



*bless the*  
**Advent We**  
*Actually Have*

A DAILY DEVOTIONAL FOR  
THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

By Kate Bowler and The Everything Happens Project

WEEK 3

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17  
- SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22

# Bless this *Joy-Filled* Advent



“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.”

—FATHER PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

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\* <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

# Uninvited Joy

*When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

—LUKE 1:41-45 (NRSV)

I've borrowed categories from my friend Luke Bretherton—who happens to also be a theologian (it's very helpful to know a few of those). Like what he calls "tragic time"—that experience of time when things come undone and whatever has happened is world-altering. Tragic time feels almost slippery. Like you cannot believe the world is still spinning because yours has stopped. And yet, somehow, experiences of joy can still catch you off guard.

Joy is sneaky in that way. It doesn't discriminate between tragic time and ordinary time. It's not a joy we can "choose" because that would often mean ignoring the reality of our heartbreak or circumstances. It just happens. Somehow. Some way. Showing up uninvited even in the most unlikely of situations.

The Gospel of Luke introduces us to Elizabeth who became pregnant after many, many years of infertility, well into her old age. Her husband, Zechariah, even reacted in utter disbelief when the angel foretold the birth of the child they had long-ago given up

hope for. When Elizabeth was six months along, she was visited by her beloved cousin, Mary—who too had just learned of her own miraculous pregnancy. Elizabeth's unborn baby leapt with joy at the sound of Mary's voice. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, rejoiced at the great gift Mary carried. Elizabeth was likely surprised by the visit of her cousin (it is not like she could text when she was on her way) and even more surprised by her showing up unmarried and pregnant. But those circumstances were not the cause of the joy that Elizabeth and her soon-to-be baby boy felt at her arrival. Their reaction was caused by the presence of God, of that new life that was growing inside of Mary—despite the complicated situation that surrounded her pregnancy. Both women were experiencing the seemingly-impossible. They could have both responded in disbelief, in unhope, but instead were filled with the surprising presence of joy.

This story reminds us that joy is not the absence of fear, or disbelief, or uncertainty, or sorrow. In fact, joy exists despite all the reasons why it shouldn't.

In the week ahead, we will devote ourselves to learning more about how to recognize the gift of joy found in the presence of God. Regardless of what is happening in our lives, joy can and does break in. Joy is

the sign and reminder that God is still working, still loving, still fulfilling God's promises. So let's put ourselves in the path of joy this week, shall we?

## PRACTICING ADVENT TOGETHER

Gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime your grandkids.

- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read the story of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Mary in **Luke chapter 1** aloud. Pay attention to how many times **JOY** is mentioned.
- Light the three purple candles (but sometimes the joy candle is pink!) and read this blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 218) as a prayer:

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Blessed are we who wait with bated breath,  
who wait for something new to be born  
—for new hope or new joy or new life.

Blessed are we  
whose patience grows thinner by the day.  
We who are tired of the world as it is  
—in all of its heartache and loss and hopelessness.  
We who want more.  
More hope. More joy. More life.

Blessed are we who sit here,  
waiting  
at the still point between desire and expectation.  
We who are making room for more of you,  
oh God, this Christmas.

Surprise us with joy in the midst of the mundane,  
abundance in the midst of so much scarcity,  
presence in the midst of the Christmas chaos.

*“May the God of hope fill you  
with all joy and peace as you trust in him,  
so that you may overflow with hope  
by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

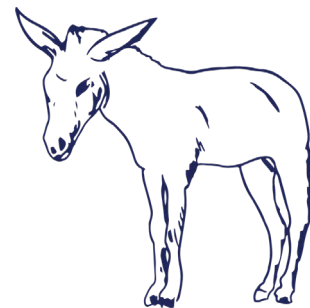
—Romans 15:13 (NIV)

We have quieted our souls to listen,  
to wait for you, oh God,  
for your Word-Made-Flesh is life to us.

Amen.

**DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:**

1. Talk about a time when you have felt filled with joy. What were you doing? What did it feel like? Is there any common thread between everyone's experiences of joy?
2. Have you ever been surprised by the presence of God or a moment of joy or abundance during a particular season of tragic time?
3. How can you be a source of joy to others this week? Could you go caroling to your neighbors? Or could you call some other family members (like the ones we are usually too busy to call)? Could you visit someone in the hospital? Or send a card of love and joy in the mail?



