



CHECKPOINT CHURCH

THE ADVENT OF THE NERD

A DAILY ADVENT GUIDE & DEVOTIONAL



VOLUME 1

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Foreword

There's a first time for everything.

This is the phrase that has been echoing in the deepest parts of my brain over the past two years. It's been a long time coming - this whole church plant thing. But it was only two short years ago that I really received the possibility that this Church for Nerds, Geeks, and Gamers might actually become a thing worth pursuing in a real way. From the outside looking in, it likely appears that this experiment might just be getting started. The reality is that this has been a longer process than I'd like to admit. Like the old adage says: a watched pot never boils - so, too, a wistful dream never comes true. Until, of course, the proverbial pot boileth. And the proverbial dream becomes reality.

I can recall whenever I first pitched this idea to some of my mentors and peers. *No, really! This is such a novel idea - it's never been done before!* I really believed that to be true. I felt like I had been in a perpetual season of Advent - a never-ending gap of time spent preparing for the eventual nerd gathering. I spent hours obsessing over the idea and, admittedly, I obsessed over myself for being the originator of the concept. "*What a grand idea!*" people would say. And it was (and is) a grand idea. So grand, in fact, that I began to discover the idea that I so proudly claimed as my own was far from original. It wasn't novel at all. It had been done and was being done. Not just once or twice, but a seemingly unimaginable amount of times! To put it mildly, my uncontrollable enthusiasm was stamped out like an errant ember.

There's nothing new under the sun.

Suddenly - there was a contradiction. A nerd church wasn't new. I went from quickly being the concept designer; the visionary; the path-maker; the trailblazer - to just the latest one to hop on a technological trend. I went from the mountaintop of the initial planting experience to the nerd church bottom-of-the-barrel. It was an unexpected hit to my pride and it felt like I would be doubled over in gut-punch-pain for the seeming future. Thankfully, the same God that saw my pride also endowed me with a stubbornness that wouldn't allow me to stay down long.

I attended a conference put on by my peers in the once-thought-novel field of nerdy church ministry. I joined Twitter threads. I built relationships. I guested on podcasts. Like a post-snooze-alarm Ash Ketchum, I was determined to rush to Professor Oak's lab in my pajamas so that I could become the very best, like no one ever was, consequences aside. I was ready to raise that stubborn Pikachu.

Then I recalled - Advent.

I love Advent. There are so many wonderful seasons of the Christian Year, but I always find myself so strangely attracted to Advent. It's greatest competition for my heart is possibly Seder (or Passover) - and, in truth, I consider the two to be incredibly related. It's this relationship that brought me from a place of being discouraged by a saturated field of ministry into a renewed enthusiasm for what a Church for Nerds, Geeks, and Gamers might be.

First, what is Advent? Advent is the season of preparation that takes place before Christmas in the Christian Calendar. This year [2020] Advent officially begins on November 29th. It then proceeds until December 24th. *Then* we officially get to start listening to Christmas music and put up decorations on December 25th in order to prepare for the 12 Days of Christmas to end on January 6th. *That's how everyone celebrates, right?* Yeah, me neither.

Regardless of how Advent has actually panned out in year's past, it is a season that is incredibly valuable to our lives - both as human beings and as Christians (should that be your persuasion). Each week of Advent is highlighted by a theme, in this order - Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. This time presents the opportunity to slow down the busy rush of the holiday season and contemplate the true reason for the season.

What about Passover? What does that have to do with any of this? A good bit more can be said about the Seder meal but, for the purpose of brevity, let us focus on just one aspect of the evening. Each year, it is tradition to get together and share in a meal with varying foods that specifically highlight aspects of the slavery and freedom experienced by the Jewish people in the Torah. Before sharing the meal (and the historicity of an oppressed people), the youngest person at the table is expected to ask the group a question:

What makes this night different from any other nights

Are you with me? Do you see how my feelings of mediocrity and this season of hope, peace, joy and love all play together in a way that only God can possibly put in place? In my perpetual Advent that I had crafted for myself, I had forgotten that there was one piece missing - *ichi-go ichi-e*. Literally this Japanese phrase translates to 'one time, one meeting.' In other words, what makes this night different than any other night? What makes Checkpoint Church different than Love Thy Nerd, Faith & Fandom, God Mode Activated, etc?

Spoiler Alert: it's **not** that one is bigger, better, more well-crafted, more Christian, more Methodist, more prosperous, more God-filled.

The difference is you. And me. And this moment. And that one. This one, too.

Over the next four weeks, you and I will have the chance to share in a series of moments. We will be fortunate enough to share with each other our thoughts, desires, short-comings, prayers, pains, histories, and so much more. Some will come and some will go. Some will stay and some will leave. We might have two or three attend daily; we might have a thousand. Regardless - we *will* have moments that can only be experienced together.

Is there a first time for everything? Sure.

Is there truly nothing new under the sun? Maybe.

Does that change the moments we have together? Absolutely not.

As I bring this section to close, I want to challenge you to live into these moments. I understand that all of us are coming to this time from different places and backgrounds. We are different people who have different wounds, scars, and memories. We have privilege or a lack thereof. Some of us will read the words “Prayer Request” in each weekday session and roll our eyes. Others will see that they should list three good things that have happened that day and barely be able to manage one. Let us not confuse our journey with the path of anyone else; instead let us look at this grand experiment as precisely what it is: *our* journey. *Our* moments. *Our* Advent. 2020 has been a year unlike any other. Let us take hold of that and make it *our* time.

I hope that you’ll join me. If not, then know that I am thankful for this moment we’ve had thus far. I would be remiss to not let you know my favorite three truths for every moment:

God loves you.

I love you.

You matter.

Nathan Webb, Nerd Pastor
Checkpoint Church
November 20th, 2020

How To Use This Book:

This book is intended to be a supplemental guide to best experience this season of Advent with Checkpoint Church in 2020. The following model would be the ideal process by which one might do this study. Any and all of the ideas are open to nuance and additional crafting as the user sees fit. Adaptations might be needed depending upon your spiritual preference, understanding of God, self-care regimen, and/or other personal concerns.

Advent is divided up into four weeks. Each week consists of three major elements. First, each Sunday will contain a thought-provoking blog based around the theme for the week written by the Nerd Pastor. These blogs will be present in full on both the church website and in this book. Second, every weekday will begin with a video premiere on Facebook and YouTube. The videos will be brief in nature and will tackle how a character might relate to the theme and selected scripture for the day. Third, each Saturday will have a suggested time of meditation, reflection, relaxation or spiritual Sabbath. Possible ideas and practices will be recommended in this book, but no method is obligatory.

On Sundays, there will be a time of reflection and conversation hosted by the Nerd Pastor in the Checkpoint Church Discord Server.

Every weekday, this book will provide an optional opportunity for further study and journaling. The video for that day will have a corresponding page that has the scripture for the video, a section for taking notes, and an area for prayers requests. There is also another unique section titled “Three Good Things.” This is a journaling practice utilized by Nathan that is highly encouraged, especially for those with depression or anxiety. The practice is straight-forward: write down three positive things that have happened in the last 24 hours. It can be as specific or as vague as you desire. The way this section is utilized is personal, so this all should be more than enough structure. During each video premiere, Nathan will be present in the chat, and will be available any time on Discord for those wanting further discussion or help with the study.

Ultimately, this practice will pay off what you put into it. Print it out or write on it digitally. Tear it to pieces or keep it pristine. Use it or don't - the moment is yours. We can't wait to see what you choose.

Helpful Links:

[Facebook](#) - [YouTube](#) - [Discord](#) - [Blog](#) - [Website](#)

WEEK 1

HOPE

The Hope that Moves

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

- Matthew 25:14-30 (NRSV)

Yikes, right?

Believe me - I get it. This passage is troublesome for so many reasons. It is a hard one to read from the outset. By the end it leaves me wanting a kind of charming resolution, but then it doesn't give that to me at all. I want the Marvel-movie predictable ending. I want everyone to come out on top. But... they just don't. And it really hurts.

