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newsletter

"Let him who is without sin cast the First Stone"
And Jesus also said, "Go and sin no more." – John 8

MINISTRIES

A Thrill of Hope

We return to Advent to remember the reasons for our expectant hope. At Christ's first coming, He emptied Himself of His rightful, enthroned equality. Instead, He clothed Himself in humble servitude and chose to dwell in and among humanity. I was reminded that His birth fulfilled God's great promise to save mankind from their sins. He was the answer to their long, expectant hope.

Though He came as a baby, He didn't remain an infant forever. He grew in wisdom and stature, living as a man among mankind. He endured hardship, was tempted yet did not sin, died, and rose again. He became the sacrificed Lamb-King. I am stunned and awed to consider Jesus Christ, who was slain before the foundation of the world! (Revelation 13:8).

Now, He has risen and ascended, embodying the fulfillment of what generations longed for. The glorious, triumphant King has shed His cloth-swaddled infancy and is now glorified, radiant, and powerful.

In my Gospel readings, I was drawn to Luke 21, where Jesus counseled His disciples about the challenges to come. He described two states of expectation:

"There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and on the earth dismay among the nations, in perplexity . . . , men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world . . . Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:25–28).

At the time, Jesus' disciples already lived under Roman oppression, and soon they would face Nero's brutal reign, marked by persecution of the faithful. Jesus painted a picture of a world burdened by fear, dismay, and uncertainty. Yet He also offered a different posture: to stand tall, lift up our heads, and find hope, knowing that our redemption is near.

Expectation is at the very heart of hope. For hope to exist, it must be fixed on something—a clear object of desire. Hope arises from two sources.

First, it stems from our most vulnerable emotions. To hope, we must be able to want or desire, which makes us acutely aware of the possibility of disappointment. This vulnerability is what makes hope feel so fragile.



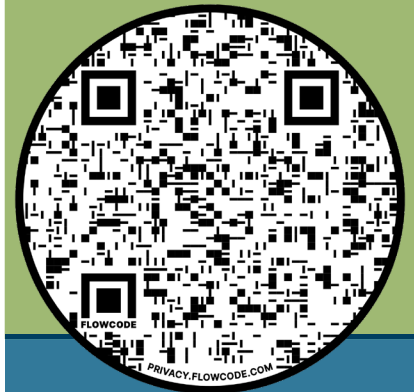
Laura Leigh Stanlake,
Ministry
Director

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Second, hope is rooted in belief. What we believe—and why—invites hope to take shape. As Romans 8:22–25 reminds us:

“For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.”



True hope is unseen. We long for what is not yet here. This fragility of hope is also why misplaced expectations can produce dread and fear. Even as we groan and wait, we must fix our hope on what is steadfast.

Into this groaning creation, our Savior came. He embodies the fulfillment of our longings. As the prophet Haggai

foretold, *“The desire of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts”* (Haggai 2:7 KJV).

Where Romans says that hope is unseen, it also reminds us that *“with perseverance we wait eagerly for it”* (8:25 NASB95). That is the nature of want or desire. That perseverance comes from the driving expectation placed in God’s fulfillment. Puritan pastor Richard Sibbes wrote about where we place that expectant hope when he said, *“Disappointment always follows when we mistakenly expect fulfillment from things that cannot truly provide it.”* But, how human is it that we are disappointed in a

child, a friend, a plan, or ourselves? I draw so much strength in my hope from this passage, which I have committed to memory.

Lamentations 3:21-26 (NASB95)

²¹This I recall to my mind,

Therefore I have hope.

²²The LORD’S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,

For His compassions never fail.

²³They are new every morning;

Great is Your faithfulness.

²⁴“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,

“Therefore I have hope in Him.”

²⁵The LORD is good to those who wait for Him,

To the person who seeks Him.

²⁶It is good that he waits silently

For the salvation of the LORD.

Filling my mind with the hope of Jesus fulfilling my deepest desires is becoming the focus of my heart—but it’s a fight. This hope isn’t mere optimism or positive thinking; it’s a deliberate redirection to Him.

When I allow my thoughts to dwell on His answers, His presence, and His promises, my fragile soul opens to the thrill of true hope. As Romans 15:13 says, *“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.”*

Come, Lord Jesus!

