The same year, when the Berlin Wall came down, the Ninth was there to amplify the celebrations. Under the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, women marched on torture prisons with the Ode To Joy as inspiration. And in Japan, the Ninth was there to repair and heal after the devastating Tsunami of 2011. Following The Ninth is both inspirational and hard-hitting, and a testament of hope.

Reflection Questions – use these as prompts for your reflections

1. What was a particular moment or scene that surprised you or that resonated with you?

2. Billy Bragg reimagined Ode to Joy in his words:

*“See now like a phoenix rising from the rubble of the war,
Hope of ages manifested, peace and freedom evermore.
Brothers, sisters, stand together. Raise your voices now as one.
Though by history divided, reconciled in unison.
Throw off now the chains of ancient bitterness and enmity.
Hand in hand, let’s walk together on the path of liberty.
Hark! A new dawn is breaking. Raise your voices now as one.
Though by history divided, reconciled in unison.
What’s to be then, o my brothers? Sisters, what is in your hearts?
Tell me now the hopes you harbor.
What’s the task and where to start?
Though speak ten million voices, every word is understood.
Furnish every heart with joy and banish all hatred for good.”*

The word “joy” is not included in these lyrics until the end, but where else do you hear joy in this rendition?

3. The early Christian movement was an illegal movement at the time, and as an early Christian (much like those in this week’s film who were part of movements for change), you could be punished for your allegiance. What motivated the early Christians to keep going?

What motivated those who told their stories in Following the Ninth?

4. Throughout this film, this piece of music resonated throughout these four

different events: at Tiananmen Square in 1989, in Chile, as the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, and in Japan each December following the tsunami. How did this piece resonate or relate to each event differently?

Individual Reflection -

Please take a couple minutes to reflect and journal.

Fill in the blanks with words that those in the film - in China, in Chile, in Germany, or in Japan - might have used complete this statement ((and how would you?):

“I believe _____, even when _____.”

Closing Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of the depths of joy. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle— even when we are not sure of your presence, ignite the flame of joy within us, that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out. Amen.

Family Film Festival

Theme: Joy

Movie: [Frosty the Snowman](#)

Bible Verse: Luke 1:46-47

Mary said, “With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my Savior.”

Mary has just learned that she is going to be the mother of Jesus, and she is overcome with joy.

Joy is more than happiness. It goes deeper.

When we’re happy, we smile with our faces.

When we have joy, we smile with our hearts.

Because joy runs so deep, it helps us get through the ups and downs of life.

Let’s look at some examples of real joy in Frosty the Snowman.

Talking Points:

- At the beginning, point out how the children find joy in simplicity – the wonder of the first snow.
- As the children build the snowman, point out how they are experiencing the joy of working together.
- When Frosty comes to life, the first thing he says is Happy Birthday! Frosty models for all of us the joy of being alive!
- When Frosty first says, “Happy Birthday,” this could be an opportunity to pause the movie and read: Job 33:4 – *The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the almighty gives me life.*
- Before continuing the movie, say – One of the greatest sources of joy is the joy that comes from reaching out to help others. See how many ways helping others is shown in the movie. [Continue watching to the end.]

After-Movie Discussion:

- What were some examples of characters reaching out to help others?
[Allow children to respond. Below are a few examples.]
 - Hocus Pocus, the rabbit, brings the magic hat back to the children.
 - The children help Frosty get on the train so he can go to the North Pole.
 - Frosty and Hocus Pocus take care of Karen when she’s shivering in the refrigerated boxcar.
 - The woodland animals build a fire for Karen.
 - Santa ensures that Frosty stays alive by not allowing Professor Hinkle, the magician, to bully Karen and Frosty.
- Reaching out and caring for (and about) others is one of the best ways to find joy. In fact, the one character who continues to think only about himself until the end is Professor Hinkle. And he is clearly the least joyous character in the movie.

When was a time you did something for someone else?
How did that make you feel?

Closing Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the gift of joy – For the joy of simplicity, For the joy of working together, For the joy of helping others, For the joy. Amen.

ADVENT 4



"I Believe in the Light: Illuminating Peace"

The "great light" prophesied by Isaiah in today's text is echoed in the first strains of John's Gospel good news: the light that brings peace—that saves the people from all that would extinguish it—has been there from the beginning. The Word is made flesh and dwells among us. This reign is now... will we believe it? Will we continue to put flesh on it, embodying the peace meant for all humanity?