Let us start with the obvious, shall we? The language is hard for many of us to read. I admit - I was tempted to cut and snip this parable to exclude all of the times the word 'slave' is used. I thought about finding a different translation altogether. Confession - I even considered just Ctrl+F-and-replacing all of them with a word of my own choosing (please don't harass me, Biblical Scholars! I resisted this temptation). In the end, I decided to put the full text with the New Revised Standard Version language.

Why? Because it is important to look this one in the face. It is important to hear what exactly Jesus is offering up in this story. It's important to know *why*.

But let's be real here - there is a bigger problem with this text. Beyond the master-slave complex that plagues human history, this story feels downright harsh. The Master in the story (which can safely be assumed to be fulfilling the role of our God trope) throws the third slave into our Biblical understanding of The Pit. Not just any ol' pit - but the one which often gets confused with the idea of Hell. Ugh. I hate that word! I hate the idea of it. I hate how it gets used to harm people. But - here we are, so we should talk about it.

To recap: Three slaves. One master. The Big Dude is about to go on a trip somewhere and he has to entrust the property to these three amigos. For some reason, the master divides it up into talents - the largest weight of currency in the Bible. We can try to pin a number to it, if we want. I have heard it made equivalent to sixteen years of labor. A Google search will equate it to a modern \$1.4 million. Regardless, know that it was a hefty chunk of coin.

The Master Commander gives one slave five talents, another two talents, and the third a single talent. There is a fun bit of language here - the master does this *according to their ability*. More on that later. The first two slaves invest their talents by trade and double them. The final slave buries the talent in the ground, preserving the original amount for the master upon the return.

Some time passes and the master returns, deciding to settle up. Like clockwork, the first two present their earnings. The master gives them a joyful pat on the back and all is well in the world. The third slave meekly steps up to the plate and offers the single talent back to the master. Here is where things go to The Pit.

The third slave doesn't start off very well. He explains that he did not invest the talents because the master is a harsh man who takes money that he does not deserve or earn by his own hands. The slave was afraid to not produce this mafia-like result and thus didn't do anything. Obviously, this sets the Head Honcho off and he rips the one measly million dollars from the third slave and gives it to the dude with ten talents, making him even richer. Kicking the third slave while he is down, the master orders him into H-E-double-hockey-sticks.

Again: yikes. What was Jesus doing with this message? Why tell this story? The rich get richer? Trading stocks? Wall Street should be proud? Where does this align with everything else that we understand? Using our three-rule-structure from Checkpoint, how does this have anything to do with 1) Doing Good, 2) Doing No Harm, or 3) Striving to Grow?

How about we take a breather and tell another story?

There is this kid. He is a scruffy young blond that works for his dad's half-brother on a farm. It blows. The kid really wants to make something of himself, but thinks that farming is no way of living. He wants to be a soldier and save lives. Turns out that there is a retired vet living not too far from him. Even better, he is willing to teach the kid how to use a weapon.

After training for a while, he gets caught up in a big plot and learns a ton about himself. Get this - the kid is actually the child of a famous high-ranking soldier and a politician. Not only that, he has a twin sister who was adopted by literal ROYALTY. It's a rough spot. He had been scrounging around on a moisture farm on Tatooine, while his twin had been living up the good life on Alderaan.

By now, I am sure that you have figured out to whom I am referring - especially given that you are reading *The Advent of the Nerd*. In the epic space-opera *Star Wars* from 1977, we witness the story of Luke Skywalker and his journey of family, sacrifice, and purpose. As the film gathered traction and spawned sequels, comic books, novels, video games, Lego figurines, conventions and so much more, this original hit film was given an alternate title: *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*.

Well, how about that? Finally - we get the word out there: Hope.

Why? Why was *Star Wars* changed to that title? This has been a point of some debate for a while in the nerd community. Is Luke the new hope? Or is it a new hope for Obi-Wan? Or the Jedi Order? Or the Rebellion? Who is/are the hope? And who or whom is the hope *for* in the long run? And most importantly - is it really a *new* hope?

Hope is an incredibly important word for us during this season of Advent. Wherever you may be with God, this season represents a time of waiting. The words we attribute (normally represented by colored candles) are symbols of our human response to that period of waiting. As Christians, we are anticipating the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

As people, though, we are anticipating something else. We are anticipating change. We are anticipating something amazing. We are anticipating that new job, new city, new relationship. We are anticipating the evolution of that thing in our lives. We are anticipating a return to a

warm memory of our childhood. We are anticipating a chance for that cherished unconditional love. What are you anticipating? Is it Christ alone? Or is it something that Christ brings?

Our first word that we present to this time of waiting is hope. We are called to be a hopeful people. We are called to approach times of uncertainty with hope. We are called to enter into hurt, pain, and confusion with absolute hope for the resulting circumstance. Are you hopeful?

I find myself far from hope too often. This is one of the reasons that I cherish Advent so greatly. I get to sit and contemplate where my hope lies. I get to find the spots of my life that I don't have so much hope. This year, my daughter had trouble with walking and had to be admitted into physical therapy. Well, she was admitted to physical therapy while I was admitted into stress, anxiety, and - if we are being honest - hopelessness. There were days where I was certain something was wrong and this would not ever end. I had a voice in my head telling me that she would never walk - *and that it was all my fault.*

That's hopelessness. That's The Pit.

God has given me a talent in the shape of a sassy, beautiful baby girl. The darkness in my brain wants me to bury that talent and think that God is just a cruel God who would give my daughter the burden of immobility - because God is just a harsh master, right? That's the temptation. When times get tough, my hopelessness comes out in droves. It convinces me of the worst case scenario. Worse yet - it pushes my own feelings onto the supposed actions of God. I blame. I chastise. I pray.

Why have you forsaken me, God?

In the end, I somehow persevered. With the help of a loving family and ridiculously strong wife, we sent our baby girl to months of physical therapy. Now, we can't seem to keep her from running to our master bathroom to pretend the plunger is a lightsaber.

God is good, right?

Of course God is good.. It is tempting to just let this be a cute anecdote. To brush this off as a miracle and declare God as the powerful Creator that God is - but let us not take away the power of the Holy Spirit and the hope that was provided here. Let us not miss the forest for the trees. Let us not bury our talent away. Let us not set the future up as an act of 'everything happens for a reason' apologetics and rob ourselves of the hope in this scenario.

God is good. Yes. But so was the perseverance of my wife and I. Because of it, we have been rewarded with a toilet Jedi running around like a coked-up jackrabbit. I am not talking about

some prosperity gospel here - we did not just pray the pain away. We cried and we bore the burden and we kept moving forward. We put our full hope into God - but we also put our full hope into the physical therapist, the pediatrician, our family, our daughter, and each other.

The source of hope is God. But the conduit of that hope has to be *you*.

Don't be overwhelmed or get a big head over this - this is a huge responsibility. We have each been given the role of being hope for *someone*. Sometimes we have to be that hope each and every day. Sometimes we might only have to be that hope once in a blue moon. Whenever you start to get cocky, remember that God is the actual source. But whenever you start to get overwhelmed, remember this:

God gives to each of us according to our ability.

I promised that we would come back to this earlier. I find it so interesting that Jesus includes this tidbit in this parable. Some slaves could handle five talents; others, two; and some, only one. But according to the Great Narrator, all three of them had it within them to handle what they were given.

After some time with this story, I have only found one thing that really hurts the message: the first two slaves story. I wish we could get a deeper look into what kind of 'trades' they each made. Were they easy trades? Did they happen quickly? Were they dangerous? How did their families handle it? Did they have good support?

The only difference between them that we get from the parable is that the third slave was scared. Was that really the only factor? Is it possible that the first slave might have had to keep going to physical therapy week after week to drop off his daughter only to be told that we would have to extend the care for another month? Is it possible that the first slave might have held his wife and cried thinking about whether or not the trade would actually go through as anticipated?

