

Advent 2021: Recovering Joy!

Fall Creek Abbey Advent Retreats



Orphaned Children's Memorial at Crown Hill Cemetery
Photograph by David L. Booram

Settling In

Ah, you're here! You've made it! You're either sitting in a guest room at Fall Creek Abbey or tucked away somewhere in your home or a favorite place to "be." You've set an intention to spend time with God and you've acted on it. Bravo! And don't forget—God is looking forward to being with you.

After all, this season is the time we remember and treasure the historical, theological, spiritual, teleological implications that God loved us so much that God became one of us so that God could really be *with* us.

Jesus' birth, the coming of Immanuel, "God with us," is why we celebrate Advent.

Before you dive into this retreat guide, it's worthwhile to take some time to check in with yourself; to begin your Advent retreat in a very honest and intentional way. In order to move into this time of quiet reflection, we encourage you to bring your real self into the presence of the grace-filled, relational Trinity-of-God and respond candidly to this question: How do I come to this time?

How *do you* come to this time?

Approaching the Intersection: Advent 2021 and the Allostatic Load

What a year it's been! We don't need to tell you that and we won't belabor the point. But it has been quite a year, nearly two! It's likely that most of us, as we responded to the question, "How do I come to this time?" have answered it by including words like: heavy, depressed, overwhelmed, exhausted, disoriented, beleaguered and/or anxious.

There's even a name for what we're all feeling. It's called the "allostatic load" and here's how Science Direct defines it:

Allostatic load is defined as the cost of chronic exposure to elevated or fluctuating endocrine or neural responses resulting from chronic or repeated challenges that the individual experiences as stressful.

Yep. It's a thing. And we're all feeling it. Every. Last. One. Of. Us.

Yet here we are, at the juncture of Advent and the challenges of the times. How do they intersect and influence one another? How is the current social context detracting from or enhancing your ability to enter this season of Advent? Take a moment and respond.

Going on a Joy-Hunt

The perennial invitation of Advent is to return to JOY, to be captured, once again, by the story of the babe in a manger and, like the shepherds huddled together under a night sky, be addressed by God's angelic messengers:

"Don't be afraid, for I have come to bring you good news, the most joyous news the world has ever heard! And it is for everyone everywhere! ¹¹For today in Bethlehem a rescuer was born for you. He is the Lord Yahweh, the Messiah. Luke 2:10-11, *The Passion Translation*

Good news, news of great joy! And what was this joyful news? That God in his infinite and enduring love "moved into the neighborhood (John 1:14, *The Message*)." That in God's willingness to reach us, God became Immanuel— "God with us!"

The original Advent of Jesus was marked by joy! Read Luke's account of Jesus' birth, slowly and reverently, looking for the thread of joy received, as well as joy lost. Circle moments of joy. Write in the margins when joy was lost. And see what affect joy had on the characters in the Christmas story.

Luke 1:5-2:38, *The Passion Translation*

During the reign of King Herod the Great of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah who served in the temple as part of the priestly order of Abijah. His wife, Elizabeth, was also from a family of priests, and was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, living virtuously and following the commandments of the Lord blamelessly. But they were childless since Elizabeth was barren, and now they both were quite old.

One day, Zechariah's priestly order was on duty, and he was serving as priest. He was chosen by the casting of lots (according to the custom of the priesthood), so the honor fell upon Zechariah to enter the Holy Place and burn

incense before the Lord. A large crowd of worshipers had gathered to pray outside the temple at the hour when incense was being offered. All at once an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing just to the right of the altar of incense.

Zechariah was startled and overwhelmed with fear. But the angel reassured him, saying, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! *God is showing grace to you.* For I have come to tell you that your prayer for a child has been answered. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you are to name him John. His birth will bring you much joy and gladness. Many will rejoice because of him, and he will be one of the great ones in the sight of God. He will drink no wine or strong drink, but he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even while still in his mother's womb. And he will persuade many in Israel to convert and turn back to the Lord their God. He will go before the Lord as a forerunner, with the same power and anointing as Elijah the prophet. He will be instrumental in turning the hearts of the fathers in tenderness back to their children and the hearts of the disobedient back to the wisdom of their righteous fathers. And he will prepare a *united people* who are ready for the Lord's appearing."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is too old to give me a child. *What sign can you give me to prove this will happen?*"

Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel. I stand beside God himself. He has sent me to announce to you this good news. But now, since you did not believe my words, you will be stricken silent and unable to speak until the day my words have been fulfilled at their appointed time and a child is born to you. That will be your sign!"