*I believe in the light, I believe in the light
That has come, that has come, and is coming.*

Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of peace on earth. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle—even when we aren't sure that goodwill among us can be found, ignite the flame of peace within us, that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out. I believe in the light, I believe in the light, that has come... that has come... and is coming.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7 & John 1:1-18

Litany of Belief

In times when humanity disappoints, perhaps when even our own thoughts and behaviors disappoint, it is an important act to call out, name and claim, the consequences of our wrongs. And in times of distress it is a prophetic act to call out, name and claim, our belief in peace for the world.

"I believe that ____[fill in the blank with a lament, a sorrow, a confession]____" AND

“I believe that _____ [fill in the blank with a prophetic word of change]. _____”

Examples:

I believe that humans seem to have a penchant for conflict AND I believe that we are capable of learning non-violent ways to negotiate difference.

I believe that our fear has told us that we must “win” in order to survive AND I believe that “winning” at the cost of others can be called out and changed.

“I believe that _____ AND

“I believe that _____”

The Witness of Music

[“Go Tell It On the Mountain”](#)

Our Carol this week is part of the repertoire of Christmas songs that were created by people who endured brutal hardships as the result of African colonization and North American slavery. But, though people of African descent were ripped from much of their cultural heritage, they maintained their heritage of group song, punctuated by West African rhythms and vocal stylings. Of course the safest thing for oppressed peoples to sing about was the religious beliefs that, first forced upon them by their oppressors, later gave many hope in the midst of suffering. “Go Tell It On The Mountain” is probably the best-known African American Christmas song and the words “seeker” and “watchman” are thought by some to have been code words for those seeking freedom on the Underground Railroad. It was made popular by the [Fisk Jubilee Singers](#) in the 19th century as these college students—themselves freed slaves—traveled the country to raise money and awareness. They were turned away from hotels, railway waiting rooms, and even some churches because of their color.

[Here is their story.](#)

As we sing, let us honor them, honor all who have endured slavery and the continued systemic racism caused by slavery.

Let us...

“Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere.

Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.”

... indeed that the Prince of Peace that calls us to break the chains of oppression... is *born!*

Pray

Dear God, creator of worlds and kindler of peace, life can be so full of strife and struggle. May your night sky be a reminder of your vastness and comforting embrace. Bear our burdens, transform our conflicts, and grant us a peace that passes all understanding. In Jesus's name, Amen.



The Witness of Film

Sweet Honey in the Rock: Raise Your Voice.

This film is available on Amazon Prime Video

A description of this week's film, from the Director, Stanley Nelson:

Emerging from the strong tradition of Freedom Singers, Sweet Honey in the Rock is a group that's as soulfully rich as it is provocative. Using song to stand in unison, five African American women sing solely a cappella, along with a sign language translator. Their music evokes stories from the past, encourages introspection in the present, and inspires progress for the future. Since it was founded in 1973, over twenty different women have contributed to the Grammy Award-winning group's distinct sound, which embraces semblances of gospel, blues, and hip hop, all with a political tone. The film features a trove of concert and rehearsal footage as it follows the group on their thirtieth anniversary tour, which is also coincidentally when founder Bernice Johnson Reagon announces she will retire. Through a variety of interviews with members, historians, and fellow artists, the film explores the roots of Sweet Honey in the Rock's existence and influence.

Reflection Questions – use these as prompts for your reflections

1. What was a particular moment or scene that surprised you or that resonated with you?

2. Is a story told differently when shared in song?

Is a story heard differently when experienced in song? How so?

3. One of Sweet Honey in the Rock's classic pieces is "Ella's Song." This piece, with words from freedom fighter Ella Baker, was set to music by Bernice Johnson Reagon, and released in 1988:

*We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons
Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons
That which touches me most
Is that I had a chance to work with people
Passing on to others that which was passed on to me
To me young people come first
They have the courage where we fail
And if I can but shed some light as they carry us through the gale."*

What words still resonate over 30 years later? What could they teach us about peace today and what we are called to do in this moment?

4. Part of this film was the story of how Bernice Johnson Reagon, who had been with Sweet Honey in the Rock since the beginning, moves on to retirement. Even though she is the only remaining original member, the group remains strong as she passes the torch. What does it take to build something that lives beyond your involvement?

How does the group move forward, and how could this be a model for discerning transition, change, and leadership?

Individual Reflection - Please take a couple minutes to reflect and journal.

Fill in the blanks with words that those who Sweet Honey in the Rock first sang to might have used complete this statement (and how would you?):

"I believe _____, even when _____."

Closing Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of peace on earth. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle— even when we aren't sure that goodwill among us can be found, ignite the flame of peace within us, that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out.
Amen.

