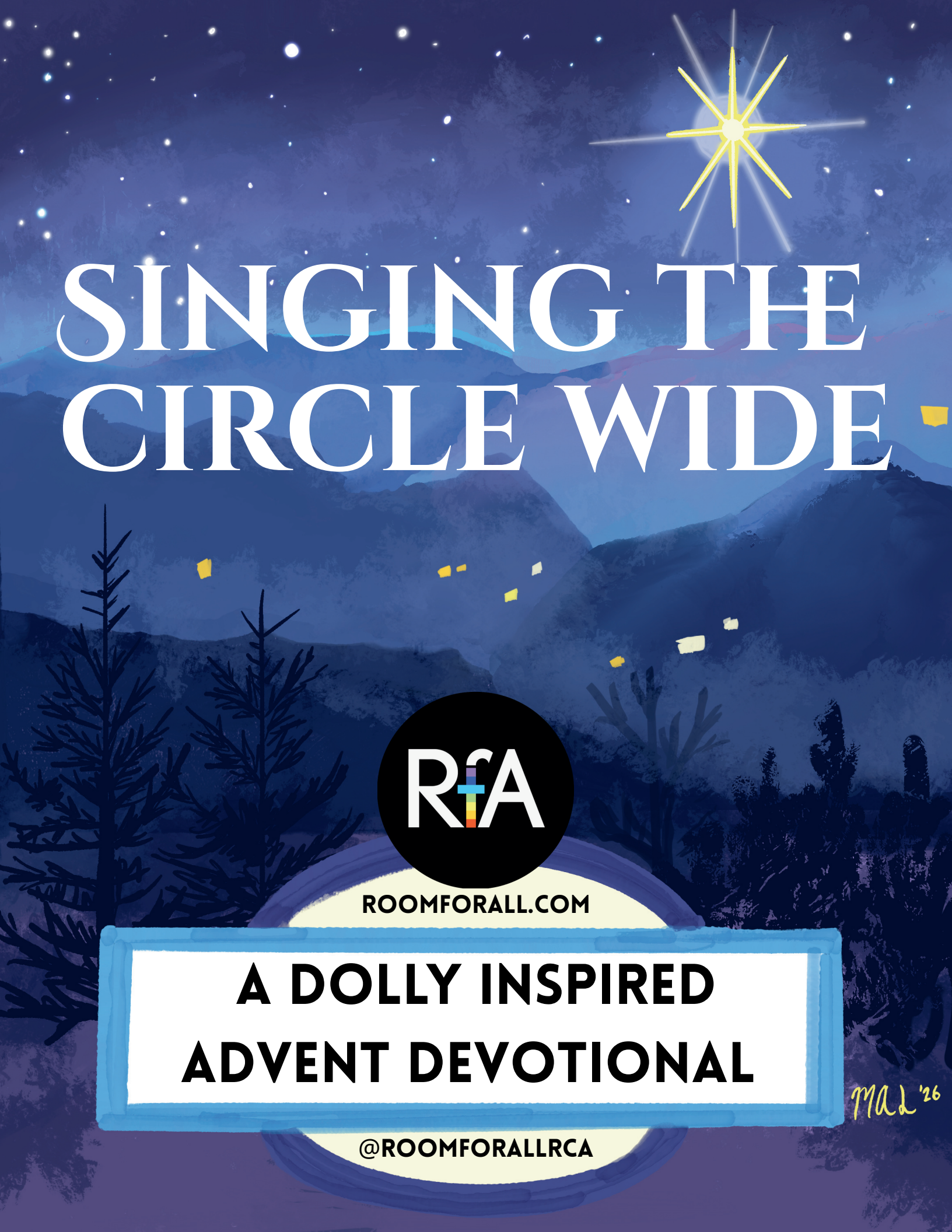

SINGING THE CIRCLE WIDE
RfA
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A DOLLY INSPIRED ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
@ROOMFORALLRCA
MAL '26

Dedicated to Dolly Parton & Rev. Derek Terry

JOIN OUR DISCUSSIONS

SCAN TO REGISTER

You're Invited to our Weekly Devotional Conversations, on Zoom at 6 PM EST
Each Monday, Nov 30- Dec 21, 2026
Hosted by Executive Director Mitchel Leet (he/him) and Contributor Megan Shook (she/her), come discuss the scripture and the song of the week!

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Well hey!