# Mysterious Joy

*What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*

—JOHN 3:6-8 (NRSV)

Because I have found that joy is not something I can force or “choose,” I try to imagine ways *to run into* this great gift. Circumstances or plans or people who might make joy possible. Like throwing ridiculous birthday parties. When Zach, the tiny human in my home, turned 9 last year, I threw a ridiculous farm-animal themed party. There were goats, bunnies, and adult farmer drinks. The kids ran around like they were one with the animals, and even my dad (who hates anything outdoors) was having a good time. As I looked around, I caught eyes with Zach. Delirious with joy, he ran up to me and asked, “Is this the day that I’m born again?” And, of course, I had to excuse myself into the farm bathroom and have a solid cry because the joy in my heart was overflowing.

Being born again is the promise that Christ brings to us. Joy is jumbled up in our response to that new life and the presence of its Giver. It might not be as easy as looking in the mirror and telling yourself: “I will be joyful today.” But you can make plans to cross paths with joy. You can plan a simple gathering with the people you love. You can go outside and play in the snow (if you have snow), or go spotting for the best Christmas lights. Maybe you need to plan a ridiculous birthday party, and if it isn’t your birthday, you can throw one for Jesus. Make a plan to cross paths with something big or small that helps you run into joy, and there you may find new life sprouting within you. When you find that joy, be reminded of the promise of Christ that allows us to be born again.

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## READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE  
ACTUALLY HAVE

## for this lovely day (p. 46)

*Blessed are we who desire to feel our hearts soar  
with the glory set in the heavens,  
the moon and the stars,  
with awe at the people right in front of us,  
with the beauty of the lily in its elegant purity,  
and the matter and power of the tiniest seed,  
bursting to life as it was always destined to do.*

## REFLECT

1. Can you remember a time when you were delirious with joy? Or when you witnessed someone full of joy?
2. How did that joy cause you to see or feel new life? To be born again?
3. What plan can you make today to cross paths with joy? What prayer can you pray, asking for new life and joy for this season?

## GOING DEEPER

- Do you need to plan a gathering to cross paths with joy? It doesn't have to be fancy or elaborate, but it does need to be intentional. Like the time Kate was getting treatments hundreds of miles away from family and friends, and she needed to find some joy. So, she gathered a bunch of acquaintances together to sing Christmas carols. You can learn more about "[The Art of Gathering](#)" (6 min) in Kate's conversation with Priya Parker.<sup>1</sup>
- Don't have a lot of time to listen to the podcast? Here is a [free guide](#) from expert gatherer Priya Parker to unlock new and creative ways to transform your next event.<sup>2</sup>




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1 Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3gMTCuZt8c>  
Full Episode: <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-art-of-gathering>

2 <https://www.priyaparker.com/the-new-rules-of-gathering>



# Small Delights

*How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.*

—PSALM 36:7-9 (NIV)

Sometimes our obsessed-with-positivity culture forces us to be grateful or optimistic or to find a brightside. But I think we need a wider language to capture the multitudes in a single day. A moment of *meh*. Another of thankfulness. Yet another of irritation. Sometimes our grief or sadness or exhaustion catches us by surprise. And the next moment might have us in a fit of laughter. Maybe we should embrace “whatever kind of day we are having” (we even made posters for our office!).

My friend, journalist Catherine Price, spent several years studying “fun.” What does fun feel like? Can we manufacture the experience of fun? Is fun uniform to every person? What if we don’t have time for fun!? Her research uncovered that true fun, which she defines as a combination of playfulness, connection, and flow, is essential for a joy-filled life. But how do we do it when our lives are too full of the things that rob us of experiences of joy?

One practice Catherine started using she borrowed from writer Ross Gay. When she is in a moment of delight, she takes note of it. She sticks her pointer finger in the air and says, “Delight!” This small practice doesn’t pretend

a whole day is delightful (they often aren’t), but takes a minute to recognize the moments when delight interrupts the monotony of a day. A gorgeous sunset on your way home from work. Delight! The joke the kid in your life made that made them crack up. Delight! A catch-up with an old friend where you felt known. Delight! A delicious meal. Delight! Clean sheets. Double delight!

Catherine explains that finding delights might feel easier than keeping a gratitude journal, where you can sometimes feel forced to be thankful for e.v.e.r.y.t.h.i.n.g. (Because, if we’re honest, sometimes our kids or spouses or roommates or parents are a source of gratitude and other times they are menaces.) Delights are small and simple pleasures you can identify throughout your ever-changing day. A chance to be honest about the small, pin-sized moments of joy in an otherwise garbage day.