I leave you with these lines from *“O Holy Night”*:

*“Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees!”*

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Holiday Triggers: Acknowledging and Navigating Emotional Struggles in Hope



**Jim
Farrington,**
Men’s
Minister

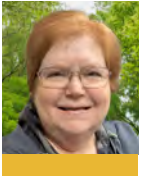
The holiday season, from Thanksgiving to Christmas, can feel like navigating a minefield, especially when relationships with family or friends are strained. Challenges arise instead of the joyous celebrations we hope for—giving thanks, honoring our Savior’s birth, and sharing warm moments. Whether it’s a loved one newly embracing an LGBTQIA+ identity, personal struggles amplified by the season, or the tension between family members who either show

unwavering support or harsh condemnation, these dynamics can make the holidays feel overwhelming and even unapproachable.

For those wrestling with sexual and relational brokenness, the holidays can feel like an emotional minefield, tempting them to retreat into obscurity and unhealthy coping mechanisms. Others may face the inevitability of encountering a family

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Parents, Prodigals, and Holidays



Bronwyn Welch,
Women's
Minister -
Intern

Whether we have been blocked by our prodigal, or continue to have a relationship, the holidays hold unique, often painful, even unexpected challenges that threaten to rob us of our joy for the holidays. Some are overcome by grief. Remembering God's faithfulness and sovereignty has the power and help to transform our perspective and empower us as we navigate the painful part of the holidays.

Isaiah 46:9 reminds us of God's unmatched authority and steadfast work throughout history, encouraging us to place our trust in Him when it says, "Remember the things I have done in the past. For I alone am God! I am God, and there is none like me." This declaration from Nehemiah 8:10 can also help, "The joy of the Lord is my strength." We discover a practical application here. By intentionally reflecting on God's past works—His provision, guidance, and deliverance—we cultivate gratitude and shift our focus from life's challenges to His greatness. This remembrance encourages us and strengthens us, anchors us in His joy, and renews our inner resilience.

God commanded days of remembrance. For example, in Exodus they were commanded, "On the seventh day you must explain to your children, 'I am celebrating what the Lord did for me when I left Egypt.' This annual festival will be a visible sign to you, like a mark branded on your hand or your forehead. Let it remind you always to recite this teaching of the Lord: 'With a strong hand, the Lord rescued you from Egypt.' So observe the decree of this festival at the appointed time each year" (13:8-10). We can

find joy in how the Lord has rescued us from sin. We can have hope because of this, and there is hope also for our prodigal. Without what God has done to rescue us, neither one of us would have hope. God's Word is rich with His focus and how we can change our focus and agree with His for the holidays. God is very sensitive, aware, and caring of our grief. He comes close to us in our need and invites us to be centered on His care for us.

We can see his care in the following verses:

"He heals the brokenhearted. He bandages their wounds" (Psalm 147:3).

"Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters. I will be with thee; and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (Isaiah 43:1^b-2).

"My soul melts from heaviness; Strengthen me according to your word" (Psalm 119:28).

"Answer me when I pray to you, my God who does what is right. Lift the load that I carry. Be kind to me and hear my prayer" (Psalm 4:1).

"Why am I so sad? Why am I so upset? I should put my hope in God. I should keep praising him, My Savior and my God" (Psalm 42:5).

"Although the fig tree shall not blossom neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive tree shall fail and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall

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From Loneliness to Abiding



Joseph Thiessen,
Office
Admin

When reflecting on how to prepare for lonely days—whether it's a long weekend, a holiday, or an afternoon after church—my mind races in a thousand directions, considering all the reasons why loneliness is such a challenging emotion.

Wisdom (and practical advice) offers many ideas and resources on how to occupy our minds, time, and energy. It would be wise to compile a list of solutions in advance—before sadness deepens into self-pity or depression.

As a 55-year-old single man whose parents have recently passed and whose closest connections are now married and starting families, I find that my

resourcefulness must be more targeted than ever. This stands in contrast to my teenage years through my late thirties, when I had a wealth of single friends readily available for hangouts, camping trips, and other activities.

How we envision and experience Jesus can have either a net-negative or net-positive effect on our relational stability as we mature.