Welcome to Room for All's 2026 Advent Devotional! I want to thank everyone who collaborated on this series, humoring my need to honor Dolly Parton, one of the greatest songwriters and philanthropists of all time. I pray that we will all be inspired to "dream more, learn more, care more and be more", as Dolly always did. *This is an unofficial tribute-- we do not own the rights to any of the music and lyrics.*

Supporting Room for All makes it possible to provide resources and virtual groups free of charge. Visit **www.roomforall.com** to learn more, connect with us and support our LGBTQIA+ affirming advocacy work within and around the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Blessings to you and yours through this sacred season,
Mitchel Leet (he/him)
Executive Director

FOR THE FULL PLAYLIST,
VISIT @**ROOMFORALLRCA** ON YOUTUBE

How to use this Resource:
In a group or on your own, each week/day, begin in prayer.
Read the scripture next, and then play the song, either from the YouTube playlist or on your music streaming platform.
With those in your mind, read the reflection next.
Finally, reflect on all three components of the devotional with the discussion/ reflection questions and suggested actions.

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MEET THE CREATIVE TEAM

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MITCHEL LEET
(he/him)

Mitchel Leet is an artist and advocate from the Finger Lakes of New York. As RfA's Executive Director, he's proud to be of service to the LGBTQIA+ affirming church movement within the Reformed Church in America. He and his wife, Cameron live near the shore of Lake Ontario in Irondequoit, New York with their rescued king Charles Cavalier Spaniel, Bruno.



REV. JEFF KNOL
(he/him)

Reverend Jeff Knol is a native of Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he was raised in the Christian Reformed Church. He was ordained in the Reformed Church in America in 2013 and has served congregations in Central New Jersey since that time. He currently serves as pastor of Hillsborough Reformed Church. He shares his life with his wife, Jamie and his two children, Margot and Charlotte.



REV. CARI KEITH
(she/her)

Rev Cari Keith is a graduate of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, holds her ordination from the RCA, served churches in New Jersey and has served on the Board of Room for All. She is a Graduate of the Guild for Spiritual Guidance. Now retired, Cari continues to serve the LGBT community by offering spiritual direction to all seekers.



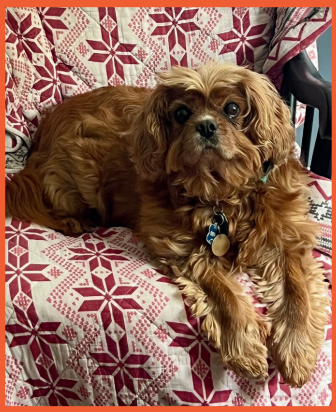
MEGAN SHOOK
(she/her)

Megan lives in Highland Park, New Jersey, where she serves as Deacon at the Reformed Church of Highland Park.
Megan will be cohosting our Devotional Calls, Mondays at 6 PM EST.



REV. DR. JIM OORD
(he/him)

As Pastoral Care Director, Rev. Dr. Jim Oord cares for the congregation at Flossmoor Community Church in Illinois. As an adjunct history teacher at a local high school, he has developed curriculum on anti-racism and feminism, including a class called "Elvis, Aretha, Dolly, and Kendrick: Windows into American Culture." Pastor Jim and his wife, Raylene, have two children, Aniyah and Michael.



BRUNO LEET
(he/him)

In his 24th straight month as Employee of the Month at Room for All, Bruno Ignatius will be listening in on all our discussions to come. Raised on Dolly, his favorite song is *Puppy Love*. He hopes you'll join us, Mondays at 6 PM EST on Zoom. Registration is open now:

SCAN TO REGISTER, OR VISIT ROOMFORALL.COM/ EVENTS

First Sunday: Hope

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 --- I Still Believe



Prayer:
Gracious God, As our weary world awaits the birth of Your son, lead us and guide us in all the preparations and decisions we make. As the first candle flickers, may it ignite hope that will always live in us as all the other stuff falls away. Remind us how ever near you always are. Illuminate the way before us, and may our hearts resonate with the music and words we read together now. Inspire in us new and renewed ways to make room for all in our churches, communities, countries and around our tables. Amen.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9:
Grace to you and peace from God our Parent and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you so that you are not lacking in any gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the partnership of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

I Still Believe:
“Even though we're walking through the valley of death
Scared and wondering what happens next
Uncertainty, division, anger, and unrest
I still believe
Questions of what and why and when
What is it, what happened, when will it end?
These are strange and crazy times that we're living in
But I still believe...

I believe to my very core We'll walk again in the sunshine
By the seashore That we'll dance and we'll sing
And be happy again Don't know how or when, but we will again
You'll see I still believe (I believe)...” --*Dolly Parton*

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9 --- I STILL BELIEVE

Reflection:
I will never forget the Christmas season of 2020. My wife, Cameron and I were newlyweds, together in the townhouse we have recently moved out of, trying to make the most of it. That year, I spent Christmas Day in non-stop tears, because all I wanted was for us to be home for Christmas with my mom and dad. I share this not to jump ahead to the holiday, but to remind myself, really, that this sacred season of waiting mimics the long, long wait the world had been in for the baby yet to be born.

