

FIRST  BAPTIST  
GONZALES · EST. 1847

**THANKSGIVING  
&  
ADVENT**

*"His presence is the  
Ultimate Present"*

**NOVEMBER 14 – DECEMBER 18**

## **THANKFULNESS**

### **Monday, November 14 – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

Today's passage is short which allows you to read and meditate over these words again and again. Let me encourage you to spend several minutes saying these words over and over again in a prayerful position. Let these words guide your day.

As a culture, we are too emotional. We do not act based on what we think but based on what we feel. And that attitude has affected the church. Christians worship when they feel like it. Christians serve others when it makes them feel good. If we don't feel like praying, we don't. If we don't want to go to church, we stay home or do something else. We are a bunch of feelers. And that attitude has hindered our relationship with God.

The commands at the end of 1 Thessalonians do not say to act only when you feel like it. They say to rejoice *always*, pray *without ceasing*, and give thanks *in all circumstances*. This does not mean we rejoice and give thanks about all situations. We do not rejoice nor thank God that we have cancer, but we rejoice and thank God for walking alongside us during the treatment. These actions are to be directed at God no matter the circumstance; they are not due to the circumstance.

In all circumstances, we have reason to give thanks to God because in all circumstances God is with us. It is the will of God for Christians to not be blown around by this emotion and that one. It is God's will for us to be anchored in Him, so no matter what may come our way, we can be confident that God will take care of us in one way or another. Let us not live our lives based on the whims of emotion. Let us live our lives grounded in Christ. Thank you Lord for being our anchor!

### **Tuesday, November 15 – Exodus 34:6-7**

I am thankful for a loving God. In these two verses of Exodus, God gives his biography. God tells Moses and us who God is. God is merciful, gracious, patient, loving, faithful, forgiving, and just. Thank you, God, for who you are!

A loving God does not mean that God is tolerant of anything and everything. No. Any parent knows that being loving means setting rules and expectations. God does the same thing for us. God has expectations for how his children will act, and there are consequences for our actions. But even in those consequences, you can see the love of God shining through. In this expression of God's love in Exodus 34, God's punishment only reaches the third and fourth generations. God's continual never-ending love lasts 1000 generations. That's a big difference!

In another example of the type of love that God has for us, the word we translate as merciful is closely related to the Hebrew word for womb. The mercy and love which God shows us is similar to the love and care that a mother gives to her unborn child. I don't know that feeling, but I've seen that type of love in action in my wife and other soon-to-be mothers. God has love for us like a mother has for the child in her womb. Thank you God for your love!

### **Wednesday, November 16 – Proverbs 16:31**

If you are older, are you thankful for your old age? If you are not older yet, are you looking forward to the gray hairs on your head? Wisdom is gained as we get older. As our hair grays, we gain understanding about the world and God (hopefully!). I am thankful for the wisdom I continue to gain in my life. And more importantly, I'm thankful to be surrounded by others who I can glean wisdom from.

I am fortunate to have several pastors who I consider mentors. I am fortunate to know lay people in the church who can give advice on how to be a godly witness to my children and family. I am fortunate to have parents and in-laws who

have godly marriages that I can hold up as an example. I am fortunate and blessed by God to be able to learn from the wisdom of these older men and women.

Do not feel insecure about age but relish in the opportunity that God has given you to grow old. Pray for the ability to impart your wisdom to younger generations. Be thankful that God has guided you to the days of gray hair. It is a crown of glory! Be thankful for being older. And if you aren't there yet, pray for God to let you grow old and wear that crown of glory.

### **Thursday, November 17 – Acts 28:1-10**

I am thankful for unexpected blessings. I was in my first semester of seminary when God provided for me in an unexpected way. About halfway through the semester, I learned that I had been awarded a \$1000 scholarship. Because I had already paid for the semester, I was able to receive that money in a check from Baylor. Then, I learned that the scholarship came from a church organization. Because of that, the scholarship was matched by the BGCT. So I got another \$1000. That \$2000 helped me buy groceries and pay rent to make it to the end of the semester. It was so unexpected and a huge blessing.

