

JOY OF HEAVEN, HERE ON EARTH

2024 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Love Divine, All Loves Excelling (ELW 631)

<p>1</p> <p>Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heav'n, to earth come down! Fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown. Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art; visit us with thy salvation, enter ev'ry trembling heart.</p> <p>2</p> <p>Breathe, oh, breathe thy loving Spirit into ev'ry troubled breast; let us all in thee inherit; let us find thy promised rest. Take away the love of sinning; Alpha and Omega be; end of faith, as its beginning, set our hearts at liberty.</p>	<p>3</p> <p>Come, Almighty, to deliver; let us all thy life receive; suddenly return, and never, nevermore thy temples leave. Thee we would be always blessing, serve thee as thy hosts above, pray, and praise thee without ceasing, glory in thy perfect love.</p> <p>4</p> <p>Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be; let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee! Changed from glory into glory, till in heav'n we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise!</p>
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Text: Charles Wesley, 1707-1788.

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Sunday, December 1

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (ELW 631)

When we sing during Advent, "Love divine, all loves excelling / Joy of heav'n, to earth come down!" we proclaim a powerful truth. Love can and is embodied in us as people. At the birth of Jesus, divine love is embodied in human form. Yet, this doesn't end at the Advent story and certainly does not end after Jesus' earthly ministry is complete. We too are given divine love as a gift of faith through the power of the Holy Spirit to carry within us and to share with others. The hymn continues, "Breathe, oh, breathe thy loving Spirit / into ev'ry troubled breast; / let us all in thee inherit." As we journey together through Advent and consider Scripture and the hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," let's listen for how that divine love speaks to our hearts and how we are called to live out that love.

Divine Love, call to us, teach us, remind us, and breathe your love into our troubled hearts. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Monday, December 2

Baruch 5:1-9

In the northern hemisphere, the night creeps up on us earlier during Advent and continues to grow longer until the winter solstice. Even as we prepare for the coming joy of Christmas and anticipate the good, we also find ourselves contemplating what and who is missing from our lives. This can be both a beautiful and difficult time of year. Yet, we are never without hope and the promise of goodness. In Baruch 5:4 we read, "For God will give you evermore the name, 'Righteous Peace, Godly Glory.'" When the night feels too long and the joy of the season seems out of reach, we can always turn to God's peace.

Divine Love, gift us with peace, joy, hope, beauty, and goodness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Tuesday, December 3

Luke 1:68-79

In the closing verses of the first chapter of Luke, the writer praises God because Jesus, the embodiment of God's love, has arrived on earth. We read in verse 78 that Jesus was sent to us "because of the tender mercy of our God." Dwell on that phrase for just a moment. Then turn again to this week's hymn, as we sing, "Jesus, thou art all compassion, / pure, unbounded love thou art." Where in your life do you need that tender mercy, compassion, and pure, unbounded love? Know that divine love shines in your heart.

*Divine Love, we pray that you shine in our hearts and guide us into the path of peace.
In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Wednesday, December 4

Philippians 1:3-11

In Philippians 1:9 we read, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight." What does it mean to have love that grows in wisdom and insight? In this verse we see the unity between the head and the heart. Further, if Jesus is the very embodiment of God's love, then what in the life and ministry of Jesus is speaking to you today that you can learn from? Consider how intellectual knowledge and the knowledge of the heart are unified in Jesus.

Divine Love, I lift up to you this request, that I and those I encounter this Advent season may have love that abounds more and more in knowledge and depth. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Thursday, December 5

Luke 3:1-6

In the third chapter of Luke, we encounter John the Baptist who is preparing the way for the earthly ministry of Jesus. Do we know how radical this very situation was? The chapter opens by telling us who is in charge, from the leaders of the Roman Empire to the heads of Judea to the institutional leaders of the temple system in Jerusalem. Yet, after introducing all of these important big-name people, who is it that prepares the way for the earthly ministry of Jesus? And where and to whom does he go to do this? We read in this passage, "the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Divine Love, help us listen to those who speak the voice of love today. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Friday, December 6

Luke 3:1-6

With all the power-players of the ancient world considered, as we saw yesterday God chose a humble prophet named John to call out to those on the margins—those in the wilderness. John prepares the way for Jesus with a promise that the hard obstacles will be made easier. We read, “Every valley shall be filled, / and every mountain and hill shall be made low. / and the crooked shall be made straight, / and the rough ways made smooth.” During Advent, how can we prepare the way for ourselves and others by removing obstacles? Where can you join in the work God is already doing to make the way smoother?