The pandemic taught us all about Hope. When so many of us could barely face that strange December, Dolly Parton dropped *A Holly Dolly Christmas*, what would be her final holiday album. The TV special aired on the second Sunday of Advent that year, and with her socially distant choir, that's when I first heard this song.

Dolly's belief to her very core was present even when things felt the most unknown. Like Harvey Milk once said, "you can't wait for hope, you have to be hope," and Dolly embodied that with her game-changing contribution to the research for a COVID vaccine earlier in the year. She made that gift of grace, sharing what God had given her and making an investment in the well being of every person in the world just a few short weeks into the unprecedented shutdown.

There was fear, abundant misinformation, and then there was Dolly, who pledged that $1 million donation that made the Moderna vaccine possible and stayed cheerfully clear that she trusted the process. The mRNA technology that was developed has gone on to break new ground in treating and preventing other diseases, including melanoma, a deadly form of cancer. This research gave hope for future victory over many types of cancer, an undisclosed form of which took Dolly from us.

On February 26th, 2026, the private, not-for-profit Children's Hospital in Knoxville, Tennessee adopted her name. May every one of the half a million patients that receive treatment there each year, their families and caregivers feel the comfort and love Dolly so exemplified when they visit.

Hindsight is a beautiful thing, that shows us how we made it through. We don't have it in the present, of course, but what we do have today, in this moment is an opportunity to shine our light. I'll never take hugging my parents for granted again, and thanks be to God, I get to do so all the time.
--*Mitchel Leet, RfA Executive Director*

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9 --- I STILL BELIEVE

Questions & Actions:
Who brought you hope and comfort during the pandemic?

What is one thing you can do today to plant a good deed of hope for a positive future?

Look for opportunities to bring holiday cheer to the patients in your local hospital, adults and children. Whether it's making time to visit, supporting a toy drive or sending cheerful cards or flowers, you can bring hope to someone who is not well this season.

Countless people's lives were changed by long COVID, and the disease has not been eradicated yet. Make time to get your booster vaccination, and revisit masking and testing policies as in person gatherings move indoors this winter.

SECOND SUNDAY: PEACE

ISAIAH 11 --- PEACE TRAIN

Prayer:
God of no exceptions, whose love is beyond anything and everything our human minds and hearts can imagine; whose light shines for all who need a candle in a dark time, hear us as we pray our gratitude for your sustaining love, your hope that cannot be diminished, your peace which passes all understanding and your joy – a joy that empowers us with the knowledge that you are ever with us. So much of life is lived in Advent time, in waiting time. Remind us as we wait that nothing and no one remains static; everything and everyone changes. We can trust the promise that we do not wait alone; we can trust that the courage we need to wait will be given. With peace, we will wait this week – together. Amen.



Isaiah 11:
Known as God's vision of a Peaceful Kingdom...The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on [them]; the spirit of wisdom and understanding; the spirit of counsel and might; the spirit of knowledge and [awe] of the Lord... They shall not judge by what [their] eyes see, or decide by what [their] ears hear, but with righteousness [they] shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth...the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid...they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.
= *Interpretation note: the bracketed words replace the word "he" to reflect the wider audience scripture addresses. The author of Isaiah, presents us with a dramatic picture of restored wholeness; a wholeness that is possible when we live with love and justice for all – no exceptions!*

Peace Train:
"Now I've been crying lately Thinking about the world as it is
Why must we go on hating Why can't we live in bliss

'Cause out on the edge of darkness There rides a peace train
Where peace train take this country Come take me home again

Peace train sounding louder Ride on the peace train..."
--originally written by Cat Stevens, re-recorded by Dolly Parton

ISAIAH 11 --- PEACE TRAIN

Reflection:
I have a stuffed lion and a lamb that never get packed away with the Christmas decorations. Both sit prominently on a chair in our living room year round. "Grandma's stuffys," my granddaughter calls them. Grandma's hope -- soft, powerful reminders of the promised peace I long for, wait for, pray for. For sure I can wholeheartedly sing with Dolly Parton, *I've been smiling lately, Dreaming of the world as one.* When lion and lamb snuggle together on the chair, it is easier to dream of the world as one. And then a child comes to play or a visitor wants the chair to themselves and my stuffy friends get separated. As I move about the house restoring order, searching for lion and lamb, I find that I too, can easily tear up, *thinking about the world as it is* – separated, roaring anger at each other, strutting their power. There is always so much to learn when I pause to pay attention – even, or maybe especially, to the seemingly innocuous.

