

2018 Advent Devotionals

'Tis the Season



Week 1

'Tis the Season for Simplicity By Rev. Katie Montgomery Mears

"It will change your life."
"The secret to freedom."
"All you need for the rest of your life."
"Its strength is its simplicity."
"Drastically changed my life for the better."
"A breath of fresh air and positive energy that brings real joy."
"I am a believer."
"A total revelation and I don't know how I lived before it."

What could those quotes be describing? An incredible piece of luggage? A smart home automation system? A religion or religious experience?

It turns out, they are all excerpts from reviews of Marie Kondo's bestselling book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. It is no surprise that it became a bestseller – we are an extremely consumeristic society that cannot stop buying things... but we're also desperate to get rid of the things we already own in the name of simplicity.

This overly complicated approach to life extends to our faith as well; we pile on one thing after another in the name of "going deeper." We think that all of our Bible studies, memorized prayers and church attendance will result in an automatic close relationship with God.

When I was in seminary, I had to read selections from *Church Dogmatics* by Karl Barth, which he published over the course of 30 years and ended up being more than six million words long. Barth is widely considered the most influential theologian of the 20th century but gosh, his writings sure can be complicated! I often had a headache when I finished digesting the ideas that he presented in his writing.

That's why it was so surprising in April 1962 when Barth visited the University of Chicago, and someone asked him, "How would you sum up all of your writings?" and he responded, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Barth could speak competently about the revelation of God, Christ's obedience before God, humankind's free will, and the reconciliation of God and humans through Jesus. He could have waxed poetic about any of these topics and more. But he chose to say something simple, which happens to be the most compelling thing about Christianity – that every single person is beloved by Jesus.

Simple doesn't mean simplistic. It isn't naïve, one-dimensional, or unsophisticated.

Instead, simple faith is humble and hopeful. It says, "I may not understand everything, but I believe God is with me, and I trust God." Simple faith is vulnerable and honest. It says, "Here are all of the things on my heart – Lord, help me." Simple faith draws the circle wider. It says, "God loves everyone, so I do too. You're welcome here."

Simplicity Day 1

Charity Autry

"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"

Psalm 46:10

"Be still", I have to remind myself of this throughout the Christmas season. The hustle and bustle of the holidays get all of us in a stir. The smell of cinnamon candles and pine needles abound. Trees to trim, holiday parties to attend, gifts to mark off the list and cookies to bake. We find ourselves caught up in the "To-Do" list and aren't able to embrace the reason for the season.

As Christians, we are called to be his hands and feet here on earth. If our hands are too full and our feet cannot rest we've missed our calling. Christmas should be about showing the love of Jesus Christ to our communities, friends and families. We can't put so much on our plates that we don't accomplish this. So, still choose that Angel Tree family, deliver poinsettias or bake cookies for that special neighbor to share your love. Just be a little more selective this season.

As Faith Hill once said, "*Just breathe*". I pray for us all this Christmas to stop and live in the moment and say no to those things that do not glorify God.

Simplicity Day 2

Brittney Ford

But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked,

"Lord don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things,

but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better,

and it will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:40-42

Distraction. 'Tis the season of distraction from the true meaning of Christmas. As Christians, the advent season should feel holy to us, and instead it is anything but. We are rushing from the holiday office party to pictures with Santa to volunteering at church to buying all the presents and at the end of the season - we are done. I'm not advocating for a holiday season of zero commitments, but what would a season of simplicity look like in your family?

When I was growing up, we hosted our family Christmas party each year. For weeks, I would help my mom prepare for the big day. When it finally arrived, I clearly remember watching her work so hard to make sure everyone was enjoying themselves that I often wondered if she had any fun at all. Like Martha, was she so distracted by the preparations that she forgot to stop and simply be present?

Are we Martha this season, running in a thousand directions all in the name of Christmas? Or are we Mary, sitting still at the feet of Jesus?

May we choose simplicity this season, instead of distraction, as we celebrate the miracle in the manger.

Simplicity Day 3

Sue Farrell

Advent is my favorite season of the year. I love the anticipation of Christmas...the music, the decorations, the sharing with family and friends. But, I don't love the stress that comes along with it.

Many years ago, when our children were young, I found a book called *Unplug the Christmas Machine*, which had suggestions for delegating chores and combatting commercialism. I poured over the suggestions for deleting unnecessary tasks and being less materialistic. I tried to find ways to simplify all these tasks or to pass them on to someone else. But, in the end, no one wanted me to stop baking the cookies or to do without all the decorations or entertaining and more.