Jesus tells us that each of the slaves had the ability, but ability does not connote ease. I so badly wish that Jesus might have said, "The first slave took the five talents and worked himself to the bone for years. The slave lost three talents and then worked like a dog to make them back. He didn't sleep some nights. His back would ache all the time. He never had any time to play video games - and sometimes that really bummed him out. He had some bad days." Wouldn't that be nice? Instead, we only hear that it is within their ability and they just *do* it.

Where might those realistic stories come from instead? Where we can hear of the [successful] stories of hardship from the faithful slaves? If this pastor had to argue, then he might say that we

get these stories from one another. Storytellers will always offer up the best stories - fact or fiction.

For example, what if we consider the fictional story of a scruffy nerf-herder? One who loses his hand after learning that his father is actually an evil space tyrant who has murdered untold amounts of people? One who loses friends and family? One who trains under the guidance of a loopy green alien? One who watches his father figure Old Ben Wan Kenobi get ended right before his eyes?

The story of Luke Skywalker is certainly one of talents spent wisely. What if Luke just *hadn't*? What if Tatooine moisture farming was just *enough*? Or what if, upon learning the true identity of Darth Vader, Luke just called it quits, let go, and fell into the cold abyss of space? These are all options. But Luke chooses hope. Again. And again. And again. Luke chooses hope.

Perhaps that is the truth behind the title *A New Hope*. It's not just Luke or Obi-Wan. Each and every time that there is a choice between hope and despair - these are all talents. These are all chances for us to say 'yes' to a newly offered hope. A new hope for right now.

So, let us go back once more before we close. Let us set aside the problematic language. Let us set aside the casting into The Pit. Let us set our sights on the third slave. Faced with the decision: does he put that talent to work and risk the presumed rage of the Master? Does he bury the talent and at least end up without losing anything in the end? Does he choose fear or boldness? Does he choose despair or hope?

The slave chooses fear. The slave chooses despair. The slave chooses himself.

This line of decision-making leads to a life in the metaphorical Pit. The place where there is gnashing of teeth and weeping. The place where the parent feels hopelessly inadequate and the child remains immobile under the crippling weight of a guilt-ridden life. The place where an inexperienced Jedi mopes for the loss of those he loves under the thumb of a revenge-filled patriarch. You see, the Pit is the antithesis of hope. The Master has no choice but to cast the slave there - because, in all reality, it is the path that was chosen when hope was abandoned.

Where are you right now? Are you in the Pit? Are you right at the start of a hard time? Are you standing in front of the tough decision between hope and despair?

Hear the good news: You have not been given more than within your ability.

No sugarcoating - it may be tough. It may feel impossible. It may *be* impossible on your own. But look to the light of the hopeful. Look to the examples of those who kept on moving.

God doesn't need you at your best.

Checkpoint Church doesn't need you to have it all figured out.

I don't expect you to be all smiles and give me vague truisms about how 'God's got you.'

I know that God's got you. I want to know that *you've* got *you*. And if you don't, then I want to stand there and bear your tears. I want you to try to drag me down with you so that I can hold you up. And anyone else who is reading this - I want you to do that, too. I want you to be the hope you were called to be. I don't you to freeze up, panic and bury what God had placed before you.

I want you to be the hope that moves.

HOPE DAY 1

Hope Is Within Us All

All Might (*My Hero Academia*)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

- Acts 2:1-4 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

HOPE DAY 2

Hope Will Overcome

Monokuma (*Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc*)

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

- 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

HOPE DAY 3

Hope Pushes Us Forward

Kirito (*Sword Art Online*)

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

- Philippians 3:12-14 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

HOPE DAY 4

Hope Is Done Together

Kamina (*Gurren Lagann*)

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

- John 15:12-13 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

HOPE DAY 5

Hope Is In Another Castle

Mario (*Super Mario Bros*)

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

- 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

Sabbath of Hope

One of the ways that we best produce and draw in hope is from others. Whether we draw hope from the example that others provide or from the opportunity to be hope for someone else, we are able to consider the role of hope in everyday life through these mutual experiences. As an act of Sabbath today, it might be helpful to consider this reality and how it has played out throughout the week. Below are a few ideas for acts of contemplation:

CONSIDER HOPE:

- Journal out moments of hope that you've seen in the lives of your family this week. Conversely, consider where your family and friends have been given hope by your actions.
- Look up videos that feature 'random acts of kindness.' Consider how you react to these. Are they cringy? Wholesome? Heartwarming? Encouraging? Inspiring?
- Create a collage or mood board of the first ten to fifteen images that pop into your mind when you consider the word 'hope.' Do any of these images surprise?
- Come up with your own contemplative method and share it with us a checkpointchurch@gmail.com.

COMMUNAL EXERCISE:

It is difficult for us to worship and practice any kind of communal activity during the trying season of COVID-19. In order for us to share in the act of being together apart, consider joining us in a communal prayer of hope. Read this prayer aloud with your family or alone in a private, quiet space at five minutes past any hour of the day (e.g. 11:05 am, 12:05 pm, 1:05 pm, etc). Should enough participants do this, the odds are likely that someone else is reading this prayer at the exact same time as you are today. Find togetherness in this moment of temporary separation.

Dear Lord,

When all we have left to do is cry out in the midst of the pain, give us hope.

When our tears feel like the only way to quench our thirst, remind us of your providing presence.

When loneliness seems overwhelming, Make your presence known.

This world seems so full of death and destruction, but you are a God of life and restoration.

Mold us into an unwavering people of grace, passion and love that cannot ever be ignored.

Amen.¹

¹ Rev. D.G.Hollums

WEEK 2

PEACE

Peace Time Matters

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

- Mark 2:13-17 (NRSV)

I have tried for a good chunk of my life to avoid this whole pastoral thing. When I was born, it was right at the time where my dad experienced ‘the call’ and made a vocational shift into pastoral ministry in the United Methodist Church. I grew up in a preacher’s house, whereas my siblings (who are a bit older) grew up in two very different houses. My uncle was called into the ministry, as well, although much earlier than my dad. And my grandmother served as a Christian educator and pastor, as well. There is a whole lot of pastoral work in my blood.

All of this led to a real mixture of emotions for me when I first felt called into the ministry. It did not help that I got the holy ‘tap on the shoulder’ at such a young age. I was only nine years old when I first experienced the feeling that God might be pushing me in this direction.

I put up a good fight, I think. I had a lot of (read: too many) dream aspirations growing up. I can recall wanting to be a chef, comedian, stage actor, voice actor, cartoonist, musician, comic book artist, Lego designer, engineer, video game designer, and teacher. At one point I wanted to just *be* my 7th grade teacher Bill “Hot-Shot” Carothers (I don’t know if he ever actually liked that nickname, but I led a chant of it often).

As I grew older, I even started to pursue some of these careers. I learned how to play guitar and sing and joined a Christian Rock band called F.A.C.T. with my buddies. I took every theatre course I could and had lead roles in all of the musicals and plays my school and community made available. I won talent shows for stand-up comedy. I made videos and tried to go viral on the early YouTube world. I created Let’s Plays and hoped for a gaming career. I joined and led an improv troupe for four years. I was a bass singer in an acapella group for four years. If it exists in the creative field, I’ve pursued it.

Even in the realm of ministry, I tried my darndest to avoid pastoral work. I tried to be a worship leader. I tried to be a youth director. I worked at a child care. No matter how far I tried to run from God's call - it seemed like I just kept getting dragged back.

You might be asking: Why? To be honest, I just do not know if I have ever been confident that I am cut out for the job. That is not to say that anyone has ever told me that directly or that anything I have done professionally has affirmed that doubt - the doubt just exists somewhere in my psych . It took me four years of serving an actual appointment to realize the source of this problem.

I am not very good during peacetime. In my heart, I am a soldier.