Not too long ago, as I was cleaning up after our guests, it came to me that unless I searched out and consciously brought the lion and lamb back together that they might never come to know each other in ways that build connection and relationship. They might remain uneasy about the other; creating stories that fit old fears and anxiety. Without a doubt I can sound a bit weird – I mean really, I'm talking about stuffed toys here! On the other hand, I am profoundly humbled and awed by God's never ending desire to engage with us (all of us – remember, no exceptions) where and as we are. Even if that means animating my stuffys with thoughts and feelings! Peace is an active, on-going process, forever requiring me to actively engage in bringing the opposites together -- the gruff and gentle, the angry and fearful, the calm and anxious, the lions and lambs of our lives.

Peace within, peace without, peace between doesn't often just "show up." It requires our active engagement... *Come join together on the edge of darkness, peace train sounding louder; ride on the peace train.* Even with our active engagement, peace can often remain elusive. I also cry with Dolly, thinking about the world as it is. And, we can chose to bring peace to any situation even if it is a simple smile or kind invitation...get your bags together and bring your friends for the reality of that peace train, is coming... As we move through this Advent season together, may you cling to the hope that lions and lambs, and the hearts of each of us, is carrying the peace of God ever closer to the reality we long for....
--Cari Keith

Isaiah 11 --- Peace Train

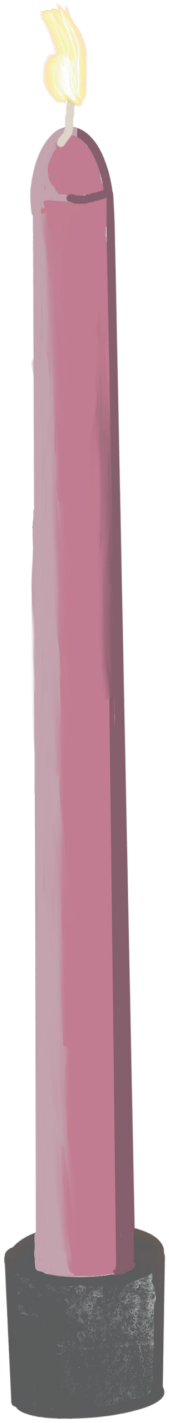
Questions & Actions:
Practicing “peace” doesn’t mean pretending the experience didn’t happen. Practicing peace is a way of responding to the untruth and unfairness with calm wisdom and clarity rather than reactivity. And it is a practice.

Think back to a time when “things got edgy” – a cruel or unfair comment spoken, an untruth being repeatedly told, etc. Consider and share (if you desire) the response options that might have been available.

For the day is coming, says the prophet Isaiah, when all people will live in God’s *shalom*. What steps, what small step can you take, right now, today to send another ripple of *shalom* into your own heart and into the community?

THIRD SUNDAY: JOY

ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11; JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28 --- CHRISTMAS IS



Prayer:
Gracious God, help us to find joy in the little things. In this busy season, bring us laughter, and help us to see and recognize Your steady faithfulness in our lives. As we reflect on Your word, lead us to appreciate the good things around us. Let us carry Your joy into our lives, sharing it freely with our loved ones and neighbors while uplifting all whom we encounter in love. Amen.

Read the full Scriptures, as named above, from your Bible.
Isaiah 61:1-3
The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.

John 1:6-8
There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Christmas Is:
"Christmas is a time for caring Bein' at your best
Christmas is a time for sharing Knowin' you've been blessed
Christmas is a time for givin' Love is made of this
That's what Christmas is

Christmas is a joyful time If you're the lucky ones
Some are blessed with gifts and trinkets Others having none
Some have feasts upon their tables Others havin' crumbs
There are the haves and the have nots,
And you could be either one..." --*Dolly Parton*

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28 --- Christmas Is

Reflection:
It's the Sunday with the pink candle! I'd imagine that Dolly would be delighted, and probably encourage us to add some rhinestone bedazzlements to today's candle. Or would that be too campy?

Not at all! In fact, I'd posit that Gaudete Sunday is camp. In Brandon Ambrosino's article "Notes on (Christian) Camp" in the June 2025 issue of Christian Century, he writes, "One of the first definitions of this elusive term... is 'making fun out of' something serious. We're not making fun of it... We're taking the serious seriously; we're just not letting it take us." In Susan Sontag's 1964 essay, "Notes on Camp," she writes, "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. One can be serious about the frivolous, and frivolous about the serious."

The reason that Gaudete Sunday gets a pink candle: it's supposed to be an oasis, a harbor of joy in the midst of a dark, somber season. Advent's liturgical color is purple, the same color that's used for funerals and the season of Lent: the color of waiting, repenting, longing, mourning. And in the Northern Hemisphere, Advent falls at a time when nights are getting longer and longer, until the Solstice, when the dark has its longest recitative.

But in the middle of all this, Gaudete Sunday interrupts: "But hold on... Christmas is coming!" Let's take what needs to be taken seriously seriously, but let's not "let it take us." Let's have a little joy, a little festivity, a little pink, a little camp.

