

# CHRISTMAS

AT NORTHCLIFFE

*An Advent Devotional: Peace*

# Merry Christmas!

We are so excited that you are continuing to join us on this journey of Advent toward Christmas! Our prayer was that you would be blessed as we explored the hope of Christmas that was wrapped up in Jesus, as we look forward to his second coming. This week, we are going to be focused on the peace Jesus brings at Christmas.

Christmas is often a time when we think about peace, both in our local communities and our global community. However, Jesus came to give us something so much more than a temporary pause in hostilities on community and global scales. Rather, Jesus came to make peace in deeper, more enduring ways.

This Christmas, we are going to explore together the peace that only God can bring us, through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Remember, this is the second of four installments of our Advent Devotional, which aligns with what we are celebrating in our worship services this Christmas. You will find next week's in the lobby next Sunday, as you continue to journey with us towards Christmas.

In the readings below, you will find a focal passage for your daily reading, some thoughts to consider as you think about the passage, and some response questions for you to respond to personally and discuss with your family. If you miss a day during the devotional, don't feel like you have to catch up; pick up on the next date. We hope that this will be an encouragement to you and your family rather than another hoop to jump through in a busy Christmas season.

We will have another installment of the Northcliffe Advent Devotional ready for you on Sunday, December 14. Next week's focus will be on the joy we find in Jesus as we approach Christmas.

# Peace

*For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the increase of his government and of peace  
there will be no end,  
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
to establish it and to uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time forth and forevermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

*Isaiah 9:6-7*

## **Sunday, December 7**

### *To Be Truly at Peace*

As we walk through the Advent season together, our next emphasis is the idea of Peace. When we think about peace, there are a lot of different ideas that shape our understanding of peace. Even in Scripture, peace is a vast and dynamic idea. As we explore this idea together, let's start with an easy question.

**Kids, Students, and Adults:** How would you describe peace to your friends?

Often, when we think of the idea of peace, we think, primarily, of the absence of conflict. When we think about peace agreements, we typically think about the ending of hostilities or war. This alone is a dynamic concept and reality. The absence of conflict is a fabulous gift and can nourish the soul. But the idea of peace is more than just the absence of conflict. In Scripture, peace is communicated with the word "shalom," pronounced "Sha-lome." Shalom is the idea of being whole, complete, and sound in body and mind. It means peace or friendship in our relationships, and, most importantly, peace and friendship with God through a covenant relationship.

When Jesus came to earth at Christmas, he set in motion God's plan to reconcile God and humanity. God would do this through the covenant, or promise, in the gospel. This gospel-fueled and promise-anchored relationship is the most significant way to understand peace in the context of Christmas. Because Jesus made away through his death, burial, and resurrection to have peace with God, it allows us to have peace in every other area of our lives.

**Kid Question:** Do you know a great story about peace? Tell us the story. If you don't remember a story about peace, can you make one up?

**Student Question:** Are there portions of your life where you feel like you need more wholeness or completeness in your life? How do you think peace or "shalom" would help those area(s) in your life?

**Adult Question:** What is the difference between the "absence of conflict" and "wholeness" or "completeness?" Reflecting on your regular pattern of life, would you describe your life as the absence of conflict or wholeness? What steps do you think you could take to pursue wholeness?

Peace doesn't always look the same for everyone. Sometimes we can be at peace in the midst of a rowdy game night with family and friends. Even in the midst of war, there can be moments of peace, not because of our surroundings, but because of the real presence of God in our lives. Peace can be the tranquil moments when we rest in the prominent presence of God in nature, in our home, or relaxing with family around the dinner table. Most of all, though, peace is about resting in Christ for who we are.

**Read Isaiah 9:1-7**

**Kids Question:** What is the coolest part of the passage you just read? What is it like when you are all alone in the dark? Would having a light make being in the dark easier?

**Student Question:** The passage tells us about "the people who walked in darkness." Do you think the passage is talking primarily about physical darkness? What kind of darkness do you think the passage wants us to understand? What is the light that is being referred to here, and how does that bring about peace?

**Adult Question:** Our passage gives us a lot of war and government related metaphors today. How does this passage want us to think about God's rule over his people? How does God's rule bring peace for

us? What can you do to help others (family members, friends, acquaintances, etc) see the peace that God is bringing?

