

Sunday, December 7, 2025

JOY ABOUNDING

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

Does this verse sound familiar? It should. We hear this phrase during the benediction almost every week in worship. Does it mean anything to you? Do you find joy through your worship experience?

We have a God who desires joy for us. God gives us a creation in which we can see and experience joy. God gives us people who can bring us joy. God gave us a Son, who brings us joy, by forgiving our sin. God gives us the Holy Spirit, so we can experience a heavenly peace and joy. How sad it is when we don't recognize them. How sad when we dwell on the sin in our life.

I don't want the burden of sin to steal my joy in life. I include a prayer for my sin in my daily devotion. I know I have more sin in my life than I can control. Do you find that to be true? Do you find that the more you try to correct your sins, the more sin you recognize?

Martin Luther struggled with sin and tried to live without sin. He found it impossible. He wrote, "It suffices that through God's glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day." If living with sin was inevitable, what are we to do?

This answer comes as the gift of Advent: a gift which frees us from the worry and fear we have about our sinful nature. God sends us the Christ Child, who comes to offer forgiveness. Because of the gift of forgiveness, we should experience great joy. If you are concerned about your sins, fill your life with good actions. Then, you will find that you do not have time to be tempted by sin.

Examine your own level of joy. Are you coming up short? We practice joy in church every Sunday. It is joyful to come to a place of care, concern, and encouragement, even during our most difficult days. Church is a place where we practice for heaven. What are we to do? Pray for forgiveness. Give thanks for forgiveness. Then live in the love and joy of God.

Prayer: Holy Father, help us to find the joy you intend for us in this world. As we receive the gift of joy, help us to spread joy to others, so our own joy will multiply. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Paul Sherwood

Monday, December 8, 2025
AND STILL WE HOPE

Romans 8:18-25

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

We bear the imprint of Christian hope in a world of deep distress and need. Our way is crowded with a sustained procession of grim events, our ears deafen by the cries of countless souls haunted with fears. But here we stand bearing the imprint of Christian hope. Some ask, "How, in such a world as this, can one dare to confess that there is hope?" And still we hope. We have a hope that the hardened world knows not of. And this hope is in the hope of the world.

The eye of hope holds fast the vision of a world where everyone honors each other's dignity, and everyone esteems God's creative diversity. Our hope holds the vision of a world where goods and services are equitably distributed, and poverty will be no more. Our hope holds the vision of a world where all God's children, who know not now what they shall be, will share the image of the Creator and live in the unity of kindred love. And still we hope.

Prayer: Mighty God, keep us mindful of the foundation upon which our hope is built. Shield us from the lure of seeking to save ourselves with the things that do not satisfy. But may we hold fast to the hope of the world until the healing power of your love makes all things new. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Samuel Stevenson

reprinted from his 2002 Advent Daily Devotional scriptures, Meditations, and Prayers



Light the second candle,
the Angels candle,
representing Peace

Tuesday, December 9, 2025

HAMISH, THE CAT ABOUT TOWN

*For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock.
Psalm 27:5*

Are you a dog or a cat person? I am both. One thing I love about our furry companions are true stories that are inspiring and sometimes prophetically meaningful.

Recently, while travelling, I learned of Hamish, a famous cat, who lived in St. Andrews, Scotland. Marianne Baird owned Hamish, but the only care Marianne needed to provide to Hamish was his annual vet exam. For you see, Hamish the cat was nomadic, traveling around the village and being seen everywhere. He could be found basking in the sun at a coffee shop, sitting in the windowsill of the drugstore, or cuddling on a bench on the campus of St. Andrews University. Hamish earned his own Facebook page and has a bronze statute in the center of town! This long-haired, ginger cat brought about a feeling of gentleness, peacefulness, and quietness that enthralled the townspeople. He had an aura of calmness around him, and he found shelter everywhere he went.

We find shelter in our Lord, and we provide shelter for others whether by a visit, a phone call, a text, or a hug. We allow the Lord's patience and grace to roll over us and to settle us.

Receive the gift and give the gift.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to be more like Hamish and the citizens of St. Andrews and play two roles: by spending time with God for quiet love and grace, and by giving grace to others. May we point others to the Lord where they may gain peace and rest. Amen.

Mikel Vann

Addendum:

Hamish's spirit lives on. The Hamish Foundation was founded in his memory, a charity to raise funds for the good of the town. This foundation provides beach wheelchairs for visitors at West Sand Beach, the same beach where Chariots of Fire was filmed.

Wednesday, December 10, 2025

BE LIKE MARY

The angel said to him: “Do Not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord...” Luke 1:11-15 (NIV)

Every year after Christmas I wish we’d spent more time just enjoying the Christmas stories like the twin birth announcements that open Luke’s Gospel. The Angel Gabriel comes first to Zechariah, the soon-to-be father of John the Baptist and then comes a little later to visit young Mary and tell her she will be the mother of God’s Son!

