

of that, we're not bound or need to be down-in-the-mouth because we don't know if it'll get better. We know that it will. Take a step back and try to see where you are at in life at this moment from another perspective – a longer term perspective. Pray for the Lord's help in keeping that perspective and for hearing clearly in your own ears and heart the promises that are true and that are yours in Jesus.

Friday — Doubts

Read Matthew 11:2-11 and as you read those verses, see if you can get into John the Baptist's head with some of the challenges he was facing as he asked the question he did of Jesus. Is this the confident John that we think of, picturing him out in the Jordan River baptizing and proclaiming boldly that Jesus is the Lamb of God and the Kingdom of heaven is near? Not exactly the image we get here, is it? John is in prison and with the time he's had to sit and think, he's started to doubt and question his earlier proclamations about Jesus. Heresy! Right? How could anyone think this way about Jesus, especially one so close to Jesus? John must have lost his faith and even his salvation must be in question because of these doubts, right? I don't think so. Have you ever had doubts when it comes to your faith or your relationship with Jesus? If you have, you're not alone. And you're also not a heretic or lost forever! Jesus knows the challenges we face, the questions that come into our minds because of circumstances, and He doesn't condemn us because of them. How did He deal with John's doubts and questions? Re-read verses 4-6. He points John back to what Jesus was doing. But the amazing thing is that He doesn't leave it at that. What did Jesus do at the end of this reading, in verses 7-11? He lifts up and commends John to the people. He talks about the role John has played as the "way preparer" for Him. And Jesus even adds a word to and about you and me. But more about that later! Today in your prayers, lay before Jesus any doubts or questions that you may have and ask Him for help. Place yourself firmly in His hands, confident of His continuing love for you.

Saturday — Joy to the World!

Begin today by reading Psalm 98. When I think of joy, I can't help but think of the fun Christmas carol, *Joy to the World!* Psalm 98 served as the inspiration and basis for this carol. I'm inviting you to spend some time reflecting on *Joy to the World!* and, taking what we've been learning and meditating on this week about joy, I think you might find a closer look at this carol very insightful. As you look at this carol of joy, you'll notice the exuberance that flows from every corner of creation over our Savior! But you'll also notice that there's not an absence of "sorrow." We find even here the acknowledgement of sin and sorrow, pain and those things that just aren't right in our world. But it doesn't take away our joy, does it? We can have joy in the midst of sorrow. If you'd like to hear this carol in a different but beautiful way, check out this link from Pentatonix, an acapella group who adds a new dimension to this endearing carol: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Xo64Q2ucQ8>

This week's *Bring It Home* devotions were written by Pastor Glen Schlecht.
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Bring It Home

*Devotions for
the week of
December 17, 2017*

What Now?

1. Ask the Lord to provide His gift of joy to you this season.
2. Be aware of people who may be struggling this season and may be lacking joy. Pray for them and look for a way to walk alongside in a supportive way.
3. Continue to be in prayer for people in your life who may not have a church home or who may not know Jesus. Look for an opportunity to extend an invitation for them to join you for Christmas worship.

If you would like to receive daily *Bring It Home* devotions by email, please contact the church office: churchoffice@immanuelloveland.org

Monday — Joy!

The third Sunday in Advent is traditionally known as “Joy” Sunday. The readings typically have a theme of joy and point us, in the midst of our preparations, toward those things that make up our joy as followers of Jesus. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 and listen for the joy. Today I want to focus on verses 16-18. When St. Paul commands us to “Be joyful always!,” what is your first reaction? Are you feeling very joy-full right now? If not, what’s stealing your joy or keeping you from feeling joy-full? Is it OK to be a follower of Jesus and not feel the joy? The realities of life in our sinful and broken world are that there are many things that can and do steal our joy. Examples I hear from people are financial situations at home, relationships within the family or with co-workers or with friends that aren’t what they should be or what you would like them to be, the feeling that Christmas seems to be pressing down on you with demands that can’t be met, or health issues that you’re dealing with. Know that experiencing these things doesn’t make you any less of a Christian! But the Lord doesn’t want you to be in that joy-less or joy-depleted situation or feeling for extended periods. He wants you to know and to have and to experience His joy. Like “hope,” which I talked about last week, the joy which Jesus offers us is also more than a feeling. It’s a promise the Lord has placed before you and in your heart. The promise of His grace, His love, His forgiveness, and His presence in your life. Jesus is with you and is on your side. You are never alone and that promise, that fact is something He wants you to have in your heart to give you peace and give you joy. For today, pray for those promises from the Lord to be at the very forefront of your mind and your life today. Ask Him to help you to truly rejoice in Him today.