Family Film Festival

Theme: Peace

Movie: The Muppet Christmas Carol

Available from Amazon Prime, YouTube, and Disney+

Bible Verse: Isaiah 9:6 – *A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.*

This week we will explore peace through The Muppet Christmas Carol. Along the way we will find that peace isn't necessarily about being "nice and quiet." There is an outer peace and an inner peace that only come when we do as Micah 6:8 would remind us – do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.

Note: Unlike the first three "movies" which are really 30-minute television specials, The Muppet Christmas Carol is a full-length movie (86 minutes).

Talking Points:

- Like Professor Hinkle and the Grinch, Ebenezer Scrooge is the "bad guy" in this Christmas movie. Both of those other characters experienced change. I wonder what will happen with Scrooge.
- In the opening song, we learn about Scrooge that "*He never gives. He only takes.*" Scrooge has way more wealth than he could spend in a lifetime, while so

many others go without enough food or the warmth of a home. It is hard to find peace on the inside or the outside when so many suffer unjustly.

- He has nothing good to say about Christmas and refuses to give to charity.

The Ghost of Christmas Past [*Consider pausing right after the visit from the Ghost of Christmas Past ends to discuss the following.*]

- Fozzywig tells Scrooge, “Stop working. Enjoy yourself.”
- There is a peace that comes when you realize that you are a person of worth, not because of what you do, or how much you make, but because of who you are – a child of God.
- You don’t have to earn God’s love. You don’t have to deserve Christmas.
- From time to time, stop, rest, play, and find peace knowing that God loves you no matter what.

[Continue movie.]

The Ghost of Christmas Present – [*Consider pausing right after the visit from the Ghost of Christmas Present ends to discuss the following.*]

- At this point, we already see Scrooge warming up, even smiling and telling a joke.
- They look in on Bob Cratchit’s house. What do Bob and Tiny Tim do when they mention Scrooge? They toast Scrooge as the “Founder of the Feast.” Even though Bob Cratchit gets paid so little, he is still grateful and kind.
- This is a real turning point for Scrooge. We see the glimmer of the possibility of healing and reconciliation.

[Continue movie to the end.]

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come (Future) –

- We learn that Scrooge dies with no friends and having never made a positive difference in the lives of those around.

- He dies rich, but completely empty.

After-Movie Discussion:

- When we see Scrooge on Christmas morning, what has changed? He realizes there is a chance for healing and for reconciliation.
- We learn from Charles Dickens (Gonzo) that “What made Scrooge happiest of all was that his life lay before him, and it could be changed!”
- What are some of the things he does that show us he has changed?

He speaks kindly to others, wishing them Merry Christmas.

He donates to the charity he had refused the day before.

He receives a scarf for his donation, and accepts it with real gratitude.

He sings.

He leaves gifts for his workers.

He brings gifts to his nephew Fred and Fred's wife.

He brings gifts to his old mentors.

He buys food for the needy.

He brings cheese to the mice (mouses).

He surprises the Cratchit Family with a feast, gifts, and gives Bob a raise.

- One thing we can't change is the past. But we can change what we do today and throughout our life when we choose to live a life of hope, love, joy, and peace.

Closing Prayer:

Loving God, We choose to live in hope, In love, In joy, In peace.

God bless us everyone. Amen.



Christmas Eve

“We Believe, Even Now”

In this season leading up to this night, we have been hearing the Good News from all the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John because we have *needed* good news and that’s what “Gospel” actually means. We have heard stories of courage all along our journey—of people who have sung out songs of hope, love, joy, and peace. Our luminaries have been a witness to the light we believe has come, and is coming.

Tonight we return to the story of Jesus’ birth as it is told in the Gospel of Luke. This account is the narrative we read again and again on this holy night, for this author gives us the most beloved detail. We yearn to see the scene play out, to hear the music of the angels, to feel the rush to the manger to see what this star that pierces the night sky has come to proclaim. We so desire to believe the Good News of the messengers that is the culmination of humanity’s pain of birth: “don’t be afraid” for unto us a sign has come that will be to all people... “on earth, peace.”

*I believe in the sun, I believe in the sun,
even when, even when I don’t feel it.
I believe in love, I believe in love,
even when, even when I don’t feel it.
I believe in God, I believe in God,
even when, even when God is silent.
I believe in the light, I believe in the light
That has come, that has come, and is coming.*

Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpse of heaven on earth In the faces and the light of those around us. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle— even when our view is obscured by clouds of doubt, You have ignited the flame of hope, love, joy, and peace within us. Let us glow with its brilliance from the inside out. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 52:7-10 & Luke 2:1-20

The Witness of Music

[“Silent Night” Here is a country version!](#) and the classics [Nat King Cole](#), [Frank Sinatra](#), and [Bing Crosby!](#)

We come to the classic moment of every Christmas Eve... the moment to light our candles and sing, “Silent Night.” We have wondered this year how we could possibly recreate a sense of normalcy in this moment. We wondered how we could get through it with the joy we usually feel on this night, having lost so much this year.