Divine Love, prepare the way in our lives by making the rough ways smooth. Help us to join in your work to make the way easier for others. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Saturday, December 7

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (ELW 631, Verse 1)

We began this week contemplating the hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," and today we return to the first stanza, paying particular attention to how we can trust and know that we receive God's grace as a gift of faith. "Fix in us thy humble dwelling," we sing, and "visit us with thy salvation." Today, I invite you to contemplate your baptism into the body of Christ and to know that you too received that promise of love, salvation, hope, joy, and peace.

Divine Love, thank you for your salvation, for visiting us, and for your continued guidance as we seek to live out your way of peace. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Sunday, December 8

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (ELW 631, Verse 2)

As the first week of Advent closes and a new one begins, let us consider how each day, each moment, is a new opportunity to be aware of and welcome divine love. In the hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," we sing "Alpha and Omega be; / end of faith, as its beginning, / set our hearts at liberty." Jesus is the beginning of faith, and the one working in our hearts and minds to complete that faith in us. We have the gift of divine love, the Holy Spirit, to fuel and empower us through the long nights of Advent and in every moment of our lives.

*Breathe, oh, breathe thy loving Spirit into every heart with peace, love, and liberty.
In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Monday, December 9

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Twice we are told that God is in the midst of Israel (15, 17). That presence is highly disruptive. Judgments are withdrawn. Enemies are deflected and disaster is no longer to be feared for it is removed. The reproach experienced by the lame and outcast is transformed into renown. Because God is in the midst of Israel the present cannot stay the same. What characterizes the present? Disasters (15, 18), a need for renewal (17), oppressors (19), being scattered and no longer at home (20)—all of these cannot remain no matter how entrenched they are. The future (“at that time”) is not the status quo infinitely extended. God is disrupting the present. That’s a promise.

In the opening verse Israel is summoned to “sing aloud...shout...rejoice and exult.” The first to do so is God, who rejoices with gladness and loud singing (17). When you sing your Advent carols, imagine God leading the chorus!

God, renew us so that we might join in your rejoicing and gladness over the renewal of your people. Amen.

Tuesday, December 10

Isaiah 12:2-6

Singing ripples through these verses. The speaker gives thanks and calls for singing and shouting aloud. The commands cascade: give thanks, make known, proclaim, sing praises, shout aloud, and sing for joy. Singing "Joy to the World" and other familiar Advent and Christmas chorales resonates with these commands.

Singing is coupled with trust and not being afraid. What is there to fear? Verse 1 has provided one context for fear, namely, enduring the "anger" of God. The prior chapters in Isaiah also document reasons for the "anger." The marvel is that God has turned away from "anger." God moves from anger to comfort. Thus, God becomes the speaker's salvation—the basis for trust and not fearing.

The summons to singing and thanksgiving are placed "on that day." The present has room for distrust and fear and hence the injunction to call on God's name along with abundant singing. Petition and doxology are joined.

You are in our midst. Lead us to trust and sing. Amen.

Wednesday, December 11

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoicing focused in the Lord is perpetual, not episodic or seasonal. More than urging a rejoicing about the Lord, the rejoicing is done in the presence of the Lord. In the Lord is where we can safely rejoice. Rejoicing is not a naïve denial of hardship. Nor is it slapping a happy face on every moment of the day.

Rejoicing in the Lord takes the shape of being gentle to everyone because the Lord is near and present. Rejoicing in the Lord can be living without anxiety because God is not distant. God attends to prayers and supplications and thus rejoicing includes making known our requests to God.

And, the call to rejoice always in the Lord is guarded by the peace of God. When hearts are disturbed and joy muted, the peace of God generates rejoicing. When our minds reach their limits, the peace of God quiets our anxiety and makes room for rejoicing.

God, grant us your peace and quiet our hearts and minds so that we may flourish in rejoicing. Amen.