**Sample Prayer:**

God, thank you for being the kind of God who didn't want us to be alone in the darkness. You are a God who stepped into our darkness and sinful world to bring us light, hope, and peace. The peace you give is not a surface-level peace, but a peace that changes and transforms every part of us. Thank you for your peace that we celebrate with the coming of Jesus at Christmas. Amen.

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**Monday, December 8**

*Jesus is the Ultimate Peace Maker*

Jesus was more than just the right piece fitting in the right place to give us peace at Christmas. Jesus actively makes peace for us with God, and in making peace with God for us, gives us the capacity to be at peace in every avenue of our lives. Remember that peace, real peace, is more than the absence of conflict; it is a condition of our lives in which we are whole, complete, and can seek to bring an end to conflict in our lives and the lives of those around us. Jesus was the perfect model of one who was at peace and was pursuing peace for the sake of others.

**Read Ephesians 2:13-18**

In this passage, we learn that humanity was separated from God through our sin, but that Jesus brought us near to God through his death on the cross, specifically the shedding of his blood. Even as believers, it can be easy to forget that our sin separated us from God and that our sin still damages our connection to him. However, we notice that through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, we have been given the gift of peace.

**Kid Questions:** How did Jesus make peace for us with God? What do you think it feels like to be at peace? Do you think being at peace can be fun?

**Student Questions:** Peace in a chaotic world can be hard to find. What areas of your life need peace the most? How does Jesus help you find peace? Our passage talks about Jesus bringing down the "dividing wall of hostility." How did Jesus break down the wall of hostility? How do you think that brings you peace?

**Adult Questions:** As adults, we get very comfortable with the idea that when we work hard, we accomplish things. What does it mean that peace was made for us when we couldn't do it ourselves? How should we respond to the peace that Jesus made for us? The passage tells us that Jesus came and preached peace to those who were far off (that means us). How can we be part of telling the story of God's peace-making on our behalf?

The reality is that sin not only brought hostility between God and us, but it also plays havoc with who we are as people. You see, we were made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27), meaning that every corner of our lives was delightfully created to reflect his nature, character, and glory, each in our own unique way. This is why we celebrate the peace we find at the coming of Jesus on Christmas. Jesus came to end the hostility we created with our sin and to make us whole. Peace, real peace, that touches every part of our lives, every circumstance that we face, can be transformed with the peace we find in Jesus.

**Sample Prayer:**

God, there is nothing deceitful in you. You are honest with us at every turn. You remind us that we needed to be saved from the sins we commit and that you have already rescued us from those sins when we believe in Jesus as our savior and lord. Thank you for bringing down the dividing wall of hostility through your loving self-sacrifice that brought us peace. Amen.

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**Tuesday, December 9**

*Peace is Ultimately About Trust*

It is easy to think of peace as something we experience as an internal condition. There is a lot to that reality. When we experience the peace and wholeness that the bible describes as shalom, we are experiencing something that is internal to us. We are experiencing something that calms and stills our hearts, that sets aside our anxieties, and gives us a sense of contentment. The reason that our peace is so satisfying is that the source of our peace is not us, but the ability to trust God for all of our concerns, cares, worries, and more. The Christmas story is filled with moments of trust, but one of the most poignant was Joseph, who risked his reputation, his family, and potentially his life by following God's plan.

**Read Matthew 1:18-25**

Joseph had a plan; he was headed in a very normal direction, one that would lead him to be relatively successful. He had worked hard, become a carpenter, and created his own business. In the middle of this very normal plan, Joseph had to face some gigantic challenges, changes, and distractions. Fortunately, God sends Joseph an angel to help him navigate everything coming his way.

**Kid Questions:** What is a normal day like for you? How does it feel when the plan doesn't work, and you have to do things differently? What do you do if your regular schedule suddenly becomes different?

**Student Questions:** We have painted a picture of Joseph doing the right things to reach a comfortable place in his life, including marrying Mary. What are some of the plans you have put your trust in to get you to a space where you can achieve what you want? How do you think you would respond if someone you trusted betrayed you, and

your plan for your life went sideways? How would you react if an angel told you to do the opposite of what everyone else said that you should do? Who do you trust and why? What can you do now to start building a pattern of trusting God, so that when something big comes up in your life, you are prepared to trust him the way Mary and Joseph do?

**Adult Questions:** We get to look at Joseph's situation from both sides of the conversation. All the evidence suggests Mary betrayed Joseph, but we also know that God is working a miracle in Mary. How would you respond if you were in Joseph's shoes? Or Mary's? What does it look like to trust God in these circumstances?