Then, in a quiet moment, I remembered Jesus' words to Martha in Luke 10:41-42.

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

I, like Martha, was distracted by the preparations. I was forgetting about what really mattered...the celebration of the birth of Jesus who came to our world to redeem us. He brought us unconditional love. Jesus was born into a world of chaos, with crowded inns, a stable for His birth, political intrigue and self-centeredness, just like our messy world today. What we need to remember is to choose the better part.

That "mental list" of mine never got much smaller. I did try to simplify but I realized that the time spent with my family, decorating the tree, baking cookies and wrapping packages was the better part. The cookies weren't perfect, the decorating was uneven, and the packages were messy, but we made some wonderful memories of doing it together as a family. How it got done was not important. I think the better part is to love one another, particularly in the busy Christmas season. That is how we show our love for God.

Simplicity Day 4

Bryan Fisher

In Luke 10:38-42, Jesus enters the home of Martha and her sister Mary and gets two very different reactions. Mary sits at Jesus' feet all day and listens to his teachings while Martha is distracted, running around to oversee all of the preparations. When Martha voices her displeasure to Jesus about Mary not helping her, Jesus replied in Luke 10:41-42:

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Dear Lord, as we head into the heart of the holidays with packed schedules and lots to do, let us take a step back and remember the true meaning of Christmas, which is the birth of your son, Jesus Christ. Let us gain contentment from that singular, simple focus. Let us be more like Mary than Martha.

Simplicity Day 5

Joseph Patty

“Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.”

Matthew 6:33

Eugene Peterson has a quote I love: “Busyness is an illness of the Spirit.” I love that quote because it challenges me and the choices I make while reminding me that simplicity is actually part of God’s design for us as humans. I think it is part of why He **commanded** us to keep the Sabbath. I think He had to command us, or else He knew we’d see it as suggestion and stretch ourselves beyond our limits. (I’m guilty.) We have this propensity to make ourselves slaves to everything around us. We make ourselves slaves to our work, to volunteering, to our thoughts, to stuff, to entertainment, and even to Church and religion. We make them idols, and all the while God is saying, “You really only have to do one thing. Seek Me.”

That’s what Jesus was saying in Matthew 6. He’s talking to a crowd, who had made their religious activity more important than the God they were supposedly doing it for. He calls us back to a simple faith and a simple life. Structure your life around loving God with your whole heart and loving your neighbor as yourself. Trust God to take care of the rest. Squeezing everything in, having every gadget, and accomplishing every task won’t make a difference in the scope of eternity. You have permission to rest, and there, in the stillness, see if God meets you.

Week 2

‘Tis the Season for Generosity

by Rev. Bill Denham

My first lessons in generosity came from my childhood. When I was only five, my father helped me memorize Malachi 3:10 so I could recite it during a Sunday morning worship service. *Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse that there might be food in my house, sayeth the Lord.* Of course, an important part of Saturday’s preparation was to prepare my little “love offering” envelope, filled with pennies, to take to church. It was there that dedicated Sunday School teachers taught me about a generous God from wonderful Bible stories. Early on, I learned the joy of giving.

As a youth, the best example of generosity came from my mother. I was born with healthy, beautiful teeth. However, when my permanent teeth came in, not only did I have buck teeth, I had a tooth growing in the roof of my mouth! Yikes. I looked like “It Came From Beyond the . . .” Braces were expensive, but Dad and Mother sacrificed so that I have the smile I wear today. Mother wore the same pair of black pumps daily for two years. They finally fell apart, but her son had straight teeth, a gift of generosity I can never repay.

As a mature Christian, I know that Jesus was the personification of generosity. He gave of Himself over and over. He looked *at* people... not *through* them. Jesus valued women and children. His generosity included the marginalized. He healed the sick. He fed the poor. He ate with sinners. He cured sin-sick souls.

We are in the season of Advent. You and I are preparing for the birth of the Christ Child. Our mailboxes are full of requests from worthwhile organizations appealing to our generosity. At the very least, each plea gives us an opportunity to be generous and experience again the priceless joy of helping to show our heavenly Father’s great love.

Frankly, I don't think I have ever been sacrificially generous, but Jesus was. Shouldn't His example be the one for me to follow? 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, *God loves a cheerful giver*. You and I are privileged to be full participants in God's kingdom through joyful giving.

When we sing *O Come All Ye Faithful* on Christmas Eve, we will be celebrating the birth of God's Son, surely the most perfect act of generosity the world has ever known. As we kneel before the manger, may we not be found wanting. A faithful Christian is a generous Christian. They are one and the same.