In Acts 28, Paul finds himself a prisoner and shipwrecked on the island of Malta. He's being transported to Rome, but a nor'easter rages in and blows the ship off course. The only choice that the crew has is to anchor the ship and swim to the shores of Malta. Verse 2 tells us that "the natives showed us unusual kindness." After the crew spent some time on the island, the people of Malta continued to show kindness by providing for the crew as they departed to Rome. The people of Malta show hospitality to the shipwrecked men. It was uncommon and unexpected for people to help one another in this manner. The Maltese welcomed in the stranger and prisoner and cared for them as their own. I am thankful for people who care for one another. I am thankful for the unexpected blessing which flow from the hospitality of others.

### **Friday, November 18 – Philemon 1:4-7**

I am thankful for fellow Kingdom workers. Much like Paul expresses in this letter to Philemon, I, too, am encouraged by seeing the work of my co-workers in Christ. It is rewarding as a pastor to see others working for the Kingdom in our church. Like Paul, I pray that your work may be effective, and you recognize all the good that you do. Whether you serve as a Bible study leader, cook a Wednesday night meal, help in AWANA, sing in the praise team, or however else you serve at the church, THANK YOU!

Let us take extra time today to thank God for the many workers at FBCG. In your prayer time, thank God for the love that our church shares for one another and the faith we have toward Jesus. If you feel led, give someone a call, or write someone a card thanking them for the work they do at the church. It is a blessing to be part of a church that works together to serve the Kingdom and the community. Thank you for doing your part.

### **Saturday – Sunday, November 19-20 – Psalm 100**

### **Monday, November 21 – Genesis 21:1-7**

It's hard to imagine how joyous Sarah must have felt at the birth of Isaac. I remember the joy LeeAnn and I felt at the birth of our two children. It is an unmatched joy in my life. Those days, along with my wedding day, are the three greatest days of my life. My family is always at the top of my list of things I am thankful for. When I describe myself, I am a follower of Christ, a husband, a father, and a pastor. That is the order and priorities of my life. The only thing I am more thankful for than my family is the sacrifice which Christ made on the cross for me.

But here's the thing: I got married when I was 23 and had children at 26 and 29. Unlike Abraham and Sarah, we didn't have any troubles or concerns in our pregnancy. For LeeAnn and I, there was great amazing joy in the birth of our children, but the joy did not come from suffering or excruciating waiting. For Sarah, she waited and waited and waited to have a child. She never thought this day would come. She laughed so that she wouldn't cry when the messengers came to tell Abraham and Sarah that she would become pregnant. But on this day, she is able to name her son Isaac, which means son of laughter. She does not have anxious, disbelieving laughter as she had earlier but laughter of joy. "How sweet to hold, a newborn baby" when you never thought you'd have one of your own.

As we get closer to Thanksgiving, give thanks to God for your family. Whether it is large or small, give thanks that God has blessed you with them. If you are estranged from family at the moment, pray for them. Pray for your relationship so that you can come together and have joy in your family once again.

## **Tuesday, November 22 - Genesis 45:4-8**

From our perspective, many times the world doesn't make sense. From our perspective, bad things happen to good people and evil causes calamity for the innocent. From our perspective, it is sometimes hard to even see God. Luckily, the world is not moving forward based on our perspective, but it is moving forward from God's perspective. It is from God's perspective where He can take evil and turn it for good. God can take the chaos and give us peace.

Today, I thank God for his providence. I thank God that He takes care of the world and each of us like he took care of Joseph and his family. I pray that we can see the events of the world in the same way Joseph saw God's providence. That, even after he was sold into slavery and thrown into jail through no fault of his own, he harbored no resentment toward his brothers because he saw the bigger picture. He realized that God had brought him to Egypt for a purpose.

In every person's life, there are ups and downs. Admittedly, some people have more downs than ups and vice-versa. In those times, remember that God is with you, and God can take the bad and turn it for good. Praise God for his providence. Thank You Lord for taking care of me.

### **Wednesday, November 23 – 2 Timothy 3:14-17**

Today, I thank God for Scripture. Scripture is to be our guide. It is to provide comfort, encouragement, and rebuke when necessary. It helps all believers be on the same page (pun intended) when it comes to living out our faith in Christ. We can be assured that Scripture stays the same now and forever. What the Scripture taught when we were children is what the Scripture still means today (of course, you have to make sure your teacher of Scripture knew what the Scripture meant, but I digress).