To be clear, I am terrible at exercise, so I am not referring to someone serving in military service. I am not called to that at all. What I mean is this: I have never wanted to do the work of the ministry that happens *after* the fun and exciting part. Conversion is sexy and exhilarating. Bringing someone into the faith, baptism, changing lives; that is the good stuff!

The trouble came with what to do next.

Whenever I started serving in a small, rural community, I learned that there was an expectation that I would pursue this Christian-ese term called 'pastoral care.' No one outside of the ministry talks about this thing. Very few budding evangelists share an incredible calling to go and sit in someone's home drinking tea for a few hours just to talk. As an excitable, raring-to-go young pastor, I was less than thrilled at the very idea.

I should say that this may seem offensive - and I totally understand *why* it may come across that way. But - let us just be honest with one another. This has nothing to do with other people. I loved my congregation. I love people. I would do anything for them. If I learned of a hospitalization, I would drop everything and head that way immediately. It was not a lack of love - it was a lack of clarity. We'll get back to this.

Before we dig any deeper into my shortcomings, let us look at this scripture for just a moment. Jesus is out teaching and working hard - suddenly he gets a bit of a rumble in his tummy. He sees this dude that he knows makes the *best* challah and he says, "Levi, come and follow me, let's grab a bite at your place, yeah?" Everybody learns that Jesus is going to grab some grub with Jesus and Levi and so they tag along for the ride.

While Jesus and the gang are partying it up, there are some folks who have been in the church their whole lives watching from the outside. They are leaders and teachers - called the Pharisees

- who have worked hard to get where they are now. One of the leaders steps up and asks one of Jesus' besties, "Hey - why is Jesus busy eating with tax collectors and other lose- I mean, sinners?" Jesus overhears this complaint and calls out from the party with a mouth full of matzo and says, "Listen here, Derek, those who are well don't need a visit from the doctor - it's the needy who actually are looking for my help. I didn't come for those who think they have it all together, but the sick, sinful seekers."

I always love Jesus' words when he is with sinners. There is a wonderful little bit of Jesus-flavored sass that absolutely emboldens me to turn up my sass level, as well (which, in all wisdom, I know I should *not* do). Jesus cuts straight to the point with the Pharisees here - it is abundantly clear that they do not really *think* they need what Jesus has to offer. He has been teaching; they have not been listening.

I always wonder what the tax collectors and sinners in the room must have thought when Jesus said this to the Pharisees. An easily-offended version of myself wants to cover up these words of Jesus and say that he did not really *mean* those things. These people were not *sick*. *I am not sick*. But Jesus would want to be with me anyway, right?

A more honest version of myself realizes that the truth of Jesus' ministry with the sinners is incredibly abridged in the Bible.

Do you know how much I can fit into a fifteen-minute sermon? Add a few sermons up and I can easily say more word-for-word than all of the collected teachings we have of Jesus together. Jesus had *three whole years* of constant, daily interactions. Over a *thousand* days - mostly unaccounted for in the words we have in the Good Book. What do you think they talked about? I bet Jesus had the best jokes. I bet he memorized everyone's name. I bet he made people feel comfortable without saying a word.

I do not often attribute the 'tough guy' persona to myself. I am in touch with my feminine side and consider myself quite far from the 'alpha male' mentality. But one thing I do sparingly is actually cry. I will experience a similar tingly feeling of catharsis - but actually having liquid emotion drip down my cheeks? Rarely. Whenever I actually *do* get the waterworks going, it stands out in my mind that much more.

That being said, it was very recently that I got to experience that bizarre feeling of having a sad water park happen on my face. Since kicking off this exciting new ministry, I have ironically had very little time to spend in pop culture. Two months ago, I could barely remember the last anime or television show I had seen. Starting in October, I realized this was not good for me and made an intentional effort to start watching *an* episode of *something* every day as a part of my To-Do

List. I decided I would just start with the first anime series on my Watch List on Netflix: Violet Evergarden.

I was not prepared for this show.

If you have never heard of this show, the viewer follows along with the life of the titular Violet Evergarden as she enters into a new vocation as an Auto Memory Doll. This is a pretty wild job. In this world, people either cannot find the words to write, have forgotten how to write or never learned to actually write, so they hire Dolls to draft out letters for them. Apparently, this job all started whenever a man created the job in order for his blind wife to write novels.

Violet is a tragic character - as a child, she was orphaned and never given a name. She was raised to be a human weapon without emotions; designed to be a secret tool for one nation to use to overcome another. Towards the climax of the war between two great nations the nameless girl gets adopted by Major Gilbert Bougainvillea. He takes a liking to her as a person. He gives her a name (Violet Evergarden) and raises her to the best of his ability.

After some time, the big day comes and the Major is called to the battlefield with Violet to be brought along as a battle weapon. Things go well at first but, after an unexpected turn in the battle, the Major ends up getting fatally wounded. He tells Violet to leave him. She refuses and carries him to safety.

On the way, she has both of her arms blown off by gunners. She then uses her teeth to carry him until they find a spot free from gunfire. She weeps at her weakness and he tells her that she must live. He then tells her three words that she does not understand, "I love you." Violet blacks out, not knowing the fate of the Major.

This all leads to current day Violet, with two impressive mechanical prosthetic arms, pursuing a job as an Auto Memory Doll so that she can understand what the Major meant by those three special words.

Sad, right? You have *no idea*.

Each episode is easily self-contained and tells a story of Violet going to work for a random client with a different story. Some of these stories will tear you to pieces. Some will warm you from the inside out. Some will have you sitting on the edge of your seat.

Then, you get to *that* episode. Season 1, Episode 10. Titled, "Loved Ones Will Always Watch Over You." Folks. I can't even express the feelings this episode created. I can only tell you this:

this episode *earned* it's 9.8/10 stars on IMDB (for the uninitiated, that's an incredible score on par with the greatest films *ever made*).

I will not spoil this episode because I genuinely *need* you all to watch it. Just know this: as a father of a beautiful baby girl, nothing has better summed up the intense love that passes between a parent and child.

Here is *why* this is important to our message here: all of these moments and episodes shared between Violet and each client happen during a state of general peacetime. Matters have settled in the nation. People are in a good place, generally. Violet really doesn't *need* to go and sit with these people. But she does anyway. And, when she does, she sits and hears their stories; she experiences who they really are and it makes all the difference.

What makes all of these stories so important is not that the people are all well and wanting to just sit and chat with an Auto Memory Doll to write some random letter. Every single story is one of a sick person in need of a listening ear - the key word there being an ear that *listens*. I am not sure what led this mangaka (author) to have this whole story be about writing letters - but, if I had to guess, it is because someone writing a letter would have to actually *listen*, not just hear.

When I watched the actions of Violet, I cried not only because I felt so incredibly seen in my love for my daughter, but because I also felt like I was seen in my love for others. Suddenly, it made sense to me. I understood why pastoral care was so necessary - and I understood why it had felt so inauthentic beforehand.

See, the truth is that not every person who is sick is in the hospital. I thought the two were mutually exclusive. They are not. Violet learned this, too. Jesus knew it from Day 1. The Pharisees did not get it one bit. I thought that every single person in the church did not need me to come and sit and drink tea with them - and I was absolutely right. There were some Pharisees. There are always some people who are well - maybe too well for their own good. But there are people who are sick and you just cannot see it.

What can we do about it? How does any of this change anything at all?

The truth lies in what happened on those thousand plus days with Jesus that are not documented in the Bible. What did Jesus do with those sinners? Biblical scholars might suggest correctly that much of Jesus' ministry is simply *surmised* in the four gospels. He would deliver ideas like those parables and sermons in multiple places and times. This is very likely true.

But what if there is more?

What if some of those times were not documented because they were downright *boring*? What if, sometimes, Jesus just *sat there* and he *listened*? Didn't say anything profound, didn't dive into their heads, didn't offer prosperity or an easy way out - just listened. Just heard what the sick person needed to say. What if, sometimes, that is all it really takes? We can run from the ministry all we want, but the truth is that we sometimes minister to others by accident - just by listening to a hurting person.