Generosity Day 1 **Pat Deckert**

When they saw the star they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Matthew 2:10-12

The Magi brought treasured gifts as an outpouring of their love for this long awaited One, a tradition that we carry on in expressions of our love for family and friends during our celebrations of the birth of that same One. Having dedicated our lives to Christ and having grown in faith over the years, our hearts also feel a tug to carry that generosity outside that circle in ways that expand with the years.

I am reminded of a story that Rev. Mouzon Biggs wrote about. A young prince in the Punjab received permission to give Queen Victoria a gift, a large and brilliant polished diamond. She thanked him telling him it would be a part of the Crown jewels. When the prince visited the aging Queen years later and asked to see the diamond, he reminded her that when he was a boy he gave her the diamond with all his heart. He added that he is now grown and knows how much the stone is really worth. He then asks her, "May I give it to you again, with all my heart?"

We each gave our lives to Christ at various times followed by good times, hard times, joyful times, sad times; all the things that come to people on life's journey. We truly know in our hearts what our lives are worth. During this Advent season, let us ask our Christ, "May I give it to you again with all my heart as I look for large and small ways every day to return your love to those who long to feel your love?"

Generosity Day 2 **Colby Biberstein**

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

2 Corinthians 9:6-8

God is the ultimate giver. He is generous to us and blesses us in so many ways. He sent his son Jesus to die on the cross for our salvation and forgiveness of our sins. It is easy to continuously ask God for more, but how often do we ask God what to do with the abundance we have been given? *God, to whom should I give my money, my time, my presence?*

Sometimes we don't feel we can give because of fear and uncertainty. Sometimes we feel that "our" resources are truly ours. And sometimes we just don't feel very cheerful about giving. But Pastor Andy

Stanley challenges us this way: "Don't wait until God changes your heart to begin giving. Giving is the way God chooses to change our hearts. As your heart changes, your attitude and feelings will follow suit. God loves a cheerful giver, but he'll put your money to good use whether you are a cheerful giver or not. My advice: Give until you get cheerful."

This Christmas season, I pray that we will be overwhelmed by the blessings and riches in our lives and return the question to God, "*how can we best be stewards of our abundance?*" -- and then share those gifts with others. Maybe this Christmas season someone will see Jesus through our cheerful acts of generosity!

Generosity Day 3 **David Swift**

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

1 John 3:16–18

As the father of a two-year-old, a lot of things are shared at my house: hugs, germs, food, dirt, love...the list goes on and on. The truth is from an early age we teach our children to share, hoping that later in life they remember these lessons in their interactions with others. Whether it be making a donation to a worthy cause, volunteering for a service project or lending a ear to someone who just wants a friend to listen, there are many ways for us to share our time, talents and treasures. God sent his only Son to walk among us. We are called in 1 John 3 to give like Christ: "this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters." There are many ways we can go about this in our daily lives. Our membership vows at St. Luke's reflect this idea, as we declare that we will uphold it with "our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness."

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ during this season of Advent, I pray that we all reflect on our vows and the free gifts of grace and love provided by God for our salvation, that we may share in the generosity that has been instilled in us since we were a child.

Generosity Day 4 **Will Monroe**

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.” “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.”

Then the angel left her.

Luke 1:34-38 (NIV)

When I think of the word ‘generosity’, I immediately think of my father in church. He would pass out crisp \$1 bills, and my three brothers and I would each get to place a bill in the offering plate as it came down our pew. I was naive about the amount I was giving or the impact it would make, and instead I was caught up in the joy of just participating.

Later in life, that innate joy of giving still resided in me. When my wife founded a nonprofit with the mission to find permanent homes for foster youth before their 18th birthday, I eagerly began volunteering with the same joy I had when I put money in the offering as a kid. As I worked with a youth in foster care, I was motivated to find him a forever home, help him do well in college, and become a functioning adult.

But as years have passed and I've gotten older, my attitude about giving has become weary. I diminish the joy of giving by worrying whether the number next to my tithing commitment will be enough to make an impact. Or I think, 'Why am I even bothering to volunteer? There are so many hurdles this foster teenager can't possibly overcome.' I'm not quite as eager as the young boy at church or as hopeful as the volunteer that was excited to change a child's life. I sometimes wonder how I could possibly make a difference at all.

This Advent season, I have wondered how Mary must have felt. She was just a humble woman from an unremarkable village. I wonder if she ever felt like I often do, 'How could God possibly use me when someone else could offer so much more?' But even still, she responded with, 'I am the Lord's servant'. And in a small stable, the woman who may have once thought she didn't have much to offer, gave birth to a son who would save the world.