Meanwhile, the crowds outside kept expecting him to come out. They were amazed over Zechariah's delay, wondering what could have happened inside the sanctuary. When he finally did come out, he tried to talk, but he couldn't speak a word, and they realized from his gestures that he had seen a vision while in the Holy Place. He remained mute as he finished his days of priestly ministry in the temple and then went back to his own home. Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for the next five months. With joy she exclaimed, "See how kind it is of God to gaze upon me and take away the disgrace of my barrenness!"

During the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, the angel Gabriel was sent from God's presence to an unmarried girl named Mary, living in Nazareth, a

village in Galilee. She was engaged to a man named Joseph, a true descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Rejoice, beloved young woman, for the Lord is with you and you are *anointed* with great favor."

Mary was deeply troubled over the words of the angel and bewildered over what this may mean for her. But the angel reassured her, saying, "Do not yield to your fear, Mary, for the Lord has found delight in you and has chosen to surprise you with a wonderful gift. You will become pregnant with a baby boy, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be supreme and will be known as the Son of the Highest. And the Lord God will enthrone him as King on the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign as King of Israel forever, and his reign will have no limit."

Mary said, "But how could this happen? I am still a virgin!"

Gabriel answered, "The Spirit of Holiness will fall upon you and almighty God will spread his shadow of power over you in a cloud of glory! This is why the child born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your aged aunt, Elizabeth, has also become pregnant with a son. The 'barren one' is now in her sixth month. Not one promise from God is empty of power. Nothing is impossible with God!"

Then Mary responded, saying, "*Yes!* I will be a mother for the Lord! As his servant, I accept whatever he has for me. May everything you have told me come to pass." And the angel left her.

Afterward, Mary arose and hurried off to the hill country of Judea, to the village where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived. Arriving at their home, Mary entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the moment her aunt heard Mary's voice, the baby within Elizabeth's womb jumped and kicked. And suddenly, Elizabeth was filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit! With a loud voice she *prophesied with power*.

"Mary! You are a woman given the highest favor
and privilege above all others,
for your child is destined to bring God great delight.
How did I deserve such a remarkable honor
to have the mother of my Lord come and visit me?
The moment you came in the door and greeted me,
my baby danced inside me with joy!

Great favor rests upon you, for you have believed
every word spoken to you from the Lord.”

And Mary sang this song:

“My soul is ecstatic, overflowing with praises to God!
My spirit bursts with joy over my life-giving God!
For he set his tender gaze upon me, his lowly servant girl.
And from here on, everyone will know
that I have been favored and blessed.
The Mighty One has worked a mighty miracle for me;
holy is his name!
Mercy kisses all who fear him,
from one generation to the next.
Mighty power flows from him
to scatter all those who walk in pride.
Powerful princes he tears from their thrones
and he lifts up the lowly *to take their place*.
Those who hunger for him will always be filled,
but the smug and self-satisfied he will send away empty.
Because he can never forget to show mercy,
he has helped his chosen servant, Israel,
keeping his promises to Abraham
and to his descendants forever.”

Before going home, Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months.

When Elizabeth’s pregnancy was full term, she gave birth to a son. All her family, friends, and neighbors heard about it, and they too were overjoyed, for they realized that the Lord had showered his wonderful mercy upon her.

When the baby was eight days old, according to their custom, all the family and friends came together for the circumcision ceremony. Everyone assumed that the parents would name the baby Zechariah, after his father, but Elizabeth spoke up and said, “No, his name is John!”

“What?” they exclaimed. “No one in your family line has that name!”

So they gestured to the baby’s father to ask what to name the child. He motioned for a writing tablet, and to the amazement of all, he wrote, “His name is John.”