At the end of it all, it might help just to acknowledge that not *everything* needs to end in fireworks and five-thousand lives turned to Christ. Sometimes the smaller times are way more impactful. Deep, not wide. We all want the loud excitement. The big parade. The climactic battle. But, the truth is this: peace time matters.

PEACE DAY 1

Peace In Common Ground

Piccolo (*Dragon Ball Z*)

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.

- 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

PEACE DAY 2

Peace In Victory

Tanjiro (*Demon Slayer*)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

- Matthew 5:43-46 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

PEACE DAY 3

Peace In Community

Papyrus (*Undertale*)

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

- Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

PEACE DAY 4

Peace That Protects

Groot (*Guardians of the Galaxy*)

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 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

PEACE DAY 5

Peace That Steps Up

Goku (*Dragon Ball Z*)

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

- Matthew 25:40 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

Sabbath of Peace

In a world that is arguably obsessed with victory, success, and zero sum games, it can be hard to even consider something like peace. It feels like we are so far from equity that there is little sense in even hoping for it. However, the power of peace lies in the individual power that we have. Peace is a decision made by a person. It can be accepted or rejected, but it has to start with an olive branch. As you reflect on this Sabbath day, consider the power of your self. You matter and can make a difference. Below are a few ideas for acts of contemplation:

CONSIDER PEACE:

- Go to the list of people that you have unfollowed from your Facebook feed or someone who you can't stand seeing their posts show up on your feed. Pause a moment and consider why they were in your circle in the first place. Write down all of the things that make them human.
- Hand write an apology to someone that you feel you've hurt - recently or in the past. Consider sending them that letter. If you can't think of anyone, write yourself a letter to your future self, reminding yourself of your worth. Keep it in a special spot for when you might need some encouragement.
- Come up with your own contemplative method and share it with us a checkpointchurch@gmail.com.

COMMUNAL EXERCISE:

Consider hosting a Zoom call or small group gathering with people you don't know. Maybe it's four or five folks from work you've never spoken to or some random people from the Checkpoint Church Discord server. Agree to an hour or two of non-judgmental open conversation and see what you can learn about one another.

WEEK 3

JOY

JOY DAY 0

The Joy of Us

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

- Luke 15:1-7 (NRSV)

I have never really liked to sweat. I have heard of athletes who long for the infamous ‘runner’s high’ that one receives from doing a bout of hard work. There is a neurological release of just the right stuff that gives someone a feeling of pure euphoria. I have envied it for some time. Here is the thing, though: I just plain ol’ don’t like the work required to do it.

I can remember when I came home from college in my final year. I had graduated in December, which was earlier than my peers and then-fiancée. I had six months of living at home before I would stand before my sweetheart and pledge myself to her forever.

I was also getting a bit husky. I was the heaviest I had ever been and I had nothing but time on my hands. I decided, with some encouragement from a visual novel, that this would be the time where I would push myself to get healthy.

Every morning, I set an alarm to wake up extra early. I donned warm fitness wear that I had just procured from the K-Mart and I set myself to a daily five-mile jog to start off my day. I drank only water, treating myself to Southern sweet tea only on a ‘cheat day.’ I counted calories. I was determined. I lost thirty-five pounds and was nearing my desired weight for myself. I expected a dramatic turn around in my life. I felt like I should feel how Brad Pitt feels constantly.

But I never got that feeling. I never got the runner’s high.

Then it got *hot*. Which, for me, is anything above fifty degrees fahrenheit. It had been pretty easy to start exercising in January. I could always layer and shed the excess clothes as I warmed up. By the time mid-March hit, I was in a tank and gym shorts and steaming like a Trekkie at a Star Wars convention.

When push came to shove, I still did not have that runner's high nor did I have the motivation of the cool weather. Add on to that I had already met my goal - I was doomed. I stopped my workout plan post-haste.

Now, contrary to the usual story, I did not put all of the weight back on right away. I have gone to and fro in years since, but I have never again found that same motivation that led to those five-mile jogs. There was something circumstantial about that.

These days, I am much more likely to go for a walk with my family. Even if I do not want to, I normally wind up walking anyway, because I enjoy the company that I am with regardless of my desire for exercise.

Truth be told, I do not think that exercise has ever been something I am missing. That is one of the ninety-nine sheep. Not the one that is missing from my herd.

Before you get going, I understand that Jesus is not telling everyone in this passage to go and sign up to order a Bowflex. Or I guess Peloton might be a more timely reference. Like I said: I am just not into exercise. Anyway - I understand that is not what this text is directly *about* in the context. But isn't it?

Let us first just take this text piece by piece. Jesus is talking to a bunch of farmers and common folk. Either these people *are* shepherds or they are best friends with one. Jesus is meeting these people where they are and talking to them in a parable with which they can empathize personally.

The dudeski in the story has a herd of one hundred sheep. One gets away for whatever reason. Jesus does something important here: without question, Jesus assumes that any shepherd worth his staff would go after the missing delinquent. The shepherd looks *until the sheep is found*. We don't get to know how long that takes. Once the sheep is found, the shepherd brings the sheep back.

Then it gets wacky. The shepherd invites the neighborhood and throws a doggone rager for the missing sheep. Everyone that is close enough to hear - this shepherd shouts from the mountaintops, "I found my lost sheep!" Raucous applause. Curtain close.

With the story finished, Jesus shares the moral of the story: this is how it goes when one sinful person repents and is 'found.' Just from the one who is found, there is, in Jesus' own words, great rejoicing! Joy!

Have you ever found a lost sock? Or managed to find your car in the parking lot after searching high and low? Did you happen to rejoice afterwards? Did you tell everyone in your life the good news? Maybe - but something tells me you probably did a quick victory pose and moved on with your life, right?

We do not get to be privy to the reaction of the audience to which Jesus speaks. I can't help but wonder what the look on their faces must have been. Were they in absolute accord with Jesus? "Yes, of course, we absolutely celebrate. We throw a party every time. And we absolutely search for every lost sheep. We don't stop until they are found."

Maybe that is the truth. I will leave that work to historical analysts. In my imagination, there is another viable possibility here: what if the crowd is positively dumbfounded by this? "Uh, hey Jesus, that's not really how this works. Yeah, we have never actually done that before. That is not something that we normally do. That doesn't line up with how we have always done things."

Perhaps Jesus is not drawing a comparison between how things really are for the shepherds; maybe Jesus is setting a goal to be attained in our IRL expectations. Could it be that Jesus is actually calling out the shepherds on their B.S. and giving them the ol' one-two gut punch?

In the first generation of Pokémon games (Red, Blue, Yellow), the player character is faced with a decision before they enter Mt. Moon. They have come a bit of the way in their adventure. By this point, they have gained a starter, met a rival, had some low-level trainer battles, caught some bugs and maybe even a Pikachu, and even beaten their first Gym Leader in Pewter City. One thing they have not done is catch a fish-type Pokémon.

The trainer looks through their roster - they have some fighting-type, grass, electric, normal, poison - depending on starter they may even have a water- or fire-type. But nothing close to a fish - unless one counts the starter Squirtle. The player then goes into the Pokémon Center outside of Mt. Moon. They have just faced some tough trainers, maybe even caught the adorable Jigglypuff. But a cave sits before them. Mystery awaits.

Inside the Pokémon Center waits a mysterious man who draws in the player's attention.

"Hey, kid," the grungy man whispers, "I'll let you have a secret Pokémon - a Magikarp - for just 500 Poké-Yen!"

The player's palms sweat with uncertainty - what decision is the right one? 500 Poké-Yen is a pretty penny, but not so much they can't afford it.. Not to mention that the opportunity to just *buy* a Pokémon has not been an option by this point in the game. What have they got to lose,

right? They hand over the 500 Poké-Yen to the crook, who snickers as the exchange takes place, “No refunds!”