For instance,

if I don't challenge my belief that God's rules are arbitrary, then as I mature, I will never consider that He

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member who triggers intense emotions, stirring up stress, anxiety, or anger. It's common to seek escape through sexual sin, addictions, or other numbing behaviors, yet these struggles often coexist with deeper emotions like loneliness, grief, sorrow, or rage. Loss in its many forms can make the holidays a deeply challenging and even dreaded season.



Exploring how we navigate unwanted or challenging situations that may trigger emotional or behavioral responses can be both insightful and transformative. By understanding our reactions, we can align ourselves more closely with God's truth and strength during times of difficulty. As I reflected on this, the phrase "Know Thyself" came to mind. Immediately, it underscored the importance of self-awareness in recognizing how our responses can serve as steps toward standing before and with God in any trial.

This phrase reminded me of a scriptural equivalent. Psalm 139:23-24 reads,

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there is any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way."

It reflects how God knows our hearts and guides us.

This passage nails it, I think. It's an invitation to look to God to ask this very question, which I believe is the best route to take for a less negative internal response to the holidays.

Over the years, I have grown more aware of the importance of preparing my heart for the challenges daily life may bring. Now, I encourage others to do the same. Singing about 'peace on earth and goodwill' is uplifting, but for those who dread this season, those words can sometimes feel hollow.

I'm not suggesting any kind of formula or implying that if you follow it, all the things you dread will magically disappear. However, I do believe that God's Word holds profound counsel for those facing troubling times. Jesus also assured us in John 16:33: "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

I firmly believe that when we release to Jesus the things that are out of our control or what seem to be out of our control, we invite Him to speak, strengthen us, and move in our lives. I'm reminded of Philippians 4:8: "Finally brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things."

Scripturally speaking, we have the freedom to choose where we place our focus, and having a plan can make a significant difference—especially when faced with the unexpected during this time of year. If we plan for the possibility of a challenge, we can thoughtfully decide how we will minimize or manage that interaction. Creating a strategy to address potential difficulties is far more effective than leaving everything to chance. We can confidently bring our prayers and concerns before the Lord, trusting that He will provide exactly what we need in all circumstances. My prayer is that you all have a blessed Christmas and Happy New Year in Jesus.

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be cut off from the fold and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hind's feet, and He will make me to walk upon mine high places" (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

"The Lord is my strength and my shield. My heart trusted in Him, and I am helped. Therefore my heart greatly rejoices, and with my song I will praise Him" (Psalm 28:7).

"You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book? Then my enemy will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that **God is for me**" (Psalm 56:8-9).

As a little 5-year-old boy once said, after listening to his family and extended family express worry and grief, "Don't forget, God is here to help!" These verses point to that truth. They point us to the God of hope. Often we can find comfort, joy, and celebration even in struggle by focusing on who God is and what He has done.

Creating space to remember and celebrate His faithfulness can be life-giving and transformative. Here are some ways to do so:

Daily Gratitude Journaling: Take a few minutes each day to write down moments where you've seen God's faithfulness. Even small blessings can help you stay grounded in His care.

Intentional Prayer

Time: Dedicate a quiet time to reflect on His goodness. Speak to God about your joys and struggles and invite Him into every part of your life.

Music and Worship:

Listening to hymns or songs that highlight God's promises can shift your focus from worries to worship. The music of the season, with its rich messages of hope and redemption, is especially powerful.

Scripture Reflection: Spend time reading verses that remind you of His unchanging nature. Memorize a few that resonate with your current season of life.

Community Encouragement: Share testimonies of God's faithfulness with others or listen to theirs. This shared experience can be uplifting and help refocus your perspective.

In this season, as you reflect on His faithfulness, may you find renewed hope and peace. What specific ways have you experienced His presence recently?



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is relational and desires to help me. I will be more prone to cynicism;

if I refuse to forgive someone, as I mature, I will become bitter and unable to open up and trust again; however,

if I foster curiosity about how my interplay of good and bad relationships affected me and process these fairly well, then as I mature, I will be open, warm, and ready for relationship.

My challenge for anyone who struggles with loneliness is to remember the importance of fostering your relationship with Jesus. As I've studied Attachment Theory, I've come across the idea that all theology is about attachment. To abide in the Vine, means we attach to Jesus. Initially, your feelings of loneliness may increase, but a dive into the topic of His affection for us will have long-term, net-positive effect in relationship to Him, our primary love relationship. How we foster this directly impacts anyone else we encounter, be that a friend, a person at the mall, or even your enemy.