This Christmas, I hope to have the spirit of the little boy that sat next to my father who found genuine joy through the simple act of giving. I hope to be a little more like Mary, embracing any calling He may have for me. I hope to look at all the ways I can give, and instead of responding with skepticism, confidently answer, 'I am the Lord's servant.'

Generosity Day 5 **Grace Freeman**

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord...
Colossians 3:23 (NIV)

I recently read a novel whose narrator lived by the rule "don't care too much." We may not admit it so brazenly, but I think we do this, too. Birthday greetings via social media. Impersonal gift cards. Minimum required hours or donations. Good intentions never carried out. *We care, but we don't care too much.*

Don't get me wrong – gift cards are often ideal, and our time and resources of course have limits. But do I at least pick out something personally relevant, or write a note? As Christians, we're called not to check the box, but to do everything *whole-heartedly*, as for the Lord. To be generous with our time and talents, remembering that true generosity is more qualitative than quantitative.

This Advent season, let's [plan, address, bake, cook, clean, shop, wrap, travel] generously – not grumpily or begrudgingly, but heartily, joyfully, as for the Lord. Let's care too much – as Jesus did for us.

Week 3
'Tis the Season for Togetherness
by Rev. David Horton

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.
Psalm 133, v.1

Sara and I could not be more different. She likes to Zumba. Me? Not so much. She's a stay at home mom. I'm a pastor trying to be a dad. She's from Pakistan. I'm from North Carolina. She's Muslim. I'm Methodist. She wears a hijab. I occasionally wear a collar.

I first met Sara when she was taking a cooking class in the Gethsemane kitchen. Our friends at Connect Community put together a series of cooking classes that were as much a women's small group as culinary education. Sara joined women from Iraq, Syria, Congo and Mexico for a few weeks of recipe swapping. I was happy to stay out of the kitchen and just enjoy the home-cooked delicacies they prepared.

Sara never looked apprehensive being in the church. That day she was all smiles as she handed me a Pakistani dish I can't pronounce but I can still taste. To this day, when she takes Zumba classes in the church fellowship hall (again, no men allowed), I hear she feels comfortable and welcome enough to remove her hijab and just be one of the girls. She loves it here, and we love having her here.

I saw Sara a few days ago at Fall Fest, which is one giant community block party where you can climb a rock wall and in ten steps register for ESL classes. Sara and a few of her friends were passing out free samples of Pakistani and Syrian cuisine because, let's face it, who doesn't love free samples?

The St. Luke's Communication Team was recording footage for this year's Christmas offering, which will benefit a new early childhood learning center at Gethsemane, and they wanted to interview community residents who would benefit from the school. I asked Sara if she would like to be interviewed and her eyes lit up. She said, "Pastor, I do this for you."

At Christmas, we remember the words of the angel Gabriel: *Glory to God in the highest heaven! And on earth, peace among those whom he favors* (Luke 2:14). God favors us all, hijab and collar; we are all God's favorite. The birth of Christ begins a new day of togetherness among all God's children where there is no us and them; there is only us.

May the Christ child lead us into deeper kinship with one another. That boy is born for Sara as much as he is born for me. Sara and I could not be more loved.

Togetherness Day 1
Babs Smith

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.
2 Corinthians 9:15

God created us with a longing for togetherness. Christianity is a relational faith and Christmas is our time to remember His loving gift. And as followers of Christ, we are charged with sharing this gift with others. Scripture instructs us to wrap all our gift-giving with Christian love - love that includes accepting one another, forgiving one another, encouraging one another, serving one another and praying for one another.

How might we remain focused on the true message and value of God's loving gift of the Christ child? As we experience the joyful excitement and expectancy of Advent and the promise of Christmas morning, cultivating relationships appear easier; family gatherings are merrily anticipated and sharing with others seems second nature.

As we look toward a new calendar year, let us intentionally adopt and extend these warm December attitudes and actions. Make this Christmas behavior into our personal Christian lifestyle. Keep Christmas' greatest gift alive by giving yourself away with love, gratitude, humility, and unselfishness in the name of the Christ child. Christmas can become a yearlong season of love.

Togetherness Day 2 **Michael Shook**

*"Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love,
being one in spirit and of one mind."
Philippians 2:2*

When I think of our church family and the environment we live in, Paul's plea to the Philippians seems to ring truer than ever. I believe that Paul understood that togetherness as brothers and sisters in Christ, would always be needed for each of us to grow in and remain strong in our faith. And with that faith sustained, Paul knew that we would be the tools to be used by the Holy Spirit, to do God's work on earth.