What is your favorite Scripture? Mine is Micah 6:8 as you probably know. I think this verse does a fantastic job of succinctly summarizing what all the Prophets were trying to tell Israel and what they are telling us: seek justice, love kindness, walk humbly with our God. These verses guide me in my understanding of what Christians are supposed to do.

Think and meditate on your favorite verse or passage today. Why is it your favorite? What about it speaks to you? Thank God for His words which prepare us to be equipped for every good work. Then, if you haven't done so already, email me or plan to let me know somehow what your favorite Bible verse or verses is. Starting in January, those verses that you choose will be the sermon texts for the majority of 2023.

### **Thursday, November 24 – Psalm 119:1-8**

Happy Thanksgiving to everyone! I am so thankful to be your pastor. Today, we will consider the sin of gluttony...just kidding (but seriously, don't overdo it today). Actually, we read the first eight verses of Psalm 119 today. It's

disappointing that the beauty of this psalm does not translate into English. In the original Hebrew, this psalm is an acrostic poem. Every eight verses is a different stanza, and each line in the stanza starts with the same Hebrew letter.

The eight verses we read today, the Aleph section, communicates that the writer of this psalm and those who read and believe the words written continue to seek God for all our days. When a person seeks God continually, their life is blessed. Some of our translations will use the word happy in verses 1 and 2, but blessed is the better translation. In our English language, happy is too fleeting; it is too contingent on daily happenings. Blessed, however, is not contingent on circumstances but on God. When we walk in the ways of the Lord and seek Him with our whole heart, we are blessed. The reading of God's Word is the main way we can seek the will of God. We are blessed when we know God's Word and practice His Word daily. Let us be thankful today because we have been blessed by God.

## **ADVENT 2022: "HIS PRESENCE IS THE ULTIMATE PRESENT"**

### **WEEK 1: HOPE**

#### **Friday, November 25 – Isaiah 9:1-7**

Typically, we have readings and devotions which run Monday through Friday leading up to the sermon on Sunday. For Advent this year, we will read the sermon Scripture on Fridays and then follow up on that theme Monday-Thursday. Our overall theme for Advent this year is "His presence is the ultimate present." Remember that God is with us. That is the best gift we can receive this Christmas season. God's presence gives us hope in this world.

Look at how Isaiah 9 begins: "there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish." Instead, Isaiah says that light will shine again. A Messiah will come and establish peace and security for his people. A Savior will come and rescue his

people from oppression. Justice and righteousness will reign once again when this child is born.

We know that Jesus has come and will come again. That should give us hope for the future. At the same time, we must remember that God is with us today. Remember, Isaiah is prophesying about the birth of Jesus, not his second coming. What Isaiah 9:7 promises is that God's Kingdom will be established when this child is born. The promise is that God's Kingdom has been established and will continue forever. That's already happened. We have hope for today and hope for tomorrow because of God's presence on earth right now. "His presence is the ultimate present." And that gives us hope.

### **Saturday – Sunday, November 26-27 – Luke 1:46-56**

This is Mary's *Magnificat*. Her song about being chosen to be the mother of Jesus. She rejoices at being chosen by God, and she marvels at what hope her baby is going to bring to the world.

### **Monday, November 28 – Isaiah 7:14**

Children being born seems to always bring hope. In your family and in the church, a newborn baby gives people hope for the future. Babies bring this feeling of continuation; there's this sense that humanity will continue on even after we have died.

In 2 Samuel 7, God promises David that his kingdom will last forever. God tells David that one of his descendants will rule over God's people forever. As Israel and Judah start to be overcome by foreign nations, the people begin to worry that God will not keep his promise. And so, Isaiah tells King Ahaz to ask for a sign from God that he will keep his promise. Ahaz will not do so. However, Isaiah then speaks for the Lord to say that God will indeed give Ahaz a sign whether he wants

it or not. A young woman will be pregnant, have a son, and name him Immanuel. This is the sign that God is still with you and plans to continue to keep his promise.