As the player looks at the Magikarp, they see a dopey weak Pokémon who does not even have any moves that can do damage. This means that the one process that might allow the Pokémon to level up is taken away - the only way to raise the Magikarp’s level is to put it out first, then swap to another Pokémon team member, sharing the experience points with both. An irritating process, to say the least.

Here lies an impasse - the player character must make a choice. Call it a loss and put the Magikarp in the Box to never be used again? Or grin and bear the process - raising the Magikarp level-by-level until something changes in the pointless fish?

Most players likely knew enough going into this encounter and cleverly avoided the temptation here, realizing a Magikarp can be caught easily a bit later in the game. Similarly, any players that took the bait and purchased the Magikarp likely just put the weakling aside - survival of the fittest.

But there is a third possibility that gives my child-like heart a twirl. What about the rare player who goes into the game blind, falls for the trick, and *perseveres* in training that Magikarp?

Imagine, if you will, their face at the moment when it all changed. This person sits for likely hours (or at least what feels like hours) grinding away at the system, levelling up their Pokémon again and again. Level 10, no change. Level 15, no change. Level 19, still no change.

Suddenly, right when they are ready to call it quits, the Magikarp reaches Level 20 and that goofy-looking goldfish starts to glow with that classic iridescent white glow. Behind the light, the fish warps, mashes and molds in the same evolutionary cycle animation that the player has seen with their strongest team members.

With unbridled glee, the player lets out a scream of delight as the light fades and reveals a gigantic sea serpent with piercing features, gnarly fangs, and a cool blue scaly exterior. The little 22- pound fish from moments ago has transformed into a 21-foot-long, 518-pound atrocity known as Gyarados. All of that hard work is made evident in the reward of one of the stronger Pokémon in the first generation.

Continue to imagine with me what might happen next - does this happen on the playground at school? Do they go and tell every other kid trading baseball cards? Do they even tell their unsuspecting teacher who doesn’t have an ever-loving idea what is going on? Do they go to the principal’s office to call home and tell their mom, dad, siblings, whoever-will-listen the good

news? Do they climb to the top of the monkey bars and exclaim that they've become the proud owner of Gyarados?

Confession Time: I have always felt bad for the ninety-nine sheep in the story. I have always thought that I am likely one of them. I have been in church my whole life. I have been a Christian pretty much the whole time. Sure, I waver and falter - but most of my life I have been one of the ninety-nine. Why should the one who wanders away get all the rejoicing? Why should they get to enjoy the party? Why does the shepherd tell everyone about *them*?

If we are being honest, I would wager many of us have felt that way before. Why should someone else get rewarded if we are the ones putting in all of the effort? I get that - and so did Jesus. I am certain that there were some in the crowd who were hearing this message from Jesus that day who knew what Jesus was doing.

Some of these folks had worked all of their lives following the Jewish law *to the letter*. Then Jesus comes along and starts spouting out all of this nonsense about love, welcoming, and an inclusive God who wants to welcome in the sinner, the tax collector, and the prostitute.

Why should we worry about the one who is lost? Why should we even bother with some weak and measly Magikarp? Why should I care one iota about getting physical exercise without feeling the rewarding serotonin-like euphoria?

Simply put, it is *because* of the ninety-nine.

The reason that Jesus tells us this story is not because the one is 'more special' or 'less worth it;' it is because of the great reunion that happens between the one *and* the ninety-nine. The gift of the return. The climactic moment that the division ends and the two become one in pure joy. With Jesus, there is no either/or scenario. There is no 'us versus them.' None of that exists, and because of that we should be in a state of absolute rejoicing!

What does this joy mean for us here in the midst of this time of Advent? This might be the most important word for those of us in the United States of America as we contemplate the act of preparing for Jesus' return. There is a great deal of rejoicing that happens when the two become one, when the division ends, when acceptance and love are shared between others.

As for this pastor's view on the current state of society, I see no current reason at all for rejoicing. I have never seen more division. I have never seen more hatred. Whether it is found in the hands of the one or the ninety-nine does not really matter at this point - the real question is this: are we even *trying* to find the one? Are we out seeking? Or have we given up? Have we been convinced that Gyarados isn't worth it? That I should just give up on my health?

Friends, I do not want you to think that I am making some bold political declaration. My statement is deeper and more important than *anything* even tangentially *related* to politicking. Compared to the level of importance of Jesus' standard of rejoicing, politics are a mere child's plaything. I want us to consider where the one sheep might be in our lives; in our families; in our communities; in our country; in our world.

I want us to think of what we are really called to in this life.

When Jesus calls us to love God and love our neighbor, where are we simply falling short? Where have we stopped looking? Jesus may seem to assume that the shepherd searches until the sheep is found, but, if we're being honest, we know that just isn't the case. Get out of your comfort zone. Get out of your bubble. Seek out the joy that can only come from a joy of people together. Seek out the joy of *us*.

JOY DAY 1

Joy In Suffering

Emma (*The Promised Neverland*)

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

- 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

JOY DAY 2

Joy With Humility

Izuku Midoriya (*My Hero Academia*)

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

- Ephesians 4:2-3 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

JOY DAY 3

Joy In The Journey

Luffy (*One Piece*)

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

- James 1:2-4 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

JOY DAY 4

Joy In Repair

Tom Nook (*Animal Crossing*)

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

- Philippians 4:6-8 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

JOY DAY 5

Joy In Opportunity

Superman (*DC Comics*)

For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

- Esther 4:14 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.

Sabbath of Joy

Joy is arguably one of those terms that can be given the title ‘Christian-ese.’ It means something potentially completely different between a secular definition and a Biblical one. Perhaps the greatest irony provided by this division is the perversion of joy and Sabbath. Too often, Sabbath has been seen as a soul-sucking act devoid of joy. It’s a thing that takes things away from us - robbing joy. The reality is the opposite: Sabbath is filled with joyful (intentional) activity. If mowing your grass brings you closer time with God and brings you joy, please mow your grass on a Sunday. There - you’ve got permission from a clergyperson. Below are a few ideas for acts of contemplation:

CONSIDER JOY:

- Develop, practice and produce an in-home flash mob. Find the perfect song that brings a smile to your face, craft a dance number, bring in those who live with you, and record the performance for social media (or maybe *not* lol).
- Think of someone who has given you a huge sense of joy in the past few months. Hand-write them a letter recounting the experience and thanking them for providing that to you. Snail-mail the letter (even if they live with you) and anticipate the joy that they will experience when they get this affirmation of their actions.
- Find a magazine and cut out all of the pictures of joyful people. Create a collage or work of art with these clippings and see how this choir of joyful people turns out.
- Come up with your own contemplative method and share it with us a checkpointchurch@gmail.com.

COMMUNAL EXERCISE:

Joy is infectious. It’s hard to see someone in a state where they are experiencing true joy and hold back a smile. If there’s one area that could use a good bit more joy, it’s social media and online content creators. Go to YouTube, Twitch, or some other site where someone is actively creating content. Type in your favorite thing that you’d like to see a video on (a game you like, a show you watch, or a question you have). Type in the chat or comment section something that made you smile from their video or content. See how they respond and if others in the chat catch on to your infectious positivity. Share your story with us in the Discord at the end of the day and let’s see where we spread joy together that day. Include a uniting hashtag like #CheckpointJoy and see if there is someone else in the chat that might see your comment and add on to the joy.

WEEK 4

LOVE

LOVE DAY 0

Love Passed Down

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

- 1 John 4:7-21 (NRSV)

I love love. Don't you? How can anyone think any different, right? I mean, there must be a reason why millions of folks find themselves cozied up under a blanket each year to watch the endless badgering of Hallmark movies. Nauseating instances of bizarre and predictable love stories over and *over*. And we love it!