Thursday, December 12

Luke 3:7-18 (Part 1)

John uses exhortations to proclaim good news. We may have a hard time equating the good news with exhortations, especially when they begin: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” John probes the intent of the crowds coming to be baptized. Repentance is not on a to-do list of religious credentialing. And, claiming to be Abraham’s descendants or members of a grace-based church does not skirt the exhortation to repent. To repent is to bear good fruit; not to bear good fruit is to refuse to repent.

Christians have often attempted to exempt themselves from John’s blunt call by labeling him as the last of the Old Testament prophets who preach law in contrast to the gracious words of Jesus. Luke 3 does not permit that easy out. The one coming after him—Jesus—will bring a winnowing fork (17), matching the ax at the base of the unfruitful tree (9). Repentance occurs when Christ arrives.

In mercy, gather us into your granary. Burn away our chaff. Lead us to repent and bear good fruit. Amen.

Friday, December 13

Luke 3:7-18 (Part 2)

Repent! What would that look like? Three groups ask John, “What should we do?” Their questions don’t focus on status, i.e., who is in and who is out. The “doing” is ongoing; it is not once and done. A good tree bears good fruit year in and year out. Repentance is like that.

The crowds are told to spread their assets. If you have two coats, then you have one to give to anyone who lacks a coat. Anyone (!)— that means no prequalifying. If you have food, do likewise. The tax collectors are to add no fees to line their pockets. The soldiers should not exploit their power over anyone (there is that limitless word again). Being satisfied with their wages sounds like no maximizing the profit potential of their positions.

All three answers move away from accumulation toward limitless service. That may seem unimaginable, but we should expect no less from the One born in a manger.

Lead us to repent and reshape us to serve without limits. Bring forth in us the good fruit of a repentant life. Amen.

Saturday, December 14

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (ELW 631, Verse 3)

The third verse starts with a petition. The first two verses were also marked by petition: "Fix in us thy humble dwelling" (vs. 1) and "Breathe thy loving Spirit into every troubled breast" (vs. 2).

"Come, Almighty, to deliver"—but deliver from what? The hymn writer leaves room for us to answer that question with our own life experience. When has God seemed remote to us? It is then that we cry out, "Suddenly return." When does our lived experience raise the question of abandonment? It is then that we urgently pray, "Never... thy temples leave." Remoteness and abandonment are the opposite of flourishing life and so we petition, "Let us all thy life receive."

A fifth petition is implied in the phrase "we would be always." There is a yearning to receive all of God's life. As recipients of all of God's life we would be blessing, serving, praying, praising and glorifying—God's perfect love made perfect in us.

God give us all the life you have to give. Perfect your perfect love in us. Amen.

Sunday, December 15

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (ELW 631, Verse 4)

Again, we start with a petition: "Finish." God has work to do. God has begun remaking us, creating us anew. We ask that God finish what God has begun. Make us pure and spotless. The assumption is that we are not yet pure and spotless. The restoration is not yet perfectly complete. As we sing, we acknowledge that we are impure, blemished, and in need of restoration. The great salvation we long to see is not a ratification of our merits. We don't simply look back for a restored Eden. We look forward.

We sing of and yearn for a new creation, a change into a new glory and a new place. Whatever crowns we might bring are swept up ("lost") into "wonder, love and praise." When God finishes the new creation, we will join the shepherds and angels who started the chorus of "wonder, love and praise" for the "good news of great joy for all people" (Lk 2:8-20)

Finish the work you have begun in us. Amen.

Monday, December 16

Micah 5:2-5a

Our reading begins with the word "But..." which indicates that we are shifting from one condition to another. What has been will no longer be and, as is often the case in biblical prophecy, we can expect the unexpected.

The unexpected comes in two forms in Micah. First, the casual assumption of privilege on the part of leaders comes to an (violent) end. The exploiters expect to covet fields and houses with impunity (2:1-2), assuming God's blessing will shield them from harm (3:11). Unexpectedly, judgment comes. Jacob/Israel becomes an abandoned, exilic remnant in need of return (5:3). There is no way out (6:13-16).

When our expectations come to an exilic end, the unexpected occurs a second time. Micah announces a secure restoration from the least likely place, from Bethlehem of Ephrathah, a little clan of Judah. We can hear a future unexpected echo in the New Testament question: Can anything good come from Nazareth?