Instantly Zechariah could speak again. And his first words were praises to the Lord.

The fear of God fell on the people of their village, and the news of this astounding event traveled throughout the hill country of Judea. Everyone was in awe over it! All who heard this news were astonished and wondered, “*Since a miracle brought his birth*, what on earth will this child become? Clearly, God’s presence is upon this child in a powerful way!”

Then Zechariah was filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit and he prophesied, saying:

“Praise be to the exalted Lord God of Israel,
for he has seen us through eyes of grace,
and he comes as our Hero-God to set us free!
He appears to us as a mighty Savior,
a trumpet of redemption from the house of David, his servant,
just as he promised long ago
by the words of his holy prophets.
They prophesied he would come one day and save us
from every one of our enemies
and from the power of those who hate us.
Now he has shown us the mercy promised to our ancestors,
for he has remembered his holy covenant.
He has rescued us from the power of our enemies,
fulfilling the sacred oath he made with our father Abraham.
Now we can boldly worship God with holy lives,
living in purity as priests in his presence every day!
And to you I prophesy, my little son,
you will be known as the prophet of the Most High.
You will be a forerunner,
going before the face of Lord Yahweh,
to prepare hearts to embrace his ways.
You will preach to his people the revelation of salvation,
the cancellation of all our sins, *to bring us back to God*.
The splendor-light of heaven’s glorious sunrise
is about to break upon us in holy visitation,

all because the merciful heart of our God is so very tender.
The word from heaven will come to us
with dazzling light to shine upon those
who live in darkness, near death's dark shadow.
And he will illuminate the path that leads to the way of peace."

Afterward, their son grew up and was strengthened by the Holy Spirit and he grew in his love for God. John chose to live in the lonely wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

During those days, the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, ordered that the first census be taken throughout his empire. (Quirinius was the governor of Syria at that time.) Everyone had to travel to the hometown of their family to complete the mandatory census. So Joseph and his wife, Mary, left Nazareth, a village in Galilee, and journeyed to their hometown in Judea, to the village of Bethlehem, King David's ancient home. They were required to register there, since they were both direct descendants of David. Mary was pregnant and nearly ready to give birth.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, Mary went into labor, and there she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped the newborn baby in strips of cloth, and Mary and Joseph laid him in a feeding trough since there was no available space in any upper room in the village.

That night, in a field near Bethlehem, shepherds were watching over their flocks. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared in radiant splendor before them, lighting up the field with the blazing glory of God, and the shepherds were terrified! But the angel reassured them, saying, "Don't be afraid, for I have come to bring you good news, the most joyous news the world has ever heard! And it is for everyone everywhere! For today in Bethlehem a rescuer was born for you. He is the Lord Yahweh, the Messiah. You will recognize him by this miraculous sign: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in the feeding trough!"

Then all at once *in the night sky*, a vast number of glorious angels appeared, the very armies of heaven! And they all praised God, singing:

"Glory to God in the highest realms of heaven!
For there is peace and a good hope given to the sons of men."

When the choir of angels disappeared and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go! Let's hurry and find this Word who is born in Bethlehem and see for ourselves what the Lord has revealed to us." So they hurried off and found their way to Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in a feeding trough.

Upon seeing this miraculous sign, the shepherds recounted what had just happened. Everyone who heard the shepherds' story was astonished by what they were told.

But Mary treasured all these things in her heart and often pondered what they meant.

The shepherds returned to their flock, ecstatic over what had happened. They praised God and glorified him for all they had heard and seen for themselves, just like the angel had said.

Recovering JOY

We recognize that we are at this unparalleled moment in time, both the time of Advent and this particular vexing time in our history. Advent invites us to rejoice in the with-ness of God through Jesus. And God knows we need to recover joy, to come out from under the allostatic load and receive the good news and great joy that Jesus came to us, *and continues to come to us, even today*, as we huddle together under the dark night sky.

But how? How do we recover joy?

Well, first, let's talk about the definition of joy. While we undoubtedly have an idea of what it feels like to experience joy, one of the primary human emotions, joy is more than just a feeling. It is a state of being.