The Kingdom of Israel is gone, but the Kingdom of God continues. Matthew retells about this sign in Matthew 1:23. Using the Greek translation of virgin, Matthew explains that this has been God's plan. God will establish his Kingdom through the line of David in this way. Jesus being born brings us hope. God being born gives us hope for the future.

### **Tuesday, November 29 – Matthew 1:1-17**

Matthew's genealogy gives us hope. If God chose for *these* people to be in his family, then God can use us as well. Jesus' earthly family, the one that God chose to be born into, has a very checkered past. Starting toward the top of the genealogy, we see that Tamar and Judah had Perez and Zerah. What we can learn from the Judah and Tamar story in Genesis 38 is that Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law and she tricked Judah into having sex with her by dressing as a prostitute. Then, further down the genealogy, there's Rahab who was a prostitute. Then, there's Solomon who was born when David assaulted Bathsheba. This doesn't even mention the awful kings who are in this line.

If God can use these people, that gives all of us hope. It's popular for churches to use some type of statement like "no perfect people allowed." It's become cliché, but there is truth in that statement. There are no perfect people in the church. We all have different backgrounds and different skeletons in the closet. We all have reasons that could disqualify us from being used by God. Yet, God wants to use us. And God will use us for his purposes if we let him. God used this genealogy to fulfill his plan of an eternal Kingdom. If God chose *these* people to be his family, then there's hope that God can use us too.

### **Wednesday, November 30 – Micah 5:2-5a**

One of my favorite Christmas hymns is “O, Little Town of Bethlehem”. It started being one of my favorites as a child because I found the music beautiful. As I have grown, I have started to appreciate the words. At the end of verse 1, the song proclaims “Yet in thy dark streets shineth, The everlasting light, The hopes and fears of all the years, Are met in Thee tonight.”

Micah prophecies 800 years before Jesus’ birth that he will be born in Bethlehem. The world can be a dark, scary place, but because of Jesus, there is light. The hope for a Messiah is found in this baby born in Bethlehem. The fear that we have can be replaced by peace because of God’s Son.

These verses in Micah tell us what type of leader Jesus will be. He will be one who returns people to a right relationship with God. He will feed the flock; he will take care of them. Micah was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel after Israel split from Judah in the south. When Micah was alive, the Assyrian Empire to the north of Israel was expanding and Israel was under threat of becoming controlled by Assyria (which happens in 722 BC). From this point, Israel ceased from being an independent country. The prayer was that a messiah would come to save them from being ruled by a foreign power.

This is what Jesus does for humanity. He saves us from being under the control of earthly powers. He gives us hope that there is something more than this world. He allows us to realize there is One who is better to follow who brings us peace in our lives. Thank God for the peace he gives you in your life. Thank him for sending his son to that little town of Bethlehem.

#### **Thursday, December 1 – Isaiah 11:1-5**

In today’s passage, Isaiah describes the character of the coming Messiah. First, he must come from Jesse, King David’s family. It has been prophesied since 2 Samuel 7 when David was king that his family would rule on the throne forever. Imagine the concern from the people of Israel when Assyria overtook the Northern

Kingdom. Imagine the horror when Isaiah says the Southern Kingdom will also fall. The people wonder “did God lie when he said David’s lineage will rule forever?”

Isaiah quickly eases their concern. No, God didn’t lie. Isaiah tells the people to have hope. In the future, the Messiah will come from Jesse, and he will reign on the throne forever. The spirit of the Lord will rest on him. From this spirit will come wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. Is this not who Jesus is? He was wise when bombarded with questions from the Pharisees and understanding when speaking with the poor and needy. A counselor when the disciples have questions, and a mighty warrior when sacrificing himself on the cross. He was all-knowing, perceiving the thoughts of others, and he had fear of the Lord when he asked for the cup to be passed from him, but humbled himself to say “not my will, but yours be done.”

We can have hope as God’s people because of what God has done. He established his kingdom forever by sending Jesus to the earth. Jesus as God was one who did not judge by eyes and ears but with righteousness. He tore down kingdoms not by brawn but by the words which came from his lips and mouth. God being with us brings us hope.