Today's song is "Christmas Is," written for the 2020 Christmas musical Dolly Parton's Christmas on the Square and released as a duet with Dolly's goddaughter Miley Cyrus that same year. The song straddles the sickly sweet and the achingly poignant. Like the best kind of camp, the song is an invitation to holy interruption.

In the musical, which walks the Dolly Parton balance of extreme earnestness and fabulous camp. Dolly is the eye of this holiday hurricane: an angel disguised as a beggar, literally interrupting "Christmas Is" with a repeated request for "change," a request that takes on a double meaning as the movie progresses. Dolly keeps interrupting the miserly and serious "Scrooge" of the town (delightfully portrayed by Christine Baranski), pushing her away from greed and pursuit of power toward a changed life of community and care.

Followers of Jesus need to learn this art of holy interruption. Dolly can be a guide here: she was a force of Gaudete Camp: letting joy do its work, interrupting and adding buoyancy to the darkness.

She'd sing the saddest song you've ever heard and follow it up with a joke about her breasts, and she'd always do it fabulously, interrupting our lives and inviting us to something new.

In Isaiah 61:1-4, a passage used by Jesus to define his mission, we're given the declaration: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners." This is the work of holy interruption, a silly pink candle among the somber purple, a rhinestone-bedecked country singer breaking into our gloomy playlists.

In John 1:6-8, John the Baptist was sent as a witness, an interruption. Wearing his kooky clothes, making a scene, coming to "testify to the light."

This year, let Isaiah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Dolly, and the Spirit that inspired them interrupt the busyness, the selfishness, the patterns that we fall into year-after-year. Relearn to care, to give, to love. Recalibrate what takes up your attention: not the "gifts and trinkets" but the people you're with. Dolly interrupts us with a simple message: "It's all about kindness, love and compassion."

Sometimes it takes a pink candle. Sometimes it takes a larger-than-life campy country singer. Sometimes it takes an angel. Sometimes it takes a prophet out in the desert. But this season, let yourself be interrupted. Let the joy, love, compassion, and kindness cut through.

And then commit yourself to the campy work of holy interruption. Like John the Baptist, like Isaiah, and like Dolly, get out there and "testify to the light."
--Rev. Dr. James Oord

Conversation Starters:
Where do you feel the need to be interrupted?

Jesus was criticized for being too light-hearted in his ministry. What moments from the gospels strike you as somewhat campy? Where did he "dethrone the serious?"

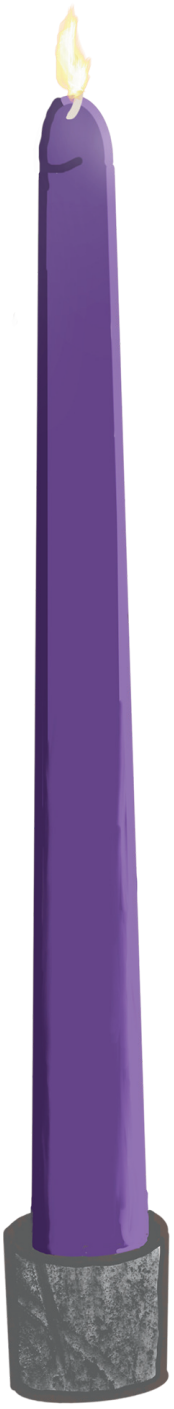
Where do you see a message of love, joy, and kindness interrupting society and culture this Christmas season? What "pink candles" are giving you sparks of hope in a dark season?

What is one way, even a small way (especially a small way) that you can commit to "testify to the light?"

FOURTH SUNDAY: LOVE

LUKE 2:1-5 --- ROAD TO BETHLEHEM

Prayer:
God of All, as we remember the young Holy Family, Mary's tender courage and Joseph's gentle faithfulness, may Your care be with all of those who are on weary roads today. In the chaos and busyness of holiday preparations, may we remember in Your love that the greatest miracle of all arrives in the world in all of its imperfection. May we discover new ways to make Him room in our lives by serving others, bringing comfort and love to all we meet along our ways. Amen.



Luke 2:1-5:
In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Road to Bethlehem:
"Joseph watched the campfire slowly burnin' out
and spread a blanket over Mary where she lay
He knelt down beside her on the ground
Bowed his head and he began to pray
"Here we are, on the Road to Bethlehem, I promised You I'd take care of Your son. Mary's tired, and I'm doing the best I can, and I'm trusting You from here to Kingdom come. Oh, if I close my eyes and go to sleep, please watch over both of them for me, on the road to Bethlehem."