In our reading about neuroscience and attachment with God, we've learned a great deal from the writing of Jim Wilder. Wilder contends that joy is the sensation we have when someone is

glad to be with us. You know the moment when you see a friend's or child's face light up, when their eyes sparkle with delight at seeing you? It's the gratifying experience of feeling loved, of being special to someone. But what if that someone is really *Someone*? Is God?

Isn't that the message of Advent, the Immanuel message—that God is so glad to be with us that he became one of us?! That Jesus is God's embodiment of gladness?! In other words, God didn't begrudgingly, reluctantly, regrettably become a human being. God joyfully and unreservedly became one of us so that God could be with us through Jesus.

Recovering joy happens through a means that helps us re-experience God's gladness in being with us through the coming of Christ. We'd like to introduce you to a spiritual practice called Interactive Gratitude, developed by Jim Wilder and the Life Model Works team, that actually helps our brains heal and restore this vital connection with God through Jesus.

Gratitude: A Password to Immanuel

The book, **Joyful Journey* suggests that gratitude is a password to Immanuel. In other words, when we interact with God in true, deep, genuine gratitude, and experience God's response of gladness, we will recover JOY. We will experience the joy of being with God, connected to God, our Immanuel.

“When we give thanks, gratitude becomes the vehicle through which we become aware of the presence of Immanuel, the God who is always with us. Gratitude in the middle of difficulties allows us to have iSight.” (*Immanuel Sight, or iSight is having the recognition that God is present, is truly good and perseveres in doing good for us.*)

The nature of this gratitude is not based on a list of “shoulds” or perfunctory responses to what I ought to be thankful for. It is the practice of reflecting on one's life, considering what I am truly, genuinely grateful for today. It is reviewing my life and noticing the ways that I *have* seen and *continue* to see the gifts of God in the midst of ordinary life. The “graces” of God that are unmistakable and issue from God's true and authentic nature of goodness.

“Every good gift bestowed, every perfect gift received comes *to us* from above, courtesy of the Father of lights. He *is consistent*. He won't change His mind or play tricks in the shadows (James 1:17, *The Voice*).

Often, if we simply take time to review our lives, especially the last week or last day, we can discover all manner of gifts hidden in the creases and corners of our coming and going. After all, “God comes to us disguised as our life” (Carmen d'Arcy). God is with us in the reality of our lives. And yet Immanuel often goes undetected because we don't bother to notice. Sad, but true.

Learning to practice Interactive Gratitude can help us notice how God is being toward us, how God is with us in the moments of our everyday life.

Practicing Interactive Gratitude

There are two parts to the spiritual practice called Interactive Gratitude: first is our expressing to God our sincere gratefulness or appreciation for someone in our lives. And second, noticing in prayer our impression of God's response to our joy and gratitude.

**Joyful Journey: Listening to Immanuel* by Jim Wilder, John Kang, and John & Sungshim Loppnow

Step One:

In the first step, we begin by reviewing the last day (or even last few days, weeks, or months) and paying attention to what comes to mind as the gifts of this day or season. We might identify people, or opportunities, or resources that we've received.

For us, we would name the new member of our family, Flo, our five-month-old Springeroodle. She has been such a sweet gift! While at times her puppy behaviors drive us crazy, she is an endless, exuberant fountain of joy and delight. It isn't hard to feel all the feels when we think of Flo.

After identifying the gifts of this season of life, then we write them down with as much detail and honest, graphic language as possible, getting in touch with the gratitude we feel as we think of them. We write them with language that matches the joy and appreciation we feel for these gifts. (This is critical to the recovery of joy, so make sure you "feel the gratitude" before you begin writing.)

Here's what we'd write regarding our gratitude for Flo:

"Oh, God, how thankful we are for this bundle of unexpected joy! She is so sweet, her nature so perfect for us and what we do. She came to us in a totally unexpected way, and we were quick to say, "Yes!" We're glad we did. She's good for us, wakes us up, messes with our "perfect" life, and invites us to play! We are so smitten with her and are so grateful that you've blessed us with our sweet pup!"