## **WEEK 2: PEACE**

### **Friday, December 2 – Luke 2:25-33**

If you did not know that Jesus’ presence brings peace, may I present to you as evidence the story of Simeon. This story in Luke tells us that Simeon was righteous and devout. Being described as righteous tells us that Simeon is a man who follows the Law. Being devout tells us that he is a man who has been steadfast and unwavering in his commitment to God. As we are introduced to Simeon, we learn that he is a man who is guided by the Holy Spirit. He has been assured by the Spirit that he will see the Messiah before his death. Simeon is guided by the Spirit

to go to the Temple at this moment so that God's promise can come to fruition. As Simeon holds Jesus, he tells God "I can die in peace because I have seen the Savior."

Immanuel, God with us, gives you and I "peace that surpasses all understanding" as Paul tells the Philippians. Simeon had been waiting his whole life for the restoration of Israel. He'd been waiting his entire life, trusting in God the whole time, for the Messiah to come. Simeon's patience and perseverance pays off with eternal peace.

May we learn from Simeon that God's presence gives us peace. May we have Simeon's patience and perseverance when it feels as if God is not with us. Even though we know that God is always with us, there are days (maybe weeks, months, years) when we feel far away from God. On those days, let us continue to remain righteous and devout, looking forward to the day of Jesus' return to the earth. Let us trust in the Holy Spirit's guidance. Let the knowledge of God's eternal truth and presence give us peace even when it feels like God is not with us. Let us always hold on to the knowledge that God is indeed with us.

### **Saturday-Sunday, December 3-4 – Philippians 4:4-7**

When is a time in your life when God's presence has given you "peace that surpasses all understanding"?

### **Monday, December 5 – Isaiah 11:6-10**

In the initial plans for Disneyland, Walt Disney wanted a ride where people got to see live animals. It would be part-zoo and part-ride. This premise became the Jungle Cruise which is still at Disneyland today. The plans for live animals were quickly scrapped though. The reason was pretty simple. The way that the ride was designed would require different types of animals near each other and let's just

say if you get a lion and a zebra near each other, it's not going to turn out well for the zebra.

We read the first part of this story last week. These last five verses paint the perfect picture of peace. Unlike the world today, predator and prey will roam together; one will not bother the other. Wolf and lamb, calf and lion, cow and bear all peacefully co-exist. What an incredible moment it will be to see this type of peace among the animals.

There is so much violence, fighting, and war in this world. The Messiah brings peace. If all people humbled themselves before Jesus, then humanity would know eternal peace. Races and ethnicities would not think themselves better than one another. Nations would not fight with other nations. Families would live at peace with their neighbors. Marriages would never deteriorate. No one would be hurt or destroyed. What a wonderful world it would be if everyone came to know the peace that the presence of the Lord gives.

## **Tuesday, December 6 – John 14:27**

In somewhat of a farewell address to his disciples before he is arrested and executed, Jesus shares these words to calm their fears about what is to transpire. He reminds his disciples that the reason he was on earth was to bring peace. Most of the disciples and most Jews at that time thought the Messiah would bring peace through a mighty sword against the Roman Empire. We know differently. Peace was given because of Jesus' death. Our relationship with God is one of peace because Jesus substituted himself for us. This is how he gives us peace.

Peace is one of the main characteristics of the coming of the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. The prophet Haggai says "The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former," says the Lord of hosts, 'and in this place I

will give peace,' declares the Lord of hosts" (Haggai 2:9 NASB). The strength and peace of the nation of Israel during the reign of David and Solomon will be overshadowed by a more glorious peace which comes through Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to this earth to give us peace; Jesus died to give us peace. In a world of violence, uncertainty, and anxiety, rest in the Prince of Peace. Do not be troubled; do not be afraid.

### **Wednesday, December 7 – Matthew 28:18-20**

We spend a lot of time, and rightfully so, on the commands that Jesus gives us in the Great Commission. However, don't miss what Jesus tells his disciples and tells us in the last sentence of Matthew: "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

I have to imagine that the disciples were feeling anxious as Jesus was preparing to leave this earth. Over the past three years, being with Jesus just felt right. It was where they were supposed to be. Being with Jesus gave them peace about their life. And now that peace was about to leave. They just had a taste of what that was like when Jesus died. They lost that peace once. The disciples don't want to feel like that again. So, Jesus comforts them with the truth of what is to come. I am not leaving you. I will always be with you. I will not be with you in person, but I will be with in Spirit.