Mary felt the baby move and she woke up
she felt Joseph sleeping by her side
She reached out in the darkness and touched his hand
tried not to wake him as she cried..."
--Dailey & Vincent, Dolly Parton

LUKE 2:1-5 --- ROAD TO BETHLEHEM

Reflection: No part of the Christmas story makes me more weary than thinking about Mary and Joseph traveling to be counted by the census. 9 months pregnant, she rode on the back of a donkey while Joseph walked beside her on the approximate 80 mile journey from Nazareth. Each year we portray the stable where she would give birth, but there were no less than five nights along the way where they must have slept beside the road.

This final Sunday's song, *Road to Bethlehem* tells about those nights, their travels and their weary prayers. Grammy winners Jamie Dailey and Darrin Vincent recorded it with Dolly on their album The Sounds of Christmas. She was a friend to each of them, collaborating often and welcoming them to play at Dollywood.

After Dolly's passing earlier this year, Vincent shared a precious memory on his social media: "...in April 1994, Dolly had asked me to come sing on [her] album, and I took my wife along with me. She was pregnant with our first child at the time, and Dolly not only welcomed her, but she reached out and placed her hands on my wife's belly and prayed for us. That was so meaningful to us!"

When Christ was in Mary's belly, she had to have great faith in God's plan for her life, which Gabriel told her. Before the choir of angels sang, there was a rugged road, hard to travel on.

What we don't often dwell on for long in the under-girding of this story with its difficulty and danger. The Holy family would face many hazards in their most vulnerable time, on this trip they could not postpone, including lack of shelter. Sometimes, as Dolly knew all too well, prayer is all we've got.

As the song continues: "Joseph heard her crying and he reached out, held her in his arms and they both prayed... Watch over us, and give us strength and peace, while the Savior of the whole world gently sleeps on the road to Bethlehem." In the flickering firelight, they found the strength to face the coming day in each other and in prayer.

We put ourselves in the story of the nativity when we make room for another. Young families wonder today, as they always have, how they're going to find shelter while caring for a child (or children) they pray for. No help awaited Mary and Joseph when they arrived in Bethlehem, but that doesn't have to be the story in our communities.

Advent is not only about waiting for when Jesus will come, but it is up to us to become prepared and willing to receive him. Are we ready?
--Mitchel Leet, RfA Executive Director

LUKE 2:1-5 --- ROAD TO BETHLEHEM

Questions & Actions:

What does “trusting God from here to Kingdom come” mean to you?

When did you last spend time with those who are in need of shelter and housing? What does your community do to help them? What could you do to help?

In the midst of these days of busy preparation for worship and celebrations, make time to pray. Set a timer or alarm on your phone if it helps you claim that space.

Take a walk or a drive through your community and look for portrayals of the Nativity. What makes them alike? What makes them different?

SOLSTICE/ LONGEST NIGHT

PSALM 22:1-10 --- HELLO GOD

Prayer:
Heavenly Parent, within the sadness in this season, the grief, losses and illnesses that pay no mind to the celebrations around us, keep tenderly reminding us of Your loving presence. In the midst of heartaches and fears, help us to place that which weighs on our spirits into Your hands, God, and rest our hearts and minds in Your peace. Nurture us now in the womb of the darkness. Abide in us, especially when the grief and uncertainty are overwhelming. Amen.

Psalm 22:1-10:
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest.

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. But I am a worm and not human, scorned by others and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they sneer at me; they shake their heads; "Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver— let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"

Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

Hello God:
"Hello God, are you out there? Can you hear me, are you listenin' any more?
Hello God, if we're still on speakin' terms Can you help me like before?
I have questioned your existence My resistance leaves me cold
Can you help me go the distance? Hello God, hello, hello

This old world has gone to pieces Can we fix it, is there time?
Hate and violence just increases We're so selfish, cruel and blind
We fight and kill each other In your name, defending you
Do you love some more than others? We're so lost and confused..."
--*Dolly Parton*

PSALM 22:1-10 --- HELLO GOD

Reflection:
In what might be her most direct songwritten plea to God, Dolly wrote *Hello God* on September 12th, 2001, the day after 2,977 lives were taken in the deadly attacks. She wrote about 9/11 in her 2020 autobiography *Songteller*, sharing in the feeling so much of the country had that day, that the world as they knew it had come to an abrupt end.

In our horrible and difficult times, we may feel as though we're all alone. When our faith is shaken, and questions abound, we can still call upon God. Seeking comfort and understanding might not yield what we want to feel in the face of terror, grief and loss, but our prayers never go unheard.

Sometimes, it's too painful to speak aloud. That's when the power of the pen comes through. That's what David knew, when he wrote down the prophetic cry for God's intervention, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", which Jesus would later echo from the cross. Dolly said "I see how everybody else deals with it, and I am able to write about their emotions. It allows me to express [sorrow] not just for myself but for the people who can't put [their emotions] into words." Through the centuries, words of honest lament have offered us a fuller picture of God's grace.

