

**December 11<sup>th</sup> – Saturday**

**Centering Breath Prayer: Child of joy...you are my promise keeper.**

**Opening Prayer:**

*Dearest Lord, who keeps all promises, I enter your presence today with joy in my heart and hope for your kingdom. I know that whatever my needs this day, you will be with me to guide me through and keep me safely in your kingdom. I know that you care about my needs and that you would have me care for the needs of others. Show me today where you would have me be an instrument of your kingdom as we continue our walk along the journey of love. In your joyous and hopeful name, I pray. Amen.*

**Scripture: Psalm 146:5-10**

**Key Verses: Psalm 146:5-6: (5) “But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper, whose hope is in the Lord their God. (6) He made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. He keeps every promise forever” (NLT).**

Promises. We make them all the time, sometimes in earnest and sometimes lightly. And sometimes we even keep them. Sometimes we don't. It's not always our fault that our promises are not kept, sometimes life's circumstances prevent us from arriving when we say we will or attending an event or even posting a devotional when it's expected. We don't always choose to break a promise, but the fact is that many of the promises we make are not kept. And sometimes, we break our promises deliberately, choosing to do other things instead of what we promised to do, etc., etc., etc.

Our scripture passage today is classified as a Psalm of praise, one in which God is the recipient of praise for being our God. In this Psalm, God is praised because of the difference between people who are very wishy-washy in our dealings with one another, sometimes good at keeping promises and sometimes not very good at all and God, who is a promise keeper forever. The Advent season through which we are traveling is all about God's keeping promises. The Messiah, long awaited by the people of God was the fulfillment of all God's promises throughout a long history of faith with the people of Israel. Yet, when he arrived his birth was both loudly proclaimed by angels and a star, and veiled from a prominent society who would not accept him especially a king who would later try to kill him. When he began his ministry, even John, the Baptizer, who had proclaimed him as the Messiah, questioned his own understanding. It was the way he was fulfilling promises that finally put to rest John's questions. He was fulfilling promises like giving justice to the oppressed, food to the hungry, opening the eyes of the blind, lifting up those who were weighed down with anxiety, loving all who came to him, even those who did not stay. Many of those promises are listed in this Psalm for today and they are repeated by Isaiah and Luke 4:16-21 and in our passage from Matthew 11:2-11 from a couple of days ago.

Jesus never tried to separate the physical needs and the spiritual needs of those he met. He found them all equally important and met them all. As his followers, we are called to reach out to others in a similar manner. Though God is the ultimate promise

keeper, we are often used as God's hands to provide for those who are in need and when we do not keep our promises, we fail not only the people we have let down, but our Lord as well. One of the facets of the Kingdom of God that we might not think about right away would be the keeping of promises. On earth, we are not generally good at keeping our promises. In the Kingdom of God, promises are always kept. Knowing that Jesus was the promised Messiah reminds us that no matter how long it may seem to take, God always keeps promises. Therefore, the Kingdom of God will also come on earth as it is in heaven because God has promised it. Our Advent journey of love is about keeping promises as much as it is about celebrating the birth of a baby. It is about the Kingdom of God as much as it is about a manger and some angels and a star. It is about our faith journey and the love of Christ which inspired it. It is about learning and loving and sharing and singing and praising and having hope and peace in an unsettling world where hope seems lost and peace non-existent. Our hope, peace and joy come from the promise keeper, the one who will never leave us and who loves us even when we mess up. I don't know about you, but that gives me great joy and hope beyond measure.

### **Additional Scripture: Luke 4:16-21**

#### **Questions for reflection and/or journaling:**

1. What promises have I made this week that I failed to keep? What ones did I keep?
2. What promises has God fulfilled that give me hope, peace and joy?
3. What promises do I need to be more intentional in keeping today?

#### **Suggestions for action:**

1. Phrase for your tree: **JESUS: PROMISE KEEPER**
2. Make a list of the promises you make today. Check it later to see how many of them you kept. Make a conscious effort to be a promise keeper.
3. Find a place where you can do something for someone in need this week. Help build a Habitat for Humanity home, gather food for a local food bank, volunteer at a local hospital, etc.