When we are going, making disciples, baptizing people, and teaching them, we are not alone. God has gone before us, and God is with us as we do God's work. Too often, we feel nervous and anxious when we are sent to fulfill the Great Commission. We are worried that we are going to mess it up and someone is not going to become a Christian because of our mistakes. Let me offer encouragement: the only mistake you can make is not going. If you are willing to go, then God will take care of the rest. God is with you. Be at peace as you go and do the work of the Lord.

## **Thursday, December 8 – Luke 1:67-79**

In this prophecy, Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, gives thanks to God for raising up a Savior, and he speaks a message of proclamation concerning John's role in the work of Jesus. John is to prepare the people and guide them to the way of peace.

The way of peace is a path for which the people of Israel had looked for several hundred years. Isaiah 35:8-9 tells of this highway to come when the Messiah comes. It will be for the righteous alone; there will be no threat of violence or danger. No lions or any predator will be found there. And not even fools can stray from the path. John's mission is to point people to this Way. He points people to being on the right track and feeling peace that comes from being with God.

Isn't that our mission too? In a lot of ways, we are like John the Baptist. We aren't the ones who can give salvation; we are the ones who can point people in the right direction. We guide people to the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We let our lights shine so that those who are in darkness can see the way to the highway of holiness. As Christians, we live our life so that others can become Christians too and can feel the peace that we have because of God's presence.

## **WEEK 3: JOY**

### **Friday, December 9 – Luke 2:1-8**

This is good news of great joy! I know the angels don't say that until verse 10, but this is the story of the good news of great joy. The world has been given great joy because Jesus is among us!

What is so fascinating about these eight verses is how mundane and frankly boring they are. Without Luke 1 or the rest of Luke 2, it's a fairly normal story. You have Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem because of a government order.

When they get there, it's time to have a baby, but because they were poor and the town was crowded, they had to sleep in a barn. Not exactly a bestseller at the bookstore.

HOWEVER, this tells us everything about the Jesus we worship. This tells us everything about who God is. He is ultimately selfless. He is completely humble. This basic story should give us unspeakable joy. "For God so loved the world...", He came to this earth and was born in a barn among animals.

The majesty and miracle of Jesus happened before and after the birth. During labor and delivery (verses 1-8), it seems pretty normal for a poor young couple. That's the beauty of Jesus. He is fully-God and fully-man. He's got angels shouting for joy about his birth, but he's also born from a mother like every other human being. Jesus' birth, his presence, is our good news of great joy. Are you excited to celebrate that joy this weekend?

### **Saturday – Sunday, December 10-11 – Zephaniah 3:14-20**

"The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst..." Let's rejoice at the Lord's presence in our lives!

### **Monday, December 12 – Romans 15:7-13**

Within these verses of Romans there is a desire for unity by "receiving one another." The point is that since Christ has received us, we must receive all people as well. Of course, this is difficult work. It goes against our nature not to judge and to receive all people equally. We are naturally suspect of people who are different than we are. It's not right, but it is our human nature.

Romans 15:13, however, gives us hope because it is not our work which forms unity, but it is the work of God inside us. God fills us with joy and peace by the power of the Holy Spirit. We only have joy and peace because the God of hope gives us joy and peace. You are mistaken if you think you can have joy and peace

and unity without God. Yes, maybe you have moments of happiness or joy. Maybe you have times in your life which are peaceful. Maybe there are moments when you get along with others. But the only way to have ultimate joy and peace is through Christ Jesus. In Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, but we receive one another as Christ-followers. His presence is the greatest present. His presence brings joy because Christ eliminates all divisions that humans have made. His presence fills us with joy and peace. Through Christ, we can welcome one another for the glory of God.

### **Tuesday, December 13 – Philippians 4:10-13**

Paul wrote Philippians while he was in prison. I might say that every time we ever have a reading in Philippians. Paul wrote Philippians while he was in prison! And 18 times in 104 verses, Paul mentions joy. That's incredible!