Zechariah’s reaction to Gabriel’s tremendous announcement is one of skepticism and outright disbelief. “What!? Have a son? My wife and I both are as old as dirt!?” He flat out challenges the angel. “How shall I know this?” The angel puffs up in response, “I am Gabriel, Right Hand to the throne of Almighty God!” Then he lowers the boom: “You’ll have a month of total silence to think about what I have promised.”

Mary, on the other hand, starts her encounter and response to the angel’s wondrous news by essentially flattering the angel, “That’s so wonderful! How will this be?” She’s asking how the angel will do these amazing things. And with that kind of lead in, the Angel now gushes forth, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and...” The angel promises one thing after another because of Mary’s openness to his life-shaping, world-changing news!

So, here’s a tip for Advent—the season of God’s special coming: if the angel tells you something, it’s better to open your heart and listen on—like Mary. That’s one thing.

But then notice in closing the gracious movement of the angel’s ‘sentence’ on Zechariah. For the term of his wife’s pregnancy, his only choice is to stay home from his priestly duties, sit there in silence, while he and Elizabeth, in their twin rockers, watch this little bundle of blessing grow, little by little, day by day. God let him know who’s working through him, through his wife and through his family. God is every bit as good as his word!

Prayer: Holy God, open our hearts to every sign of your surprising work. Show us your will in our lives this season of Advent. Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Mark E. Durrett

Thursday, December 11, 2025

MARY, MARY, QUITE CONTRARY

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

*"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."
Luke 1:38*

An innocent young virgin asleep in the night
awakened by an angel, shaken by the sight
a most unlikely vessel, this common peasant girl
chosen to deliver the Savior of the world

Blessed among all women, receiving heaven's nod
told that she will bear the very Son of God
troubled and perplexed at how this could be
even so, she answers, "May it be done to me"

Mary, Mary, quite contrary
how does a heart so faithful grow
such a fearless "yes" I dare carry
a life surrendered, ever contrary

Unmarried with child, ripples of scandal
a heavy burden for a young girl to handle
shamed and rejected, a consequence of faith
but steeled by the strength of an unrelenting grace

Mary, Mary, quite contrary
how does a heart so faithful grow
such a fearless "yes" I dare carry
a life surrendered, ever contrary

Lord, help me say, "yes, yes, yes" with every breath
help me say, "yes, yes, yes" my every step
help me say, "yes, yes, yes" and nothing less
help me say, "yes, yes, yes" forever blessed

An innocent, young virgin asleep in the night
awakened by an angel, shaken by the sight
a most unlikely vessel, this common peasant girl
chosen to deliver the Savior of the world

Mary, Mary, quite contrary
how does a heart so faithful grow
such a fearless "yes" I dare carry
a life surrendered, ever contrary

Scott Suhr

Friday, December 12, 2025

LOVING THROUGH GIVING

God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 2 Corinthians 9:7-8

In the years 2002 to 2023, we were members of a church on Sanibel Island. Now that we have returned to live full-time in Marietta, we are once again a part of First Presbyterian Church where our daughter was married in 1999. One of the blessings of being back is sharing stories with members. Recently when I was talking to a friend about giving, she told me that when her grandchildren reached a certain age, she told them that she would give them a certain amount of money for Christmas for them to donate to a charity. Their task was to research the places that they might give the money and make a decision as to where their donation would go. What a wonderful way to teach children the joy in giving!

Prayer: Dear God, Giver and Sustainer: As we give thanks to you for your marvelous gifts to us; teach us to give cheerfully and joyfully. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Dixie Bowden

Saturday, December 13, 2025
BELIEVING, THEN SEEING

“For my eyes have seen your salvation...And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Luke 2:30; 3:6

Have you ever said, or heard it said, “It’s so nice to put a face to the name”? During my career, I often worked with colleagues who resided in different locations or states, often for years before having an opportunity to meet them in person. The meeting was always special, because of course we knew about each other, but did not truly know each other until we could see each other. God has always known and understood our human condition. He knew our human minds and hearts could not comprehend his greatness or holiness; it is why he appeared to the Israelites as a cloud by day and a fire by night as they journeyed from Egypt.

God also understands our human fears and doubts. From the beginning of time, he knew he would need to give us his son in human form, in order that we could see his face, and know him as a human is known, and to have a relationship with him. In his infinite wisdom, God knew we needed this connection of the physical in order to deepen our relationship with him. And it was the only way God could fully demonstrate the depth of his love for us, by coming to us in the form of a baby, who would as a man develop deep relationships with men and women. These men and women would learn that he was the Way, the Truth and the Life. It was these men and women who, after the sacrificial gift of his death on a cross, would be the first ones to spread his gospel of love and peace throughout the world.

Prayer: Holy Father in Heaven, You gave us the most perfect gift of yourself in the form of a precious baby, that we know You as a human, and also know that you truly understand our human frailties and weaknesses. You gave us yourself so we would see your perfect sacrifice That sacrifice would ensure we could know you and be in relationship with you forever. We give you grateful thanks, in the precious name of your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Linda Bush