#### **Closing Prayer:**

*Precious Lord Jesus, who always keeps promises, help me to become like you. Let me see the value in my word to another person and work diligently to honor it daily. Show me some of the many ways you keep your promises to me each day so that I may have hope for the future and peace in my soul. Let my joy overflow into promises that will show the value of others and my willingness to serve them with gladness as a part of my worship and praise for you. In your wondrous name, I pray. Amen.*

## December 12<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent

### Centering Breath Prayer: My spirit rejoices...in God my Savior.

#### Opening Prayer:

*Father God, who chose Mary as the mother of our Lord, be with me in this day. Thank you for the lessons of acceptance and great joy in your will which Mary teaches us. Through this quiet time of reflection with you, teach my spirit how to rejoice in your presence. In the name of the Christ Child Mary once bore, I pray. Amen.*

#### Scripture: Luke 1:46-55

**Key Verses: Luke 1:46-47: (46) “And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, (47) and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;” (NRSV).**

Here we are going into the last two weeks before Christmas Day and once more we are confronted with Mary. We are winding down to (or is it gearing up for?) the last hectic days before the main event. Though a few days may have seemed like forever, on the whole the time is rushing past us and we are likely feeling like it's getting down to crunch time. All the things we let slip past us undone are now catching up to us. Hopefully, this special time we have taken on our journey of love is helping us cope with some of this madness. Whew! Wouldn't it be nice if we could turn back the clock to a simpler time where the stresses and demands on us were easier? Maybe we could go back to the time of Mary and Joseph when things were so much less frantic? Maybe, then, my spirit could rejoice in God my savior, too! Right – sooo much easier! Let's see, first, we are visited by an archangel of the Lord, who announces we are going to have God's baby (Luke 1:26-38). Piece of cake – right? Then, let's see, we have to tell Mom and Dad and Joseph. Then, we'll travel to cousin Elizabeth's to see if she's really going to have a child (and at her age, too)! After that, we get to travel to Bethlehem on the back of a donkey, while nine months pregnant! The whole country's on the move since everyone has to go to their own tribal or family city. Then we get there and, guess what, there is no place to stay. So we get stuck in a stable along with all the animals! Well, it's not so bad, at least we have a roof over our heads. Of course, then Baby Jesus decides it's time to arrive (Luke 2:1-7). No hospital, no doctor, no medicine, nothing but dear Joseph willing, but how able? Well, the baby's finally here, so now maybe we can rest. But, nooo – now we've got all these shepherds crowding in to get a look at the “special” baby the angels sang about! And what does Mary do? Break down and cry, right? Of course not! Mary ponders everything in her heart! (Luke 2:19). Later, we'll take a trip to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate Baby Jesus and have him circumcised (Luke 2:21-24). Then, we'll have all these visiting magi. And, then, we get to escape all the way to Egypt in order to stay alive. Simple, huh!?

OK, maybe, life's not so bad here and now. When we think about our difficulties, maybe, we need to look back to see how God's people have handled theirs. Mary is a wonderful example for us. Her simple, childlike acceptance of God's will for her has earned her praise all through two millennia. God chose well. We could say, “Well, Mary was special, she was the mother of our Savior.” And, that's true, Mary *was* special and

she was the mother of our Savior. But, she was a human person, she was not God. She had free will to choose to accept or reject God's will. She chose to accept. She could have been like Sarah, Abraham's wife, laughed at the whole idea and complained and whined the whole time (Genesis 18:10-15). But, Mary chose to glorify the Lord and rejoice in God her Savior.

We, too, can choose to complain and whine about the tasks we are given (or choose to accept) during the Advent and Christmas seasons or we can choose to rejoice in the opportunities God gives us to accomplish. We, too, can choose to rejoice in God our Savior. We, too, can choose to ponder the things happening around us in our hearts. We, too, can choose to glorify the Lord in our lives with our love gifts of action – labors of love – to God, to family and friends and our neighbors both near and far. Our journey of love takes many paths and is reflected in our spirits as we rejoice in God our Savior!

**Additional Scriptures: Luke 1:26-38, 2:1-7, 19, 21-24; Genesis 18:10-15**

**Questions for reflection and/or journaling:**

1. How can I rejoice in the Lord in the midst of my lifestyle?
2. How are my actions reflecting God's love on our journey of love?
3. What stands between me and rejoicing in God's gifts?

**Suggestions for action:**

1. Phrase for your tree: **REJOICE IN GOD MY SAVIOR**
2. Do all the tasks of this day with a cheerful heart and stop often to give God thanks for the ability to do them.
3. Take a few moments sometime during the day to ponder the joy and wonder of the Christmas events.