## READ THIS BLESSING

## for learning to delight again (p. 176)

FROM THE LIVES WE  
ACTUALLY HAVE

*Blessed are you who discover that even in the smallness,  
your attention might be compressed even more.  
You who pull out a magnifying glass  
to discover, to notice, to taste, to smell  
the small joys and simple pleasures that make a life worth living.*

## REFLECT

1. What kind of day are you having today? Circle the word that fits.

JOY-FILLED	LOVELY	MAGICAL	PAINFUL
GARBAGE	DIFFICULT	UNREMARKABLE	LIMITED
MEH	OVERWHELMING	MEANINGFUL	MOURNFUL

3. What are the savory things of life that remind you of the goodness of God? This goodness does not have to deny or ignore the day you are having. There is enough space to hold both at the same time.
4. How can you start to see small delights in the world and share them with others?

## GOING DEEPER

- Learn more about delights in Kate's conversation with Catherine Price, "[Serious About Fun](#)."<sup>1</sup> Or add Catherine's book *The Power of Fun* to your to-read list.
- Start a delight text message thread with a friend or group. It is really simple. When you see something that brings you delight, you can text the group or send a picture. You can laugh or cry together at all of the amazing things you notice.
- Need a reminder that every moment is the day we're actually having? Download a free printable to hang up in your home or use as a phone lockscreen.<sup>2</sup>



1 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/serious-about-fun>

2 <https://katebowler.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/have-whatever-day-print-larger.pdf>

# A Cake for Christmas

*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.*

—ISAIAH 9:6 (ESV)

The beautiful and terrible always live side-by-side. It's a strange reality.

Poet Maggie Smith described this truth on the first Christmas after her divorce. Her two kids spent the night at their dad's house, and Maggie woke up with the heaviness and dread of an empty home on what should be a special day. Then, the doorbell rang. A neighbor stood on her doormat with cake in hand. She remembered that Maggie would be alone on Christmas morning and wanted to remind her she wasn't forgotten.

Our lives can come apart in a million tiny ways. Try as we might, we can't often engineer our own happi-

ness. There are certain realities we have to live with—like parents who have to share kids on Christmas. But, somehow, joy can meet us right in the depths of our can't-make-it-work humanity.

Which is, of course, the very story of Jesus. Jesus was born as all infants are, shivering and protesting loudly. Yet on those tiny shoulders rests the basis of all that is most solid, most true, most trustworthy: love. A love that is for us—for me, for you—and for the whole world. This is how joy comes to us, full of surprises in the middle of our beautiful, terrible realities. Just like Maggie's neighbor was God's love in human form, cake and all.

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## READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE  
ACTUALLY HAVE

## for stretching your heart (p. 18)

*God, my life has too many things.*

*Awful. Lovely. Full. Shockingly incomplete.*

*Will you help me learn to live with a greater capacity for this?*

*Living in the tension between a life that has worked out . . .*

*and one that has gone to hell in every handbasket.*

*Let today be a divine exercise of yes . . . and.*

## REFLECT

1. This blessing speaks of how pain reminds us that we're not invincible. Have you experienced this reminder? Was it gradual? Sudden?
2. Pain is a vast canvas against which big loves and small delights shine brightly. What beauty can you see that comes forward to greet you amidst the terrible?
3. Do you have post-it notes you can stick up around your house? A white board to write on? Spread these small delights around on the path of your everyday life like rose petals, to slow you down and turn your face toward what is lovely and good.

## GOING DEEPER

- The new terrible in poet Maggie Smith's life arrived in the form of a divorce—one she never imagined possible. Join Kate's conversation with Maggie called, "[This Place Could be Beautiful, Right?](#)" (3 min clip), to hear about how joy can ring the doorbell and be invited into the terrible.<sup>1</sup>
- In Kate's conversation with Miroslav Volf, they talk about how joy in the midst of suffering is possible because it has something to do with being loved. Theologian Miroslav Volf said, "Even when I can't stand myself, I can be pulled out of myself by some other force. God's love is there, irrespective of how skillful we are to engineer our emotions, and our circumstances." This is the ultimate anti-bootstrapping gospel. Listen to "[Life Worth Living](#)" (41 min).<sup>2</sup>
- Jesus came to be with us, to be human like us. He knows exactly how it feels from the inside. Go to a special place of great beauty or comfort, or even just in your mind's eye, perhaps a place from your childhood. Wait for Jesus to meet you there, and tell him what is most true for you today, everything about it, the beautiful and the terrible.




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1 Clip: [https://youtu.be/xpMi1SqpdTE?si=RrZdP\\_3nvrLZJpR9](https://youtu.be/xpMi1SqpdTE?si=RrZdP_3nvrLZJpR9)  
Full Episode: <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/this-place-could-be-beautiful-right>

2 [https://katebowler.com/podcasts/miroslav\\_volf](https://katebowler.com/podcasts/miroslav_volf)

# Joy in Caring

*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

—JOHN 10:10 (NIV)

Some of my very favorite kinds of people have existentially and emotionally expensive professions. These healthcare workers and first responders, caregivers and therapists, teachers and social workers, chaplains, priests, and funeral directors have chosen jobs that take them to the heart of human need. They understand the precarity of life. They see it every day. Like my friend Gary Haugen who rescues kids from human slavery around the world. Gary and his colleagues at International Justice Mission bear witness to so much fragility and pain. But they, like so many others in caring professions, feel called.