No, it is not the same. And we know that because of the people we have lost, the jobs and security we have lost, that it will likely not ever be the same. Surely every year, we will remember this moment when we thought perhaps light and song would elude us. But here we are. We will light our lights and we will have our song. Just like those soldiers in World War I sang across enemy lines. Everything stopped for a short while as the message that all is calm and bright prevailed above the violence and dark night of the world. We have been sorely divided on many things. We are devastated by our losses. We are tired and we are not so calm. But for this moment, this night, let us remember that we are not alone. And that we believe that the music and light of God’s promises come again and again: hope for a better tomorrow, love that works for a more equitable world, joy that wells from a place deep within us, and peace that offers us the assurance we need.

Closing Prayer

*Holy Infant, we treasure you and the gift of love that you bring to us today.
Amen.*

Sunday After Christmas



“Believe This: The Time Has Come”

The Good News that we have proclaimed for this Advent/Christmas season ends with a second chapter of Luke that starts, “When the time came...” Indeed, the time has come for us to move from the narrative of birthing to the narrative of redemption. The story of Jesus’ ritual cleansing as a child contains stories of people who had been waiting for this moment. But the time of waiting is over—for us too. Like Isaiah who says, “for Zion’s sake I won’t stay silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I won’t sit still,” we will not stop our songs of resistance until justice shines out like a light for all.

*I believe in the sun, I believe in the sun,
even when, even when it’s not shining.*

Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we have caught throughout this season of Advent and Christmas of your gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle—even when we have not been sure of tomorrow, you have ignited the Light within us, and we have glowed with its brilliance from the inside out. I believe in the sun, I believe in the sun, even when... even when... it’s not shining.

Scripture: Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3 & Luke 2:22-40

Litany of Belief

In times when humanity disappoints, perhaps when even our own thoughts and behaviors disappoint, it is an important act to call out, name and claim, the consequences of our wrongs. And in times of distress it is a prophetic act to call out, name and claim, our belief that hope, love, joy, and peace are what we are born for, and are possible in our world.

“I believe that _____ [fill in the blank with a lament, a sorrow, a confession] _____” AND
“I believe that _____ [fill in the blank with a prophetic word of change]. _____”

Examples:

I believe that we have waited for someone else to rescue us AND I believe that we can be the change we want to see.

I believe that we have hidden the light for too long AND I believe that the light can shine whenever we open ourselves to be Christ’s presence in the world.

“I believe that _____ AND
“I believe that _____”

The Witness of Music

[“Do You Hear What I Hear?”](#)

This carol was written in 1962 by Noel Regney and Gloria Shayne at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Inspired by seeing babies pushed in strollers in New York City while the dire threat of nuclear war loomed, Noel wrote, “said the night wind to the little lamb,” and “pray for peace, people everywhere.” The “star dancing in the night with a tail as big as a kite” can be interpreted as the star of Bethlehem but also what a nuclear missile looks like in flight. The composers said in an interview later that it was difficult to actually sing the song that year without crying. Indeed, our prayers for peace continue and the need to protect the children of the world and secure a future for them are as dire as ever. As the last song in our series, this Carol is “a song high above the trees” and “big as the sea.”

[Here is a video of the story about this song.](#)

Prayer

Star of Wonder, you have led us along with so many, to the Child of the Light. Continue to guide us on our journey to be followers of the One, the Creator and Redeemer, and Sustainer of us all.
For it is in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

The Witness of Film

The Singing Revolution

This film is available on [Vimeo On Demand](#), and on Amazon Prime.

Most people don't think about singing when they think about revolutions. But in Estonia song was the weapon of choice when, between 1987 and 1991, Estonians sought to free themselves from decades of Soviet occupation. During those years, hundreds of thousands gathered in fields to sing forbidden patriotic songs and to rally for independence. The Singing Revolution documents how the Estonian people regained their freedom and helped topple the Soviet Union along the way.

Reflection Questions – use these as prompts for your reflections

1. What was a particular moment or scene that surprised you or that resonated with you?

2. The film states that heroes in Estonia are different from how much of the world defines a hero. *“In Estonia, fairy tale heroes are not brave noblemen who slay dragons and save damsels. Their hero is the shrewd old barn keeper who sits by the fire, waits, watches, and acts only when the time is right.”*

How does this model of a hero help Estonians through these times?