**Bonus Parent Question:** If you were Joseph's parents, how would you respond to what Joseph has told you? Do you trust the story that Joseph has given you?

Despite everything that was happening to Joseph, he decided to trust the angel's message from God, took Mary as his wife, and proceeded to Bethlehem to be counted in the Roman census. There would be some big challenges for Joseph and his family, but he was trusting God for his future and the future of his family. Joseph had peace regarding his future, his family's future, and even peace in the reality that Jesus would be Immanuel, God with us.

God's presence with us makes us whole. His presence brings peace even in the middle of the most difficult, trying, and overwhelming times. Joseph's willingness to trust God shows that peace is ultimately about trusting God to be who he is and to do all he has promised.

**Sample Prayer:**

God, we need a peace that only comes from you. We can't manufacture or make peace for ourselves, but by trusting in you and following your direction, leading and will, we can have peace that transcends the circumstances of our daily lives. Help us this Christmas

to find a peace that exceeds our circumstances by trusting in you in every circumstance. Amen.

## **Wednesday, December 10**

### *Peace Extends beyond our Circumstances*

As pastors at Northcliffe, we have heard, and maybe even given, more sermons that call us to look beyond our circumstances than one might imagine. Our circumstances can be difficult to look past because they are right in front of us, demanding our time, energy, effort, attention, resources, and often demanding more of us than we want to give. Our circumstances color how we think about each day, the things we have to accomplish, and how we will relate to the people around us. Sometimes our circumstances distract us from what's most important or lead us to make poor decisions.

**Kids Question:** When we talk about circumstances, we mean the things that are happening in our lives. They can be good, they can be bad, or they can be just what is happening at the moment. What are some of the circumstances in your life? Would you say they are good circumstances, bad circumstances, or just what is happening today?

**Student Questions:** For many students, what is happening "right now" is the only thing that matters. How can you balance being present in the moment with focusing on the future promise of God's plan for your life? What concerns you about trading the present for the future? How can trusting in the future give you peace in the present?

**Adult Questions:** Every day, we are making decisions based on our circumstances. Our choices will affect our spouses, children, extended

families, friends, jobs, and our lives in the church. As a follower of Jesus, how do you make choices from a perspective of peace (wholeness/completeness) rather than satisfying your regular circumstances? How can the choices you make point the people around you towards peace?

### **Philippians 4:4-9**

This passage reminds us that we have the capacity to rejoice in all circumstances because the Lord is near. We can be free from anxiety by placing our sense of peace in Jesus' hands through prayer and supplication. We pray with thanksgiving because God is faithful in all his actions and speaks truth to us in his word. The culmination of these things is that peace will abound in us. As we have already seen, God has made a way for us to have peace with him, and because of our peace in him, we can have peace in the world. It isn't always easy to pray and let go of the circumstances. Sometimes they weigh on us, but we know God is faithful.

One way we know that God is faithful is that, when Adam and Eve sinned, he promised that he would one day make a way for people to have peace in him (Genesis 3:15-17). That promise was illustrated, reiterated, and modeled throughout the Old Testament, and then, at the birth of Jesus, that promise was made flesh and blood. Peace, perfect peace from a perfect peace maker, was made real. It is a peace that transcends our circumstances, anxieties, and fears.

As you step into a time of prayer for this devotional pause for a moment and list the circumstances in your life that may make you feel overwhelmed, cause you anxiety, or distract you from the peace God has created for you.

### **Sample Prayer:**

God, we admit that it can be easy to let our regular circumstances distract us from the peace that you have given us in Jesus. Help our hearts and minds to rest regularly in your peace. We ask that you help us with the things that cause our hearts to be weary, anxious, afraid, or distract us from your peace. We know that you are faithful, because on Christmas we celebrate the reality that you kept your promise of salvation, redemption, and peace in Jesus. Amen.

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## **Thursday, December 11**

### *What Does it Mean to Value Peace?*

Talking about how we value something is always a little bit tricky. Mainly because when we say we value something, or something is a value, we think about how we feel about that thing we say is a value.

**Warm-up Question for Everyone:** What is a value, belief, or feeling that you think is important? How do you know it is important to you?