Paul's secret to having joy is found in Philippians 4:13. Philippians 4:13 is not about making the game winning shot or getting the promotion. Philippians 4:13 is about having joy in the midst of suffering. What Paul is saying is that he has learned what it's like to have food and be hungry. He knows what it's like to be taken care of and what it's like to lack necessary supplies. But no matter what his life is like, he chooses to have joy because he knows he has Jesus. And he can do all things through Christ who gives him strength.

God's presence in your life should lead to always having joy. That doesn't mean you are happy about everything going on. It just means you do not let temporary events overshadow your eternal God. Whether things are going your way or not, you have God with you. And God is enough to get you through the difficulties you have. Remember, Paul was in prison when he wrote Philippians. If Paul can have joy while he is hungry and in prison, then you can have joy too in the face of your circumstances.

### **Wednesday, December 14 – Luke 2:36-39**

Anna's life could have gone off the rails. After being married for only seven years, her husband died. At this point, she was a young woman who was alone. Her choices were limited. She seems to go back to her father's household as she is described as being the "daughter of Phanuel." Instead of remarrying, Anna devotes herself to God. In this story, she has been living this way for probably about 60 years, praying day and night in the temple. So, of course she's at the temple when Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are there. And when she sees the baby Jesus, she worships God and has so much joy about the Messiah who has come. She then spreads the joy that she has with others. She is an example for us. Let us spread our joy of knowing the Messiah to others.

I love to read the stories of Simeon and Anna every Christmas. They are both wonderful reminders that there is no such thing as retiring from faith in God. Simeon and Anna are examples for all generations of Christians but particularly senior adults who may feel that God and the church are leaving them behind. I thank God for people like Simeon and Anna who have remained devoted to the Lord late in life. I pray that we can be like these two, excited with joy about being with the Messiah, and sharing that joy with others.

### **Thursday, December 15 – Luke 1:39-45**

In May 2012, LeeAnn and I took a babymoon, even though we did not know what that was at the time. A babymoon is when you are pregnant and take a last trip without a baby. So, on Mother's Day weekend, we took a short trip to Disney World. On Saturday night, we watched the Main Street Electrical Parade at Magic Kingdom. It's full of lights and fun music. As we were watching, Hannah started kicking and moving around. It wasn't the first time LeeAnn felt her move, but it was a memorable moment for our family of almost three to share as Hannah leaped in the womb because of the parade.

John leaped for joy in Elizabeth's womb when he heard Mary. It should not surprise us that even not-yet-born Jesus could have this effect on a not-yet-born John. Jesus tells the Pharisees that if the people did not cry out his name, the rocks would (Luke 19:40). Demons recognized the voice of Jesus (Luke 8:26-31). So of course, a not-yet-fully formed John would know that he was in the presence of the Lord. And even before John was born, this brought him great joy.

This is the joy which all of us should have when we are in the presence of the Lord. When we gather together, we should have inescapable joy that the Lord has gathered with us. When we are alone, we should have continual joy because the Lord God lives inside of us. If an unborn child has joy at the presence of the unborn Messiah, how much more joy should we have with God living inside of us?

#### **WEEK 4: LOVE**

##### **Friday, December 16 – 1 John 4:7-12**

God's presence gives us love. God's presence shows God's love for us. God's presence allows for us to show love to others. God is love.

First John 4:7-12 makes a very controversial statement that I don't know if you'll agree with. If you have love, then you know God. If you do not love, then you do not know God. Does that mean that a non-believer who loves their spouse and children "know God?" What about the believer who is always dour and doesn't seem to love anyone? Are they actually a believer? What is this passage saying?

To answer the first question, what I would say is that a non-believer cannot give unconditional love like a believer can. If you have not experienced the sacrificial, forever love that Jesus gives us, then you have no hope of loving others in that way. What I would say is that a non-believer does not know God and cannot love like God either.

To the second question, appearances can be deceiving. Everyone does not show love in the same way. The person who looks angry, may not be as angry and mean as they seem. And if they are actually angry and mean, I won't judge a person's relationship with the Lord. But God is love, and we should see the fruit of the Spirit in a person's life.

God's presence in the world shows the love that God has for us. It gives us the opportunity to show that love to others as well. As we get closer and closer to Christmas, many people get more anxious and stressed. How can you be the presence of God in someone's life? How can you show God's love to those around you?

**Saturday – Sunday – December 17-18 – John 3:16-17**