Tuesday — God at Work

The Old Testament reading for Sunday was from Isaiah 61 and the setting for that is God’s people living in exile – far from an ideal situation. The fact that God’s people were still in exile is an important piece when it comes to understanding what Isaiah was writing. The Babylonian exile was a dark time in Israel’s history. Being in exile meant being away from their homeland, being isolated, lonely, and feeling like God had abandoned them. But through the prophet Isaiah, God promised new hope and everlasting joy. When Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, the church was under heavy persecution, yet Paul told the people to “be joyful always” (5:16). When Paul wrote Philippians he was in prison and yet said, “Rejoice... always!” How is joy possible, especially in situations like these? The generation that returned from captivity in Babylon did not see fulfillment of all the promises; Paul himself (and countless others) died as martyrs of the faith; today we live in tumultuous times and many are filled with fear. Is our hope and joy in circumstances or in God’s faithfulness? That question may be the real crux of figuring out what real joy is and where real joy comes from and where real joy can be found! So many times in our lives and in our world, God is very much at work but we don’t see Him. At times we simply can’t. At other times, we choose not to. At other times, it’s just hard to see because we’re so caught up in the fray of life. But He is here – with us! He loves you and me and has assured us that He will never leave us. He’s got our best interest at heart and He has promised that one day we will experience this amazing gift of joy in all its fullness and for all eternity.

Wednesday — Joy!

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24. There are times in God’s Word that what we read can feel like an impossible task. This is one of those! Another similar passage is also from St. Paul in Philippians 4, but we’ll look at that tomorrow. Paul seems to be on a roll here in 1 Thessalonians 5 when he tells us not only to be joyful always but then we’re supposed to pray continuously and give thanks in all circumstances. Wowzers! How in the world can we do that? When Paul is telling us to be joyful always, we first need to remember what joy is. Again, it is far more than just feeling happy. The joy our Lord talks about is a gift that He provides for us. The same can be said for prayer and gratitude. The key in all of this comes as we keep reading – the reality is, we can’t do all of that. But we pray that God would sanctify us through and through, which is to say, by His grace we are praying for Him to make us holy as we are filled with Christ. And verse 24 is the punch line in all of this as we are reminded not of our strength, goodness, holiness, or faithfulness, but the fact that it is our God who is faithful – and not only faithful but a God who carries through on all His promises. So He is pouring His joy into us – joy that can be filled with the emotion of happiness but it goes much deeper. Related to “hope,” the joy we have comes in our keeping in mind the long-view of what our faith gives us. That long-view means we remember, even in the midst of tough times, that we’re not alone and we are also not without hope or a future. Jesus is with us and has promised, by His grace and work on the cross and through the empty tomb, that we have everything we need and more. Our lives are secure and it is that assurance that brings joy into our lives, reminding us constantly of what we have. It is that which prompts us to be in ongoing prayer, which is an expression of the relationship we have with our Lord as we talk to Him, seek Him out, ask Him for help, and praise Him, and also nudges us toward a life of gratitude. I pray that this gift of joy (as well as prayer and gratitude) would be in the forefront of your hearts and minds, no matter what you may be going through, to give you the wonderful assurance of the love God has for you. Joy!

Thursday — Joy!

Read Isaiah 61:1-3. These opening verses of this chapter are what Jesus quoted of Himself in Luke 4:16-20 (if you have time, take a quick read of those verses, too). Reading these verses we know that Jesus is the power behind the healing and freedom and joy that jump out of this prophecy. There are almost too many images to take in in such a short, compact section! The overriding theme of joy in 61:1-3 are intimately tied to the freedom that we know. You’ve heard the expression, “jump for joy.” It is that sense of unbounded, free-wheeling, wahoo that is ours because of Jesus. Over and over in these three verses it’s about freedom: freedom for the poor by way of hope; freedom for the brokenhearted by way of healing; freedom for the captives by way of, well, freedom; freedom for the mourners and grievers by way of comfort. Were all of these actions taking place? Not directly but there was the promise that these are the things that Jesus would bring. Do we experience them today? We can. That’s how real the gift of joy is for us who know Jesus. No, we’re not always going to be “up,” but all the negatives (being poor, brokenhearted, captive, a prisoner, etc.) cannot take away from us the assurance of what Jesus brings through His accomplishments and victory on the cross and in the open tomb. We ARE forgiven. We ARE loved. We ARE free. Do we experience the negative consequences and natural results of our sin and sinful behavior and a sin-filled and broken world? Yes. But we know that these are not the final word. Because