When we think about the peace that Jesus brings at Christmas, peace is more than how we feel. We have already considered that peace is a condition that impacts every corner of who we are as people, because it is grounded in our relationship with God. Peace extends beyond how we perceive it to how we live in light of it. Peace is a relief from anxiety because God is trustworthy to care for us and meet our deepest needs; by trusting in him, we find relief from all of our anxieties. Peace leads to the ending of hostilities because God is at work in us to help us become the kind of people who build relationships that pursue peace in love. We are called to be ambassadors of peace, heralds and proclaimers of peace with a ministry of reconciliation.

That paragraph might have been a bit much, but we hope you see the point we were trying to make. We know something is valuable or important to us when we are willing to take action based on it. In this case, peace is a value not just because we feel it, but because it is

anchored in God and his gospel; we change the way we think and act based on it, we are called to share the peace that we have been given, and we serve as ambassadors of peace wherever we go.

**Kid Questions:** *Parents, this is a pretty abstract concept: we are trying to connect the value of peace to the actions kids can take. Depending on your kids' ages, you may need to help them put all the ideas together so they can participate in this part of the conversation.* What is something super important for you to do? What happens when you don't do it? What happens when you do it?

**Student Questions:** Words are important, and they have meaning, but what do you think when a person says one thing and does another? Why do you think everyone sees being a hypocrite as a negative thing? If we say we have peace, or can have peace, but aren't doing anything about it, what does that make us?

**Adult Questions:** We have tried to build the bridge between what we think is valuable and how we act, showing us what we value. For example, if you are a parent, you usually try to make sure your kids get their schoolwork done. Why, because education is important. How might our behavior, habits, or leisure time change if peace were truly important to us? *\*\*Remember, peace in this context is the sense of wholeness or completeness based primarily on our relationship with God\*\**

### **Read Romans 14:13-18**

In this passage, we see the church trying to navigate divisions, but they are encouraged to pursue peace. God has made peace in their hearts through Jesus, and now they have to figure out how to live out peace in their community.

**Questions for all:** How do you live in peace with others, even when they disagree with you?

**Sample Prayer:**

God, we know that holding something valuable and exercising what we have as valuable are two very different things. We pray that you will help us hold peace as deeply valuable and life-changing for us, and that you will also allow us to exercise that peace in our relationships with those around us. We know that you are the source of Peace, so we seek your help in being a people of peace. Amen.

**Friday, December 12**

Peace Ambassadors: Extending Peace to Others

One of the most amazing things about Christmas is that it is a story of people coming to find peace, only to go out and share the peace they have received with others; the shepherds are confronted with an angelic choir, the wisemen follow a star, and John the Baptist was born to be the greatest of heralds of the gospel. Every person who comes into contact with Jesus begins telling the story of good news and peace to everyone they meet. It is easy to experience peace with God and be consumed by the goodness of that moment. To be so happy and content in the presence of God that we forget that peace is more than something we experience, it is a calling to help others receive that same peace we have been given.

**Kid Questions:** Why do you think the shepherds and wise men were so excited to tell people about meeting Jesus? If you were with the shepherds or the wise men, would you have wanted to tell people about Jesus's birth?

**Student Questions:** What do you think made the shepherds and wise men so ready and excited to tell people about seeing a baby in a manger? What would it have taken for you to be that excited about meeting Jesus? Knowing what you do today about Jesus, are you excited about telling others about Jesus? Why, or why not?

**Adult Questions:** It is amazingly easy for us to come up with reasons we can't, don't, or won't share the story of Jesus with people around

us. What are the reasons we can, will, or should share the story of Jesus with the people around us? Why do you think it is easier for us to choose not to share Jesus's story than it is for us to share Jesus's story?

## **Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21**

The idea of an ambassador is one who speaks on behalf of the person who sent them, with the authority of the person who sent them. There are two huge ideas in our passage that shape how we think about our lives as followers of Jesus. God calls us ambassadors for Christ, entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation. Peace is the product primarily of the reality that God has made a way for us to have peace with him, and in doing so, he gave us the capacity to have peace with those around us. However, he didn't stop there. God also calls us to be the kind of people who actively seek to help others find the same peace that has been given to us.

We are also reminded in Matthew 5:9 that, "blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God." Jesus was reminding us that if we are the kind of people who help others find peace, and make peace, then we will be the kind of people who reflect the nature and character of God. Said another way, we will truly be his children. The peace we see at Christmas is the beginning of a plan that culminates in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. The manger was always intended to be the precursor to the cross. The cross is designed to form a people who would be ambassadors, heralds, and proclaimers of the peace of God that comes from his presence with his people.