As Thomas Merton says, “Our individual vocation is our opportunity to find that one place in which we can most

perfectly receive the benefits of divine mercy, and know God’s love for us, and reply to His love with our whole being.” It is perhaps surprising that the place where we are most effective as givers is the exact place where we better understand God’s mercy and love for us. In this divine alchemy, we give and we get.

But, hey, if you’re feeling a little rundown or burnt out, bless you. Perhaps borrow Gary’s trick for sustaining this kind of work. “Joy,” he says, “is the oxygen for doing hard things.” Where can you top up on joy today?

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## READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE  
ACTUALLY HAVE

### for caregivers (p. 96)

*Blessed are we who say, I really can’t keep going like this,  
at this pace, under this weight, and the momentum is so strong.*

*God, come and be the wisdom to find that the community is  
broad enough, kind enough, effective enough  
to meet the needs that are here  
—both mine and theirs.*

## REFLECT

1. Where in your life do you see how precarious, how fragile, and how precious life is?
2. Do you sense joy in any particular activity or role that brings meaning to your life, whether or not it is a paying job?
3. What is your level of fatigue in the work that you do? Where could there be an adjustment so that it is more life-giving for you and for others? Or do you need a hard reset?

## GOING DEEPER

- There are days that we need to be reminded that God is with us. There are days we need encouragement to keep working and doing the work God has called us to do. There are days we need to hear God calling us by name. Listen to this song (on repeat if needed) until you soak in these gentle reminders: “[Your Labor is Not in Vain](#)” by The Porter’s Gate (4:20 min), also on our [Advent Playlist](#).<sup>1</sup>
- Some people have a resilience and determination that is breath-taking, and Gary Haugen is one of those people. International Justice Mission is dedicated to rescuing people trapped in slavery and violence. The scope of it is huge, and the reason he doesn’t get overwhelmed is that for Gary, “[joy is the oxygen](#)” (4 min) that keeps him going.<sup>2</sup>
- In my conversation with Justin Welby, in the podcast episode, “[Suspicious of Joy](#)” (52 min)<sup>3</sup>, he spoke about the intensity of human suffering that crisis workers deal with and that he himself has experienced in comforting the tragically afflicted. He asks, how does one deal with the enormity of the need and how impossible it is to meet it? He says, “It actually doesn’t matter what percentage of the problem you’ve dealt with. Your job is not to solve the problem in most cases. Your job is to do what you can with the resources God has given you. And if that’s very, very little indeed, it’s very little indeed.” Listen for a very special and wide-ranging conversation that bubbles up with humor and wit.



1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPj3Kf7Dorw> | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

2 <https://youtu.be/3nZNlfwH68U?si=IznkbaP--FK6g3M8>

3 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/archbishop-justin-welby-suspicious-of-joy>

# From the Inside Out

*You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

—PSALM 16:11 (NRSV)

How many clowns can fit inside of a tiny clown car? Enough to delight a circus audience as the laws of physics are challenged and dozens of them happily pour out. How much delight can fit inside cramped spaces? Take Dr. Who and his timeship Tardis, which from the outside looks like a small kiosk, but inside it houses a control room, a library, a pool, an art gallery, a zoo, and on and on! C.S. Lewis captures this idea in *The Last Battle* when the loyal followers of Narnia are forced up a hill and into the door of a dark and tiny stable.

*“Tirian looked round again and could hardly believe his eyes. There was the blue sky overhead, and grassy country spreading as far as he could see in every direction, and his new friends all round him laughing. ‘It seems, then,’ said Tirian, smiling himself, ‘that the stable seen from within and the stable seen from without are two different places.’ ...*

*‘Yes,’ said Queen Lucy. ‘In our world too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.’”*

In the child, Jesus we see immensity enfolded into one tiny human frame, who is Emmanuel, God with us. And in his presence we might find the fullness of all joy.