John Lennon wrote that "A dream you dream alone, is only a dream; a dream you dream together, is reality." As I think about the coming Christmas season, I see so many things that our church can "make a reality" if we, together, dream those things.

I believe Christmas is a time that we as a church family, should recommit to "dreaming together" and to continuing God's work in uniting all people through love, service and understanding.

This Christmas season, I pray that we remember why we are called to be one family under God...to do God's unifying work and love one another and all others in the many ways that God loves us.

Togetherness Day 3 **Paige True Farrow**

*Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body,
he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us.
Ephesians 2:14 (CEB)*

Christmas always brings into laser focus what is important in our lives. Generally, that brings us together with others, whether that be family or friends.

It can also highlight the gaps in our "togetherness." The in-laws that are just so pushy, the co-worker who never understands boundaries, the friend you realize you haven't caught up with lately. The unsend Christmas card, the hesitation before writing that one address.

My dad has always said that Christmas was the time where the whole world was open and ready for reconciliation. To come back together. To heal. As children and teenagers, if we were missing a friend he would have us sit down and write a letter (or Facebook message) and actually send it! We would carefully

plan a gift for the cousin who we hadn't gotten to see as planned. Make that put off phone call. Bridge the gap.

Remember, friends, Jesus already broke the barriers! HE removed the hatred, the unworthiness. HE made us ONE BODY. As we come together this holiday season, remember that this babe we celebrate has already done the work to bridge the gaps that come between us. Feel his love and let it fill your soul! Let it fill the gaps, and let it bring us back together.

Togetherness Day 4 **Ann Woods**

"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"
Psalm 133:1

Togetherness is the feeling of satisfaction normally felt when you are united with other people for a specific purpose. It is not just being physically close to people in a crowded room, but a spirit of unity when all are in agreement.

I have had that feeling of "togetherness" through activities in college and through organizations as a young adult, but I have not had a strong experience of faith-based togetherness until recently at St. Luke's. St. Luke's has so many outlets for this to happen, and when it does, it is something powerful! It truly makes God happy when we are all together worshipping, praising and studying him.

I pray during this holiday season that we can all take a break from the hustle and bustle of Christmas and just be together in God's holiness. I pray that we can all experience a true feeling of togetherness with friends and family. I pray that we open our hearts, so together in the spirit, we can accomplish more for God's kingdom.

Togetherness Day 5 **Ben Halladay**

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!
Psalm 133:1

There is something unique about coming together in the collective. The common focus and unity of a group embodies a feeling of wonder and excitement, and the holidays are a catalyst for that togetherness. It's part of what gives the season that magical feeling, every aspect has some idea of collective togetherness. Family, sports, and especially worship, we all know the feeling and comfort of the group unity during the holidays. As Christians, we are called to be gathered in fellowship. In Matthew, it is noted that in a gathering of Christians there is the very presence of God. Every time you gather together this year, focus on the communal fellowship, and the pleasant knowledge that God is together with you.

Togetherness Day 6

Jo Beth Hawkins

“Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with peace that ties you together. You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope.”

Ephesians 4: 2-4 (CEB)

Recently my husband and I had the opportunity to visit the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC. The museum itself was beautiful and its six floors were filled with ancient artifacts, stories of the Bible, a depiction of the life of Jesus, and a special exhibit dedicated to the ministry of Billy Graham.

Of everything I witnessed during our six hours in the museum, nothing was more powerful than the presence of the Holy Spirit moving and working within the people gathered there for one shared purpose...to immerse themselves in Scripture and to experience a piece of their Savior's life and works. Despite being surrounded by governmental and political structures, in this place, everyone came together as a common body, the body of Christ. It was palpable. The Holy Spirit was present in a very clear and potent way.

Within the museum, people were engaging one another, demonstrating deference to one another, and showing Christian love to one another through simple acts of holding a door, offering a bench to sit upon, allowing someone their place in line, and talking with one another about what was being read or watched. It was amazing. People from different cultures, countries, and conditions came together to experience God's word. In a world which feels riddled with divisiveness, conflict, and contention, Christians gathered together in this sanctuary, a spiritual oasis in the heart of our political center.

As Christmas approaches, I pray that each of us finds our spiritual oasis surrounded by friends, family, or strangers who share a thirst for God's word and Jesus Christ's love. Together we are stronger, because together we are His.