Even a curmudgeon like myself cannot help but smile whenever the beautiful blonde ex-lawyer from the Big City™ moves back to her Small Hometown™ and falls madly in love with hunky, but definitely once awkward, country boy who saves her from the ice hole that she fell in while ice skating as practice for the Olympics. Every cheesy joke, every cutesy line, every washed-up child actor - man, I eat it up every *single time*.

Why do you think it is that we love these stories enough to produce an entire movie genre? I grew up in a Small Hometown™ and I can certify that I never once witnessed a climactic meet-cute like in a Hallmark flick.

Is it just our active imaginations? Do we really *want* that kind of hook-up for ourselves? Is Tinder not enough? Where is the movie where the girl puts her ice cold feet on the man's back and he screams in icy-hot pain? Now, that's *real* love.

One of my favorite aspects of preaching, writing, and teaching are the opportunities where I get to talk about love. I am crazy head-over-heels in love with my high-school sweetheart. I fall more in love with our beautiful daughter by the minute.

But even those two instances of love that I experience every single day do not quite manage to encompass the incredible love that I experience from Christ. When I get to share that kind of love with others... man, I just get so excited about it.

I think that the Biblical authors loved love, too. Have you ever read the Song of Solomon? If you think Hallmark movies are cheesy, dive deep in the steamy intimacy of that Old Testament book.

In the NRSV, the word 'love' appears 538 times. Out of 1,189 available chapters, that word could be nearly divided out to every other chapter. Of course, that's not how it works - the passage above uses the word 28 times alone. That's a lot of love.

This passage also makes one of my favorite claims in all of the Bible: God *is* love.

This truth from John the Evangelist is, in my opinion, just as incredible of a revelation as John's other bold proclamation from John 1 about the Word. John is not being shy or pulling any punches in this passage - make no mistake that this truly *is* a bold proclamation.

I remember when I first learned that there were different types of love present in the Bible. No doubt you have heard of them, as well, but we will brush up on them for our purposes here.

Eros - Romantic love. The intense sexual desire for someone. Found in Samson's love for Delilah or King David's pursuit of Bathsheba.

Philia - Affectionate love, also known as brotherly love. No passion or sexual impulse, founded on respect or admiration. Love amongst the disciples and the early church.

Storge - Familiar love. Typically viewed as the love that a parent might have for a child and potentially vice versa. A deeper bond by blood or strong family-like ties. Like the love from the mother to her demon-possessed daughter.

Pragma - Enduring love. Practical love that continues after the 'honeymoon phase' ends. This is a matured love that continues past the passion of the *eros* love. This can be seen in Jacob and Rachel or Ruth and Boaz.

Philautia - Self love. This is a healthy corollary for self-esteem. It can also be seen as good self-discipline or spiritual discipline. Think of Daniel refusing to eat unclean food that the King tried to serve him.

Ludas - Playful love. This is the gross Song of Solomon stuff I was referring to earlier. Imagine the butterfly feeling of a first kiss - or perhaps whenever the small town hunk rescues us from an ice hole.

Agape - Unconditional love. This is the love that Jesus calls us to in the Greatest Commandment. The desire to love others as we love ourselves. Without condition or respect, the act of loving someone like this is based on nothing but fellow humanity.

Whenever I was first taught these, I was told that *agape* love is the love that represents God. Whenever John tells us that 'God is love,' this is what I was taught that meant. As I've grown older and experienced more of the love from God, I've discovered that this understanding falls a bit short.

If there is one pet peeve that you will find in my ministry, I am especially nit-picky anytime that someone attempts to *limit* God. Acknowledging human shortcomings, that is easy. Finding Biblical contradictions, we can talk about it. Interpretive differences, we are all good. But... telling me that something is impossible for God - we are gonna have problems.

Now, I am not suggesting that the person who taught me the forms of love directly tried to limit God - but it is an unfortunate oversight to think that the awesome and perfecting *agape* love is the only form present in God.

God is love. But not just *any* love. God is *all* love.

Those butterfly feelings when you catch the eyesight of someone across the bar? Yeah, God's there. Putting a bandaid on the latest boo-boo of your precocious progeny? There's God! Seeing those adorable two retiree's sitting on the same side of the booth after 45 years of marriage? God. Taking a day of self-care and getting that massage you've needed? God's giving that

backrub, bb. And - yes - God *wants* you to have a happy and fulfilling sex life. Stop blushing - it's true!

God is love and love is *everywhere*.

Can we mess that up? Yes, of course. Giving in to those butterfly feelings while our spouse sits next to us, helicoptering over our kid to the point they cannot breathe, abusing your spouse for those 45 years, self-medicating and avoiding responsibility in attempted acts of self-care, or only satisfying our own carnal desires in the act of sex - those are ways that we sap God out of the love and replace with something more sinister.

So, what can we *do* about it? If God is love, what does John want us to do with the information? How can that radically change our lives? How can change anything as we prepare for this season of Advent? What should we do in our anticipation?

John helps us out with two ways to best do this.

We must see that if God is love and Jesus wants us to become *like* God, then we are the final product of the equation.

God is love → we are called to be like God → we are love.

Once we acknowledge that we are called to be love in this world, as God is love in this world, then we have to figure out *how*.

One of my favorite anime of all time is *Fullmetal Alchemist*. I first watched it when I would sneak downstairs and stay up late to watch Adult Swim on Cartoon Network. It was haunting, smart, and changed my life forever. I got hooked and bought the manga as they were translated in the United States. I watched both series and all of the movies - I even played the DS and PS2 game adaptations.

The best part of *Fullmetal Alchemist* has to be the incredible characters that have been lovingly crafted by Hiromu Arakawa. They all have depth and epic backstories - many of which she lets the reader imagine on their own. Some of these characters are incredibly sad or even downright heartbreaking - Rose, Hughes, Tucker and Nina; even 'bad guys' like Greed bring a tear to your eye.

Some of these characters are just downright silly.

One fan favorite is the inhumanly muscular Major Alex Louis Armstrong. Perfectly voiced by Chris Sabat in the English dub, this character comes to life in every scene and is immediately the focus of attention. He appears to be a literal giant with a body made entirely of muscles - which are often seen, given that his shirt rips off with every flex (and he flexes often).

He is mostly bald, with the exception of a single golden curl on his head and a perfectly coiffed blonde mustache. His eyes are serious and piercing with beautiful eyelashes and his shiny dome is almost always accompanied by his trademark pink shine marks floating around like a halo.

Amongst the many absurd lines spouted by Armstrong, there is one that stands out in the minds of even the most casual fan. Nearly every action done by Armstrong - whether it be his signature alchemy style, chopping wood, cooking dinner, taking walks, beautification techniques, whatever - is one that has been passed down in the Armstrong Family from GENERATION TO GENERATION!

Aside from being a gag that always makes me laugh, it seems that everything that Armstrong does spawns from a central place: his lineage. Armstrong is, without a doubt, one who is incredibly proud about where he comes from. He is proud of who he is and how he got there. Taken a step further, Armstrong is a representative of his family and - with every act that he does - he bears the honor of his family as his burden. Imagine if he were to fail... that is a stain on the Armstrong legacy.

For Armstrong, it is not just a blessing. It is a burden. His lineage is not something taken lightly - it is an honor and one that he takes very, very seriously.

What if this is what is lacking from our lives that gives us such love for Hallmark movies?

Do we watch these cheesy films not because we want that for ourselves, but instead because we want to remember those warm, fuzzy feelings of sitting down with our parents and thinking about our future love lives? Are we using these movies just to fill a void that we really just want to pass on a childlike love to our children, family, and friends?

I think that John would be amazed by the passionate honor present in Major Alex Louis Armstrong. I also think it might be that exact kind of honor that John wants to commend upon all those who have experienced God's all-encompassing love.

Imagine, if you will, that we saw the love that we have experienced from God not just as the incredible blessing that it is - but that we also saw it as an honorable burden. What if we went around loving people in ways that were truly unbelievable - not for our own sake, but because of the love that has been given to us from 'GENERATION TO GENERATION?'