Before you step into a time of prayer, make a list of people for whom you can be an ambassador of God's peace. Pray for an opportunity to share the peace of Jesus we celebrate at Christmas.

### **Sample Prayer:**

God, we are so grateful for the way that you bring peace into our lives. We are also appreciative that you have made us not passive consumers of peace, but have called us to be active ambassadors for the gift of peace that you have worked in our lives. This week, we ask that you give us opportunities to serve as the ambassadors of your peace in the relationships you have given us.

### **Saturday, December 13**

#### *Peace at the End of Life*

**Special Note to Parents:** *If you have younger kids, this may not be a devotional you want to share with them. We have sought to address the issues of peace and death carefully, kindly, and respectfully for everyone who might read this devotional, but we are also aware that these issues can cause some challenging feelings.*

For many of us, this is maybe the most challenging of the devotionals on peace. Largely, because when we start thinking about Christmas, "end of life" issues don't immediately jump to mind. However, as followers of Jesus approach the end of life, we become not less peaceful but more peaceful. We have the opportunity to have a greater trust in Jesus, not less. Our lives become an even more powerful testimony to the peace found in Jesus for those who struggle with the end of this life.

**Kid Questions:** What is the hardest thing for you to talk about? What makes talking about that hard? Do you think it is important to talk about hard things? What makes you believe that?

**Student Questions:** Students, teenagers, and folks in their 20s and 30s don't often think about end-of-life issues until something tragic happens. Why do you think that might be true? How do you think peace might change the way we think about death? What is one thing that peace would personally change the way you think about your life and eventual death?

**Adult Questions:** How do you think peace might change how you handle end-of-life issues? How do you think peace would change how you handle the end of your mortal life before you enter into eternal life? Why do you think that, even followers of Jesus, approach the end of life with such anxiety? How could the passing of a believer be an encouragement to those who outlive them?

This devotional is designed as an encouragement. The peace we have in Christ transcends all of our earthly circumstances, without exception. Our peace is anchored in the eternal promises, presence, and character of God. One person, whom we have already met in a previous devotional, had his life book ended by meeting the infant Jesus.

### **Read Luke 2:25-32**

In this passage, we meet Simeon, a devout man of God who had been told he would see the Messiah who would bring peace to a world that so desperately needed it.

One of the most powerful lines in Simeon's story is below.

*"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word;  
For my eyes have seen your salvation  
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel."*

In this brief poetic proclamation, Simeon tells us something so significant, but it is easy to miss. Simeon says, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace." Simeon had become a fixture at the temple; he was waiting for the Lord's salvation to come, and now he had seen the messiah, Jesus, with his own eyes.

**Kids Questions:** Why do you think Simeon waited so long at the temple to see Jesus?

**Student Questions:** How hard would it be for you to wait day by day, knowing something is coming but not knowing what it would look like or when it would arrive? How would you describe Simeon's reaction to seeing Jesus?

**Adult Questions:** More than most students and kids, as adults, we have a greater understanding of death because we may have experienced that loss more than younger generations. Simeon believed that because he had seen the Messiah, he would be able to depart in peace. How do you think the reality of a confident peace helps those who are passing away? How do you think that confidence in peace helps those of us who outlive our loved ones who pass away?

When sin entered the world, death became part of what we expect as human beings. However, how we approach the end of our mortal lives is greatly affected by the peace we have with God. Like Simeon, if we have trusted in the Lord, we may depart in Peace.

There is no greater peace than trusting in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We have all sinned and failed to live up to the standards that God has for his creation. God knew that we couldn't meet those standards on our own, so he made a way for us to have peace with him by trusting in Jesus. The peace that comes from trusting in Jesus is a life-altering, circumstance-overcoming peace grounded in the person and work of Jesus. Simeon was looking for this exact moment when he could meet

the Messiah, that his peace might be made complete. Not because he had waited patiently, or searched diligently, but because he had seen Jesus.

**Sample Prayer:**

God, the end of our life can be scary and unknown. However, even though those things are true, we know that we can trust you with our lives and our deaths. We know that our peace will always be in you. God help us to celebrate the peace that comes from you in every avenue of our lives. We know that nothing is so far from you that your peace can't touch and embrace it. Help us to trust you more each day so that we will have peace in every aspect of our lives.



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