In the grief that remains in our hearts, the chronic pain and illness that shapes our daily lives, the relationships and jobs we leave behind, we are never alone. Sometimes, like David, we cause our own share of hurt to others, and we lament that, too. Our suffering is not sacred, but through it we can see a reflection of the compassion everyone deserves. God hears and holds us when we speak, cry, or write our own laments, and is glad Her children call upon Her unconditional love.

Scripture reminds us each Advent that the world was poor, tired and suffering then, too. God came anyway, in a helpless baby born in the cold. In the heaviness that this season sometimes holds for us, in our grief, illness, or hard times, may we remember that this longest night of the year is a womb that holds us before the birth of a new day.

We don't have to hide away the hard feelings. Our faith makes abundant room for lament, and the expression of it is an important step towards healing. We don't have to be happy or merry tonight, or at all if this December finds us in a difficult place. We can lay down our mask, the expectations that burden us, and come to this time of reflection as we are. God loves each one of us, all ways and always.

PSALM 22:1-10 --- HELLO GOD

Dolly's sister, Stella Parton shared that in the end, Dolly had one last request. "That's the last thing Dolly asked me for, was prayer," she shared in an interview.

Phillippians 4:5 invites us to, "by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." We are heard. When we wonder if God's really there, They are never far from us, nor is God put off by our very human moments of disbelief. In the face of those times, may we remember that Jesus came to be with us in our imperfection, as we move through every day, good and bad.

Thanks be to God, we were alive at the same time as we had a Dolly Parton in our world. We will always have Dolly's legacy of goodness, generosity and music left behind to inspire us. Just as she did, take refuge in prayer this night, and always. Let us look to what's eternal and put every ounce of the weight dragging us down in the hands of our God, who always loves each one of us. In our grief, there can yet be gratitude for the sweet memory of the ones we miss. The love we share with one another is eternal. God's eternal love for us, in all our human imperfection is why, in just a few more sleeps, we'll welcome the birth of Jesus.
--Mitchel Leet, RfA Executive Director

Actions:

Write a short note naming who or what you're grieving tonight. Set it beside a candle or electric light that you light to shine through this night.

Pause to remember your loved one's name, their face and their voice.

Step outside into the darkness, and remain in the peace and quiet of the nurturing night for a few moments. If it's not too cloudy, look up at the stars. Let this night hold you.

Create sacred space and reach out to those who are facing difficult losses and conditions in this season.

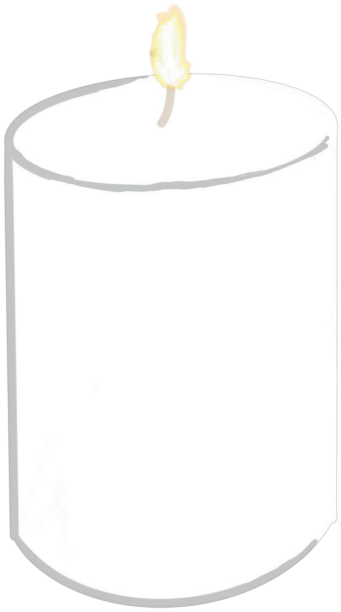
CHRISTMAS EVE

CIRCLE OF LOVE

Prayer:
Adoring God, may our churches, hearts and homes be filled with the love and peace of Christ this night as Jesus arrives anew in us. Thank you for the wonderful gift that made angels sing with joy, shepherds look on in wonder and wise ones come to worship, all honoring Your son, the Prince of Peace. With grateful hearts, we praise You as we bring the light of Christ into the world, with compassion and grace for all we meet. Amen.

Circle of Love:
"Circle of love, halo of light
When Jesus was born on that Christmas night
And oh, what a night that holy night was
When Bethlehem glowed in a circle of love

God sent his Son, his great gift to us
Salvation for all, he loved us that much
We honor and praise that gift from above
He holds all of us in a circle of love."
--*Dolly Parton*



Reflection:
Dolly Parton's Christmas song, *Circle of Love*, is a cozy song, punctuated by moments of praise. In many ways, it's just like the first Christmas Eve, and just like a Christmas Eve service.

As a pastor, I've served mostly in churches in New Jersey that were built in the 1830s. These churches have clear glass windows, and the old glass is charmingly imperfect, full of waves and bubbles. Those ancient windows don't keep out the cold very well, but on Christmas Eve, the sanctuary feels cozy and warm. As congregants push through the heavy wooden church doors, they shake off their winter coats and leave behind the darkness and cold beyond the sanctuary. On Christmas Eve, we sit closer together in the pews. We share our warmth on that cozy night.