**Closing Prayer:**

*God of rejoicing, teach my spirit to rejoice. When I get bogged down in the holiday tasks, show me the joy they can bring to another. Show me how to ponder the wonders you daily send my way. Open my eyes to the joy our journey of love is bringing into my life each day. May my spirit truly rejoice in you, Lord, as I look forward to the birth of your son in whose name, I pray. Amen.*

**JOURNEY OF LOVE DEVOTIONALS  
WEEK #4 – JOURNEY OF LOVE**

**December 13<sup>th</sup> – Monday**

**Centering Breath Prayer: Child of love...hear my prayer.**

**Opening Prayer:**

*Dear Christ Child, as our journey continues to become more complicated and the time before your celebration becomes short, I need to know that you hear me. The season becomes more stressful and I need your loving Spirit to sustain me. I cry out to you for guidance and my heart needs to feel you near. Be my strength for today and lead me along the way, even when the going gets tough. In your precious, loving name, I pray. Amen.*

**Scripture: Psalm 80:1-7**

**Key Verses: Psalm 80:1a, 2b-3: (1a) “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. (2b) Awaken your might; come and save us. (3) Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved” (NIV).**

Do you ever feel like you need to awaken the Lord to hear you? Sometimes it seems like a lot of our prayers are meant to stir things up so that God will hear us and respond. We seem to spend a lot of our prayers in begging God to do this or that whether we are seeking God’s help for ourselves or others. The writers of the Psalms were not much different than we are today. Today’s Psalmist begins with a plea for God to listen. Notice that the Psalmist, like we often do, uses imperatives, “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel...Awaken your might...Restore us;...make your face shine upon us...” In the opening prayer above there are also imperatives, as if we had the right to order God to do anything! Most of us don’t mean this type of wording as giving God orders, yet that is precisely what we are doing. What’s really interesting, at least to me, is that what I’m really meaning when I demand something from God is to beg God’s attention to something which is important to me. I realize that what is important to me may not be so important to God, except that God loves me and you and God desires to do good things for us. But, it must sometimes grate on God’s nerves (if God has any) to have so many of our prayers seem so very demanding. I know that I give prayers in this form to reduce some of the wordiness. And imperatives have a rich sound to them. But, perhaps the insistence that we be heard is part of the reason that we so often feel that we are not. When God seems to ignore our prayers, or answers them in ways which we do not understand, do we, like the Psalmist, cry out to be heard?

Yet, it is in our hope that we continue to cry out to the Lord. If we had no hope that God does hear us and desires to do good for us then we would not give voice to our prayers. Certainly the Psalmist believed that God would listen when he cried out, “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel...” And his plea is for God not only to hear, but to come and save us. As we head into this fourth week of Advent, we have hope that God listens and has sent his Son to save us. Our hope is built on the love of the God who

sent the Christ Child, a Child of love, to bring us the salvation which we so desperately need. It is this very love which inspires our prayers and convinces us that our loving God does, indeed, hear us when we cry out. The answers our loving God gives are not always easy to understand or even recognize at times. Yet, those answers are present if we will just listen ourselves. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to our receiving the answers to our prayers lies in us not hearing God rather than God not hearing us. As we move deeper into this Advent season and the arrival of the Christ Child becomes immanent, we can listen more in our quiet times with God. As we finish reading the message in these devotionals and move on the questions, let us spend more time listening for the Lord than in finding more imperatives to send God's way. As we travel this journey of love, let us feel secure in the love of God, knowing that God does, indeed, hear us and desire to answer our prayers. This quiet security of God's love can help us to rise above the stresses which surround us and renew us as we follow the Child of love on our journey of love.

### **Additional Scriptures: John 3:16-18; John 5:24-26**

#### **Questions for reflection and/or journaling:**

1. Do I sometimes feel that I need to awaken God to hear my prayers?
2. How might I improve my prayers by seeking to listen more instead of always asking for something?
3. How much do I expect God to answer my prayers according to my desires instead of looking for God's desires within the situation?

#### **Suggestions for action:**

1. Word for your tree: **LISTEN**
2. Spend at least 10 minutes today just sitting in silence with the Lord. Don't ask for anything or expect anything specific. Just sit quietly and bask in God's infinite love.
3. Spend a little time today listing different ways you have known God's love. Use your journal or just list them mentally.

#### **Closing Prayer:**

*Dearest Child of love, I come to you today returning a tiny bit of the vast love with which you have showered me each time I come to you in prayer. I know that sometimes I seem to be a demanding child, full of myself and demanding to be heard. Please know that I do not mean to demand your attention or to dictate to you how to answer even though my prayers at times come out that way. You have taught me that you desire to listen to me and spend time with me, even though I do not always understand you. Please accept my apologies for any impatient demands I try to place upon you. I am mostly pleading to become better through your help. I will try to keep my prayers grounded in you will instead of my own selfish desires. In your loving name, I pray. Amen.*