Consider investing time to absorb content from books, blogs, podcasts, and/or videos on topics regarding God's love for us, as witnessed in these verses:

Psalm 18:19 states, "He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me." This verse beautifully encapsulates the idea that divine rescue is rooted in love and delight.

2 Samuel 22:20 echoes this sentiment, affirming that God saves those who are in distress because of His affection for them.

Zephaniah 3:17: "The Lord your God is in your midst... he will rejoice over you with gladness"

Psalm 149:4: "He takes delight in his people, especially those who are afflicted"

The **Song of Solomon**, when read as an allegory, yields many insights on the interplay of love between God and His creation.

Or consider consuming content in general that fosters connection, communion or a better understanding on how God created us. Some which have been helpful to me:

Sacred Companions by David G. Benner

Introverts in the Church by Adam S. McHugh

Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals our Way to Healing by Jay Stringer

Strength in Weakness by Andrew Comiskey

Our time spent reading scripture, digging through to find morsels of delightful goodness, helps foster what scripture calls "abiding in the vine." Another way to put it is that this process is just like tilling the soil of our hearts so that the good things we are learning about can grow.

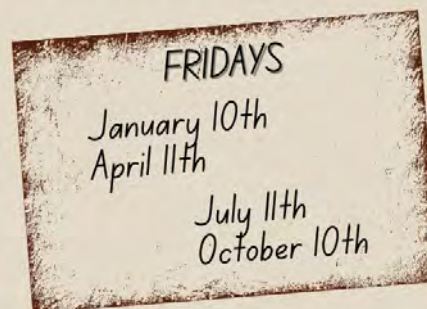


It would be wise to cultivate a daily rhythm of time in the Word of God in ways that foster connection. One cannot expect this kind of connection to be instantly gratifying. No, we cultivate this connection over time, building our resource of indwelling love to sustain us as we go.

I know too well the battle of getting into Bible reading. Rather than forcing myself, I rarely did it. I was recently introduced to Tara-Leigh Cobble's The Bible Recap. I subscribed to this reading plan through the YouVersion Bible app. Rather than deal with my eye-roll emotions of having to read through boring, pasty passages, I listen to the scriptures while I shower. Then later in the day I listen to or watch the recap video. I've kicked my perfectionistic, legalistic leanings out the door, so there's been room to miss a day or two. I'm happy to announce that I've enjoyed over 100 days of God's delightfully enjoyable scripture! I am building resources for comforting my lonely heart by abiding in the vine.

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SCOTUS and Transgender Transition Laws

2024/12/5 – Yesterday, SCOTUS finished hearing oral arguments for United States v. Skrmetti, which challenges the State of Tennessee's ban on gender transitioning for minors. The court will be considering this over the next couple of months. This would be expected to be a first challenge since these decisions were tossed back to the states recently. Please pray regularly and purposefully for the justices as they deliberate and prepare their opinions. Pray for God's wisdom and direction for them. Pray that the

clarity of God's design would supersede any confusion by the Enemy to distort male and femaleness. (Gen 1:27) That it would be evident that the Tennessee law protecting minors from surgery and procedures that will ultimately destroy their reproductive systems DOES NOT VIOLATE the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution. That it would be evident that there is NOT a substantive due process right to what is referred to as "sex change" surgeries, drugs, or procedures.

Dear Heavenly Father, we lift up the nine justices of the Supreme Court to You in the upcoming oral arguments in the critical transgender case U.S. v. Skrmetti. We pray that they would seek Your wisdom and truth in this case and decide in accordance with Your righteousness and justice. In Jesus name, Amen.

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Administrator's Corner



**Joseph
Thiessen,**
Office
Admin

Since my first days in this ministry, I've managed people's information in 4 separate pieces of software. Because they each store items differently, combining these sources for analysis was nearly impossible.

We've discovered an all-in-one solution and are now nearly 95% ready to implement our new tool. Over the summer, I dedicated countless hours to combining and refining data for over 4,000 contacts. This includes individuals like you, whose connection with our organization may be through our newsletter, whether in print or email. Not only will having this management solution simplify my work, but our staff will have more ready and reliable access to the information they need for their contacts and for requests for help that we receive every week.

We are a frugal ministry, carefully stewarding all our resources, but the impact of inflation has touched us as well.

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