CIRCLE OF LOVE

On Christmas Eve, the light in the sanctuary is cozy, too. We turn down the lights, and the candles on the Advent wreath flicker. The candles we hold in our hands twinkle and shine like stars as we sing Silent Night. All that cozy candlelight helps usher us to ponder and cherish the wonder of Jesus' humble birth.

Dolly's singing in *Circle of Love* is mostly cozy. With gentleness and wonder, she sings about Bethlehem, Jesus' birth, God's love, and the salvation Jesus has come to bring us. We are held, Dolly reminds us, in God's circle of love. It's an all-embracing circle. God so loves us; God so loves this world. Dolly's song is cozy, but just like the first Christmas Eve and our worship services, her song is punctuated by praise.

The Christmas Eve story is punctuated by praise. The angels blast out their praise to God from the parted heavens. After finding Jesus in Bethlehem, the shepherds praise God as they go, telling everyone they meet about the Savior who has been born. I love to sing "Go Tell It on the Mountain" on Christmas Eve. I love hearing children excitedly shout out the chorus, and I love seeing them energetically lead the rest of the congregation in the motions. Christmas Eve is a night of cozy wonder and thrilling excitement!

In *Circle of Love*, Dolly brings the praise with volume and energy. At the beginning of each verse, her familiar voice washes over our ears, full of celebration. Like the angels and the shepherds, Dolly reminds us that Christmas Eve is a time to rest in God's love and a time to sing out our praise. God loves us and God has become our Emanuel, God-with-us. With Dolly, we have reason to raise up our voices with volume and energy.

I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas Eve. I hope you can find a cozy sanctuary, full of welcome, warmth, and lit by candles. I hope you can shake off the darkness and cold that so pervade this world and leave them behind, at least for a little while. And I hope God will use the story of Jesus' birth, along with the songs we sing and listen to this Christmas season, to remind us that God holds us, all of us, in God's all-embracing circle of love.

Merry Christmas, and God bless you.
--Rev. Jeff Knol, RfA Board President

CHRISTMAS DAY

JOHN 1: 1 – 14 --- COAT OF MANY COLORS

Prayer:
Loving God, on this Christmas Day, we give thanks for the extraordinary gift of your presence among us. Open our hearts and our eyes to recognize the Divine in unexpected places, especially in those whom the world so often overlooks. Help us to see the sacred worth of every person. Teach us to be instruments of your love, offering compassion, dignity, and kindness to all whom we encounter. May Your peace which passes all understanding dwell among us, and may we be moved to live in love. Amen.

John 1: 1 – 14:
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him.

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Coat of Many Colors:
"Back through the years I go wanderin' once again
Back to the seasons of my youth
I recall a box of rags that someone gave us
And how my mama put the rags to use
There were rags of many colors but every piece was small and I didn't have
a coat and it was way down in the fall Mama sewed the rags together
Sewin' every piece with love she made my Coat of Many Colors
That I was so proud of..."
--Dolly Parton

Reflection:
Christmas is the ultimate demonstration that God's presence does not arrive in the ways we might expect. God - the Creator, the Divine, the great I Am - appeared to us in the flesh as an infant. An infant conceived outside of marriage, born into a world rife with oppression and violence, and laid in a manger. Not surrounded by wealth or power, but by the vulnerability and uncertainty of ordinary human life. How often do we overlook something beautiful because it doesn't look the way we expect it to?

Perhaps that is part of the wonder, and the miracle, of Christmas – that God chose to enter the world in circumstances so humble and so ordinary that many may not have recognized the extraordinary presence of the divine among them.
There is something of the Christmas story in Dolly's song and Dolly's cherished coat. What others saw as rags and scraps, even as a symbol of poverty, she understood as a tangible expression of extraordinary love in an unexpected package. Just as Dolly recognized the love woven into every stitch of her coat, the miracle of Christmas invites us to recognize the love of God woven into the fabric of our humanity.

"The Word became flesh and lived among us." God's divine love is not confined to a faraway place, unreachable from earth and distant from humanity. In Jesus, born as an infant, God entered fully into the human experience, sharing in our vulnerability, our suffering, our joy, and in our capacity to love.
--*Megan Shook*

Questions & Actions:
When have you experienced love or the Divine in an unexpected place? How might we recognize and honor the sacred worth of those whom the world often overlooks?

How might the Christmas story invite us to recognize that we are all worthy of love and belonging, exactly as we are?

Take a few moments to reflect on a seemingly ordinary gift, gesture, or act of kindness that made you feel deeply loved. Consider how God's presence might have been revealed in that moment.

This Christmas, make an intentional effort to recognize the sacred worth of someone you might otherwise overlook. Offer a moment of genuine connection, kindness, or compassion, remembering that God's love is present in our shared humanity.