God, break open our limited expectations to receive your surprising and gracious renewal. Amen.

Tuesday, December 17

Luke 1:46b–55

Long before pop stars began recording Christmas albums, before carols blared through shopping mall speakers, before choirs began leading services of lessons and carols, and even before infant Jesus wailed his first cry, Mary sang. Music has always been part of Advent and Christmas, even that very first Advent, when Mary awaited the birth of her child. When she sang this song, what we now call the “Magnificat,” she testified to God’s work in her own life—“the Mighty One has done great things for me”—and to God’s work in the world—“he has brought down the powerful from their thrones.”

Mary reminds us that God cares for us as individuals and for the world at large: everything from personal joy to cosmic justice is part of God’s concern. The next time you hear Christmas music, remember Mary’s song, and be assured that nothing is too big or too small to be outside of God’s care.

Thank you, God, for the gift of music. Help us use music to remember your presence with us—and tune our ears to recognize your melodies of mercy, presence, and peace. Amen.

Wednesday, December 18

Hebrews 10:5-10

During Advent it can be disconcerting to encounter Scripture passages that talk about Jesus' death. After all, we are anticipating Jesus's birth! Why ruin the mood with all this talk of sacrifices and sin offerings? But we know that the birth of Jesus necessarily carries with it both the brightness of his life and shadows of his death. In the words of the hymn "I Wonder as I Wander," "Jesus the Savior did come for to die."

In the same way, though, Jesus's death is never a story we can tell without the hope born in his resurrection. Life, not death, will have the last word—in Jesus's story and in our own. As the apostle Paul reminds us, "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). When the shadows of death creep up around Christmas, remember and rejoice: Jesus's birth points toward his death, and his death points us toward his—and our—resurrection.

God, you are a maker of miracles: one who brings life out of death. Help us always to remain confident in your abiding presence and in your promises of abundant life. Amen.

Thursday, December 19

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

Of all the Scriptures we tend to read in Advent, this one may just be the most joyful. The delight that Mary and Elizabeth take in each other—and that the children in their wombs share!—is practically breathtaking. I like to imagine the two women gathered together in the evening after the day's work was done, sharing their hopes and fears about their pregnancies, motherhood, and the extraordinary circumstances they were experiencing. It is while Mary is at Elizabeth's house that she is moved to sing her "Magnificat," testifying to the wonders of God.

This beautiful scene is an important affirmation that we need one another. The joyful relationships in our lives—even the ones across great distances or great hardships—deserve to be tended well. Is there someone in your life you've fallen out of touch with simply because of distance, inconvenience, or changing circumstances? Let the love between Mary and Elizabeth inspire you to reach out this Advent season.

God, you give us the gift of friendship. Help us to tend our friendships well, even when it is difficult or inconvenient, and to give one another the grace and love that you show us. Amen.

Friday, December 20

Isaiah 9:2–7

Like so many of his fellow prophets, Isaiah was a poet, and in verse 3 of this passage, he offers two metaphors to express the depth of rejoicing the people feel before God. The first, “as with joy at the harvest,” recalls the natural rhythms of life, and the feelings of happiness and relief when fields have yielded enough to sustain a people for another year. The second metaphor, though, is disturbing: “as people exult when dividing plunder.” By putting the depravity of the spoils of war in parallel with the life-giving imagery of the harvest, the poet artfully indicts human bloodlust.

But Isaiah has another twist in his poem. In verse 5 we hear the promise that war will end, and all its bloody remnants—including the boots and cloaks taken from the enemy as spoils—will be turned into fuel. The coming Savior diverts our hope and our joy away from the death-dealing powers of the world, and toward the life-giving warmth of God’s good creation.

Merciful God, help us to put away our confidence in violence, fear, and death. Divert our hope toward the peace and joy that only you can provide. Amen.

Saturday, December 21

Psalm 96

Christmas is a good time to be on guard against idolatry, because Christmas is big business. There are gifts to buy, decorations to put up, parties to prepare for. It's almost a cliché now to complain about the commercialization of the holiday and to scold each other with the admonition that "Jesus is the reason for the season." But idolatry is something more than just a loss of focus, and something more sinister than a round or two of overzealous shopping. Idolatry involves putting our full attention toward something empty and false even as we ignore the living God. Idols have no saving power, and yet we put our hope into them. "All the gods of the peoples are idols," warns the psalmist, "but the LORD made the heavens."