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## READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE  
ACTUALLY HAVE

## for this painful day (p. 112)

*But our God came to be cloaked  
in our fragility,  
in our humanity,  
to know our pain from the inside out.*

## REFLECT

1. Early church father Irenaeus paraphrased Psalm 16:11 when he wrote, “The glory of God is man fully alive.” Irenaeus (and the Psalmist) says that our aliveness is directly related to our enjoyment of God’s goodness and presence. It’s a one-to-one connectedness that we can participate in through Jesus who shows us who God is. How do you experience this correlation—that in being your full self, you bring God glory and that in God’s presence we discover that same fullness?
2. Have you ever been in a group meeting where others are dominating the conversation and you’d really like to say something but can’t get a word in? All that we want to say, God actually *wants* to hear. Everything that is on our hearts. We might know this intellectually, but never have tested it out in real time, or trusted that it could actually be true. Say it all out loud to God who knows and sees and hears.

## GOING DEEPER

- At my lowest ebb when the guard-rails came off of my life, my faith became something that was not just about an idea-God, but an actual God whose loving presence I felt. [Listen to this clip](#) (1.5 min)<sup>1</sup> from my conversation with Randy Balmer to hear me try to put words to this. (Heads up, my religion-professor roots are showing in my use of the word “Pietist.” It refers to an 18th century emergence of experiential devotion. You’ll feel very smart.) What are the ways that God speaks love into your world? Into your heart?
- God speaks to us in more ways we can count—through the beauty of nature, through scripture, through the life of Jesus and his followers, and in the still small voice that is God’s Holy Spirit sent to us. Spend some time doing whatever works best for you to be able to listen, to be attentive to God speaking, whether on a walk or in a quiet place, or just going about some mundane tasks. Don’t worry if it is only silence, or only a nudge and not actual words. It can be, but most often it is just an inkling. Wait and watch and listen.




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1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AG3sLDx8wk0>



# A Glimpse of God

*Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us*

—ROMANS 8:35, 37-39 (NLT)

So often when people are going through difficult seasons they ask: Where is God? And just as often, we forget that God is always with us—through all of the beautiful *and* the terrible.

I wish God would show up with a big neon sign announcing God's presence, or storm in with an army to make things right, or perform a healing miracle right when I ask for it. But more often, God shows up in small merciful glimpses of joy and love. The presence of a friend. An encouraging word at the right time. The beauty of a sunset after a long day.

God is with us in the wonder and tears, through the sorrows and celebrations, through the amazement and disbelief of life. As theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it." May you have the eyes to see the presence of God in the midst of whatever it is you're facing today.

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## READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE  
ACTUALLY HAVE

### for a little boost in the morning (p. 48)

*Resurrection has happened again today—you made the sun rise, and brought love to the world already, in the shape of a cross. The hardest work is already done.*

*The work that remains is simply more of it: more love, more trust, more faith in the unseen pleasure you take just gazing at us, sitting here.*



## REFLECT

1. Have you ever asked or wondered, “Where is God in this situation”? What were you going through?
2. Galatians 5:22-23 describes the signs of the Spirit as joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, love, and self control. Sometimes God works through miracles. And sometimes God is present through small moments of God’s Spirit. During that difficult season, did you experience God through one of these mysterious ways?
3. Where do you see God in your life right now? Through the love of a friend? Joy of a grandchild? The goodness or beauty of nature around you?

## GOING DEEPER

- Did you know that the song “Joy to the World” was not written about the birth of Jesus in Luke 2? This song was actually written by Isaac Watts in 1719 about Psalm 98, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises” (Psalm 98:4). The hymn was written to celebrate Christ’s second coming more than the birth of Christ. Yet, it has become one of the most popular Christmas hymns. In many traditions, it is the last song you sing during the Christmas Eve service, often the congregation will light candles and sing “Joy to the World” right as the clock strikes 12:01am.
- Take time to read the words of “[Joy to the World](https://hymnary.org/text/joy_to_the_world_the_lord_is_come)”<sup>1</sup> while reflecting on all that you have learned about joy this week. Here are more ideas to help you think deeper about the words of this song:
  - How can you “prepare room” in your heart for God? Is there space and time in your schedule to notice the presence of God in your life?
  - Read Psalm 98:7-8 and reflect on the invitation to all creation (us too!): “Let heaven and nature sing.”
  - Did you know the “curse” mentioned in verse three is referring to the “curse” of Genesis 3:17, when Adam eats of the apple, and God curses the ground? There are many interpretations and perspectives on this curse and its consequences, but this song sings of hope: blessing will flow into all the world “as far as the curse is found” (good and bad, light or dark, awful and amazing). There is no place that God’s blessings will not reach when the Kingdom of God has fully arrived.
  - How might the “nations prove” the glory of God’s righteousness?

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1 [https://hymnary.org/text/joy\\_to\\_the\\_world\\_the\\_lord\\_is\\_come](https://hymnary.org/text/joy_to_the_world_the_lord_is_come)