How do our current cultural models of heroes affect us?

What can we learn from the Estonians' type of hero?

3. The Estonian National Anthem “Mu isamaa, mu õnn ja rõõm” was written in the 19th century and later set to music.

*“My fatherland is my love, and I want to rest,
I lay into your arms, my sacred Estonia!
Your birds will sing me to sleep,*

*you will bloom flowers from my ashes,
my fatherland, my fatherland!"*

How do these words evoke hope, love, joy, and peace?

And with this, how do these words sustain a revolutionary movement?

4. The prophet Isaiah says, *"for Zion's sake I won't stay silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I won't sit still."*

Do you see this refusal to stay silent in the people of Estonia?

How might "not staying silent" look in different times and cultures, including today?

5. Throughout this series, we have experienced stories where music was central in revolution, singing was weapon, a chorus was liberating, song was the glue that connected people.

How did music do this?

And how could song help us, even now?

Individual Reflection -

Please take a couple minutes to reflect and journal.

Fill in the blanks with words that the Estonians who sang under Soviet occupation might use complete this statement (and how would you?):

"I believe _____, even when _____."

Closing Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we have caught throughout this season of Advent and Christmas of your gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle— even when we have not been sure of tomorrow, you have ignited the Light within us, and we have glowed with its brilliance from the inside out. Amen.

The Family Film Festival

Theme: Believe

Movie: The Polar Express

This film is available on Amazon Prime

This is a full-length movie, rather than a 30- minute “Christmas special” like so many others in this series. But the theme of belief runs throughout. If you are facilitating a group of children, virtually or otherwise, and don’t have enough time to view the entire movie, consider starting at Chapter 14. This is the scene where the Polar Express has made it to the North Pole.

Hero Boy (the main character), Hero Girl, and Billy have been separated from the other children. Hero Girl and Billy can hear the sound of sleigh bells, but Hero Boy cannot.

Bible Verses:

Luke 2:29-30 – *Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation.*

These are the words of a good man, Simeon, who has just seen the baby Jesus with his own eyes and held Jesus with his own hands.

Now let’s watch a movie that asks if we can believe in things...even things we can’t see.

Talking Points:

- [Note – I always love pausing the movie at the hot chocolate scene to make hot chocolate myself!]
- A good place to pause – Following the scene where the Polar Express gets back on track after sliding on the ice, it spirals up the tracks around a mountain. The conductor is talking to Hero Girl and Hero Boy (the main character) and says, “Sometimes seeing is believing. And sometimes the most real things in the world are the things we can’t see.” Pause and say: *Listen to these words from Hebrews 11:1 – Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

What are some things that we might not be able to see with our eyes or hear with our ears, but are real? [below are a few examples]

Air, The way a song makes you feel, The memory of something funny your pet did, Love, Hope

- And we can believe in the amazing power of God who makes all of those blessings, and many more, real. *[Continue watching the movie but note – right after this pause is a scene where Hero Boy gets disoriented in a train car with lots of marionettes and a Scrooge puppet. It might be a little intense for the very young, so this could be a spot where you fast forward a bit. Just wanted you to have a heads up.]*

- As you reach the scene where Santa makes his big entrance, encourage the children to pay careful attention to the main character and how he responds to the sleigh bell he finds.

After-Movie Discussion:

- When Santa entered, all the children and elves were excited, except the main character. He still couldn't see Santa through the crowd. He wanted to believe so much, but still wanted to see first. Then a sleigh bell rolled his way.

What happened next?

He tried ringing it but couldn't hear anything. He said, over and over, "I believe." Then he could hear the bell ringing...and he saw Santa's reflection in the bell.

- There's a saying that "Seeing is believing." The main character discovered in that moment that sometimes, believing is seeing (or hearing).

- For the rest of his life, he would be able to hear the bell – "Though I've grown old, the bell still rings for me, as it does for all who truly believe."

Closing Prayer

Loving God, We believe in Jesus. We believe in love. We believe in you.
Amen.

Credits: Scripture comes from the NRSV. Hymn lyrics are from the UMC Hymnal if not otherwise noted, liturgy, prayers, questions, and commentary adapted from the following sources: Worship Design Studio, SALT, Mark Burrows. Photos: Ninabeth Metcalf, Wiki images.

Closing message

Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness, come into His presence with singing! ~

Psalm 100

We are so grateful to journey with you this Advent and Christmas season.