If we begin to care more about crafting the perfect Christmas than about caring for our neighbor, we have made the holiday itself into an idol—a false god. Human striving—whether for money or notoriety or power or adoration or perfection—is no match for the creative and saving power of our living Savior.

"O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day." (Psalm 96:1-2)

Sunday, December 22

Micah 5:2-5a

The prophet Micah, like so many of the Hebrew prophets, regularly upends his hearers' expectations. In this description of the coming ruler who brings peace, Micah says the promised ruler will come from Bethlehem of Ephrathah, "one of the little clans of Judah." This detail shows how unexpected such an origin might be: from a small tribe comes a great ruler. I am reminded of the line from Helena's description of Hermia in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "And though she be but little, she is fierce!" (Act III, Scene 2) Bethlehem may be small, but it will soon "punch above its weight!"

The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are all about upending our expectations. What looks insignificant at first glance turns out to be more important than we could ever imagine. In that lowly stable we see yet another way that God surprises us: by using the power of love rather than the love of power to save the world.

Keep us watchful, O God, of the ways in which you surprise us. Help us to remember that no one is small or insignificant in your eyes. Amen.

Monday, December 23

Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

Jesus's birth narrative in Luke 2 starts out about as mundane as anyone can imagine: with bureaucratic paperwork. The first five verses are just background information about who was in charge, where Joseph was from, and what he had to do to comply with imperial regulations. The account is more akin to someone's description of their trip to the DMV than it is to an action movie. Even the birth of Jesus is strikingly matter of fact, especially given the extensive attention to Mary's pregnancy in Luke 1; "and she gave birth" hardly seems to capture the intensity of the evening.

But the terse prose of Luke 2:1-7 gives way to powerful drama when the shepherds are visited by the angels—first one, and then a whole host (Luke 2:8-20). Here is where the action is! The writer of the Gospel of Luke invites us not to dwell too long on the stable, but rather to find ourselves among the shepherds, spreading the good news to all we meet.

Put your words in our mouths, O God. Teach us to share your good news with confidence and joy. Amen.

Tuesday, December 24—Christmas Eve

Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20

Today, Christmas Eve, Christians all around the world will read these familiar words from Luke's Gospel—the heart of the Christmas narrative. Good news of great joy will ring out across the globe in hundreds upon hundreds of different languages. From the grandest cathedrals to the simplest sanctuaries, in cozy homes or under the open sky, in hospital chapels and on military bases and in the breakrooms of 24-hour grocery stores, people will stop for just a moment to voice the good news of great joy. Listen! Can you hear it?

The words of this gospel story connect us to siblings in Christ all around the world. As we read the familiar phrases from Luke, none of us is alone. On this day, in this remarkable moment, we remember that we share in the singular hope that comes with the birth of Jesus, Immanuel, God With Us. Thanks be to God!

God, bring your light, hope, peace, and healing to every corner of the world today. Let your Holy Scripture be a beacon to us, so that we might remember that we are all connected to one another through Christ. Amen.

Wednesday, December 25—Christmas Day

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (ELW 631)

This Christmas morning we are greeted with love: a “love divine, all loves excelling.” The love of Christ surpasses any kind of love we can give, receive, or imagine ourselves. As the Word made flesh, Jesus takes on human life and experiences all that it means to be human: to rejoice, to weep, to suffer, to delight, to die. Yet Jesus is not limited by his humanity. As the one who is fully human and fully God, Jesus offers us unending grace beyond all human capacity.

The hymn reminds us that as we celebrate the birth of Jesus each year, we also proclaim our sure and certain hope that Jesus will receive us into God’s kingdom, where we may praise God forever. We think of those who have gone before us, who have already cast their crowns at Jesus’ feet and serve him with joy. Thanks be to God that each Christmas we can experience a taste of heaven’s joy come down to earth, until “in heav’n we take our place.” Merry Christmas!

“Come, Almighty, to deliver, let us all thy life receive!” Enter our hearts this Christmas. Give us the courage and joy to serve our neighbors with justice and compassion—and keep us ever mindful of your unlimited love. Amen.

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