It is an honor to be able to share with someone the gift of love. It is also an incredible burden - because we have the capacity to royally screw it up. Consider this the next time you're given the chance to love someone - any kind of love.

Where has God been in your life? Where have you experienced the love you are offering? God is there - what did God do for you? How can you do that - how can you be someone's next experience of God? What an awesome challenge!

Most importantly, I hope you will consider that love is an infectious force of nature. Like Armstrong's family values, how we love is not limited to just ourselves - it continues on in the lives of those affected forever. It is a generational thing. I hope you will consider not just the love you are experiencing - but think of the love passed down.

LOVE DAY 1

Love That Sacrifices

The Elric Brothers (*Fullmetal Alchemist*)

God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

- 1 Corinthians 12:24b-26 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.
LOVE DAY 2

Love That Stays

Uncle Iroh (*Avatar: The Last Airbender*)

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him.

- Job 2:11 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.
LOVE DAY 3

Love That Persists

Frisk (*Undertale*)

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

- Galatians 6:7-10 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you. I love you. You matter.
ALMOST THE BIG DAY

CHRISTMAS EVE

Jesus (*The Holy Bible*) (duh)

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

- Luke 2:8-18 (NRSV)

Notes:

Three Good Things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer Requests:

God loves you so much that He sent His only Son. You matter that much.

Sabbath of Love

Love is so much more than affection. It seems sometimes like everyone and their mother has written a self-help book on love. There may not be any other factor of life that we all like to think ourselves as professionals. Every Hallmark movie focuses on the traditional tropes of unrequited and unexpected love. Odds are, the themes we've talked about this week have been far from the love present in these self-help guides and chick-flicks. For this Sabbath day, consider taking the time to sit in and experience a deeper, more intimate love. Below are a few ideas for acts of contemplation:

CONSIDER LOVE:

- Write out the outline for your own 'self-help love guide.' Look at the table of contents from other books and trim the fat or parody them in order to create a guide that better lines up with your understanding of love.
- Consider three people who you love that haven't seen you or heard your voice in a long time. What would you say to them? What do you wish they knew that had happened to you recently? Give at least one of them a call and do them that favor.
- Set an alarm on your phone for the same time every hour (e.g. 10:26am, 11:26am, 12:26pm). Every time your alarm goes off, pause and think of someone you love. Go and check out their Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook profile. Scroll for a few minutes and like or comment on anything that makes you smile.
- Come up with your own contemplative method and share it with us a checkpointchurch@gmail.com.

COMMUNAL EXERCISE:

Monday, December 27th, 2020. On that day, treat yourself to lunch out to eat with a drive through window. By this act, you will be loving yourself and practicing a good act of self-help. Once you get to the pay window, pay for the car behind you. By this act, you will be loving your neighbor and potentially turning around their day. Sometimes it's the easiest tasks that make the biggest impact. Imagine if our whole community did this - the more that participate, the greater the chance that we could serve two people from the same circle. What if two people both experienced the same love on the same day? What a powerful testament of our reach as a group spreading love.

Epilogue

Four weeks ago, we set ourselves to the goal of preparation and anticipation of something great.

As Christians, we set our sights on preparing a world worthy of Christ's climactic return. We put our hope into something beyond our control. We put our love into those who do not deserve it. We put our joy into moments that stretched us. We put our peace into times of division and hurt. We did this in an effort to make a difference - to make an impact.

As human beings, we set our sights on anticipating a great change to take place in this broken world we inhabit. We put our hopes into one another and the bonds that we share. We put our love into those who have come before us and those that are passing it on to by our actions. We put our joy into the community that we are forming. We put our peace into time well spent with those who needed someone to just listen.

And now., here we are. Did you find it?

Did you find your moment?

As I sit here writing this, I hope and pray that God did something amazing with this time.

I hope that you have laughed. I hope that you have smiled. I hope that you have cried.

I hope that you shared moments with family, with friends, with long lost besties, with people you hate, with your arch-nemesis, with your dog, with yourself and - if you were willing - with God. I hope you met someone new on our Twitch streams. I hope you made a friend in the YouTube comment section (proof there is a God, right there).

I hope you have not found my words too boring or think that the videos have droned on. I hope that you do not mind my spelling mistakes or grammatical errors. I hope you made use of one, two, or all of the devotional guides. I hope you have found something amazing in practicing 'Three Good Things.' I hope you have found my cute perler bead ornaments as adorable as I have.

I hope that you have been stretched. I hope you have rolled your eyes. I hope that you have found some aching wounds and given them some tender care. I hope that you have felt supported. I hope that you have come to grips with someone and found common ground. I hope that you have been bold, taken risks, and grown from who you were before this all started.

More than anything, my greatest hope is that you have felt at home here.

I hope you know that you are seen here. You are loved here. You are trusted here. You are wanted here. We do not care where you have been or who you used to be - we just want the 'you' that's right here. If everything else was pointless, I will count everything a big success if even one person reading this knows that they are truly *welcome* at Checkpoint Church.

Why? Because this Advent has been different than any other Advent before. And it is not because of anime characters or memes or puns. It is because of you. We could not have done this without you. Has this been *our* Advent, after all? I believe it has.

What makes this night different from any other night?

It is all about *you*, beautiful person. It is all about a bunch of nerds getting together every day for four weeks and spending time with one another in active hope, love, joy, and peace.

Oh, I hope you hoped.

Oh, I hope you loved.

Oh, I hope you rejoiced.

Oh, I hope you were peaceful.

At the end of it all, it is always tempting to make parting the sweetest of sorrows. To say goodbye, to move forward past these moments we have shared - but we do not actually *have* to do that. The most incredible part of Advent is that it isn't the *end* of the story - it is the beginning! We are just getting started. Christ is born - a new life is starting. Hallelujah, the year has only just begun! Let us take this energy, this growth, this excitement and push it forward with us into the exciting new world we are entering.

Who knows what the year holds for us? We can dream and share the amazing possibilities with one another until we're blue in the face, but we'll only really know when we dive headfirst and *do the thing*. So, let's do it!

What makes this life different from any other life?

Let's find out. Together.

Now, one last time during our time together this Advent:
God loves you. I love you. You matter.

Nathan Webb, Nerd Pastor
Checkpoint Church

November 25th, 2020

About Checkpoint Church

Checkpoint Church is the church for nerds, geeks, and gamers.

We are an up-and-coming digital church plant based out of Denver, NC. We began preliminary gathering in August of 2020 with a majority of our time being spent streaming on Twitch, bonding on social media, or building relationships on Discord.

Our key focus is on creating a welcoming, inclusive community that especially focuses on those from nerd and pop culture areas. By our relationships, we hope to bring our community closer to God and closer to each other.

To support our ministry, consider donating directly to church by using our [Planning Center](#) or by subscribing to our community on [Twitch](#). You can also support us by purchasing merchandise on our [Teespring](#).

If you're interested in becoming involved with our community, feel free to join us on any and all of our various social media platforms and communities. The **best** way that you can get involved right away is to join our [Discord](#) community group. We are most active on our [Twitch](#).

[Facebook](#) - [Twitter](#) - [Instagram](#) - [YouTube](#) - [Website](#) - [Podcast](#)

About the Nerd Pastor

In addition to a passionate love for God and the Church, Nathan Webb is a major nerd in just about every way. He loves video games, anime, cartoons, comic books, tech, and his fellow nerds. He can be found lurking on some visual novel subreddit, reading the latest shōnen entry, or playing the newest Farm Sim.

He is married to the love of his life, Logan, and the two have a daughter, Norah. Nathan is an ordained provisional elder in the United Methodist Church in the Western North Carolina Conference.

If you're interested in booking the Nerd Pastor for your podcast, church, or conference, [click here for more information](#).

Personal Socials: [Twitter](#) - [YouTube](#) - [Instagram](#)