Step Two:

After journaling your gratitude to God for the good gifts you've received, then you pay attention to your impression of how God seems to you, how God responds to your expressions of gratefulness. Yes, this can feel odd, awkward, and even a bit "presumptuous"—right? "Am I suggesting that I'm recording God's exact words?"

No. You are simply trying to "match" your thoughts to God's thoughts, your impression of God's response to your joy. If you can allow yourself to "let go" of the fear of doing something wrong or not getting every word right, and just let it flow, you might be surprised at what comes out.

So, imagine God being with you as you express your thankfulness for whatever you've named. Reread what you've written, feeling the thrill, the elation, the simple pleasure of calling to mind and naming this gift. Now imagine how God might respond, what Immanuel might say in response to your gratitude. And just start writing. Don't edit what you write! Just let 'er rip!

Here's what we wrote down as God's response to our gratitude for Flo:

"Oh friends, she is a delight, isn't she?! I knew you would love her, fall in love with her. I knew that she would be good for you, too, and you would be good for her. I love that you've already formed such a strong bond with Flo, and it makes me happy that you will have many years of faithful companionship ahead of you. Aren't dogs just the best!"

Now here's the magic of this spiritual practice: *it actually changes our brain!* It begins to rewire our brain, which regulates our emotional state, and develops our experience and capacity for joy. It won't necessarily happen immediately. But like anything, if you keep practicing, you will notice the allostatic load lifting and the interior emotion of joy buoying you. This has been our experience, and it has been the experience of hundreds, even thousands of folks who've practiced Interactive Gratitude over time.

So, now it's your turn to recover joy by gathering the graces of this last year, expressing them to Immanuel, and tasting Immanuel's gladness to be with you!

Gathering the Gifts

As you review the last day or two, what are you most grateful for? What or who has been a blessing to you? Once something comes to mind, feel the joy, gratitude, goodness of this gift. Then write down the gifts with as much detail as possible (in terms of what was so good about each gift) and with descriptive words that name how you feel about each one.

As you review the last few months, what are you most grateful for? What have you appreciated most about your life and this season? (Follow the same instruction as before.)

As you review this last year, a year affected by so many complex issues—a pandemic, political and racial tension, virulent animosity and anxiety, work, and economic strain—what have been the gifts, the graces? Who or what has kept you going? Where have you experienced hope? What has sustained you? (Follow the same instructions as before.)

Experiencing God's Gladness

Reread what you wrote about the gifts from the last day or two. Allow your heart to feel the joy, the goodness of these gifts. Then pray what you wrote to Immanuel. Allow yourself to “feel felt” by God and write down what seems to be your impression of God’s response, God’s gladness for you. Don’t edit or critique what you write. Simply go with what comes to mind.

Reread what you wrote about this last tumultuous year. Allow your heart to feel the joy, the goodness of these gifts. Pray what you wrote to Immanuel. Allow yourself to “feel felt” by God, and to write down what seems to be your impression of God’s response, God’s gladness for you. Don’t edit or critique what you write. Simply go with what comes to mind.

Reread what you wrote about the gifts from the last couple of months. Allow your heart to feel the joy, the goodness of these gifts. Pray what you wrote to Immanuel. Allow yourself to “feel felt” by God and write down what seems to be your impression of God’s response, God’s gladness for you. Don’t edit or critique what you write. Simply go with what comes to mind.

Finally, take time to pay attention to what has happened within you. You began with writing down how you came to this time. Now write how you are leaving this time. Has anything happened within you? Have you noticed any shift or anything that is worth noting for you to remember? End by engaging with Immanuel in prayer and thanking God for being with you.

Closing

This is our tenth year of hosting Advent Retreats—even though during Covid one had to be virtual! It's our joy to share Fall Creek Abbey and this guide with you this year and to assist you in awakening to the joy of this season. Please take good care and bring the gifts of your retreat with you into your families and faith communities. Joy is contagious!

We leave you with these last words, which were Jesus' very last recorded words to his disciples and particularly meaningful for us today. Please let them sink in and take them with you as you go!

**“And never forget that I am with you every day,
even to the completion of this age.”**

Matthew 28:20, *The Passion Translation*

Warmly, Beth and David Booram
Fall Creek Abbey
Advent 2021