

**CHRIST CHURCH
COMMUNITY
2020
ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL**

Greetings to You in Christ's Name!

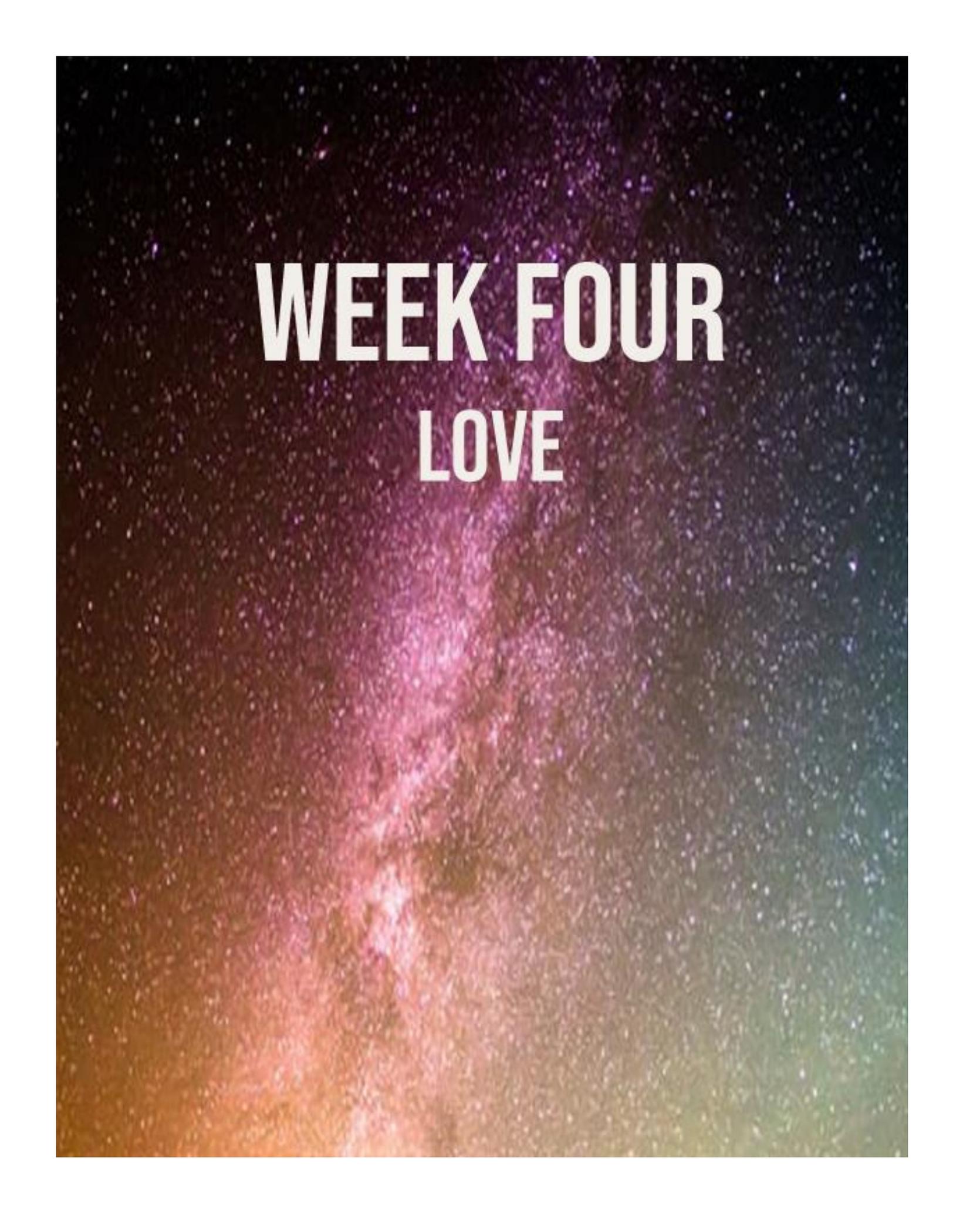
This year has been full of grief in the life of the Church and the world in general. The COVID-19 pandemic, like death, has one power. It has an insatiable appetite for taking things away. It has taken memories, opportunities, resources, traditions, and in the case of 250,000+ Americans, life itself. The pandemic has caused us to part with many beloved rituals and meaningful practices.

This year members of Christ Church and our friends have collaborated to create a new tradition that cannot be taken away from us. Our collective work has resulted in a community crowdsourced advent devotional. These writings are the sacred fruits of our labor. They include reflections on scriptures from people of diverse faith backgrounds and walks of life.

It is my prayer that you find hope, peace, joy, and love in these reflections. May the Spirit that surpasses all understanding be with you this advent season and prepare you for the birth of the Christ-Child.

With gratitude for you,

Rev. Dan Stark,
Pastor, Christ Church UCC, Milwaukee, WI.



WEEK FOUR
LOVE

LOVE | Zephaniah 3:14-17

With hats that look like sliced cheese, people clothed in brightly colored green and gold and standing amid shouts of "Go Pack Go!!!", Zephaniah would have felt right at home. He was no straight laced, bean-counting statistician. There was no reciting of dry historical facts or figures. Rather, a more appropriate picture of Zephaniah would include a set of pompoms, a megaphone and a full repertoire of crowd inspiring cheers. He was nothing if not a full-fledged cheerleader, a totally appropriate approach for a prophet to King Josiah, who came to power at 8 years old. Zephaniah was the constant encouragement that energized King Josiah and prepared him for the task of leading God's people.

His understanding of and appreciation for the power of attitude to motivate and inspire, has been validated at every political convention, sporting event and marketing rally that has occurred to this day. He knew that how we act and feel affects how others feel around us. His encouragement to King Josiah, led to the revival of the kingdom, to a moral and God centered lifestyle not seen in generations.

After an era of darkness, God's people began to step out into the light, led by the king and motivated and encouraged by the prophet Zephaniah.

Lord we pray: Rejoice over us and with us as we prepare with great anticipation for the celebrations that mark our remembrance of the coming of the Christ Child. The coming of the Christ Child that was the ultimate sign of your love for us. Refresh and renew our spirits so that through us, others may come to hear and know the good news. Lastly, we ask that in your love for us you would exalt over us with loud singing that would inspire, encourage and sustain us as we move from these dark days, into the future light you have promised.

Paul Mayeshiba, Christ Church

CHRIST | Luke 2:15-20

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." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them...

The story of Jesus birth was one of the first stories I remember being told by my teachers in Sunday School. Living in a city, in a house, with a car I could not understand it.

After traveling many miles with Mary, pregnant riding on a donkey, Joseph and Mary arrived in a town called Bethlehem. The city was crowded with people because someone called them there. Joseph knocked on many doors. They were turned away because all of the inns were full. They needed to rest and maybe Mary would have her baby. Someone felt sorry for them and said they could use the stable behind the inn. As a child I thought...with animals, straw and the smell, oh *yuck*.

Where was Bethlehem and did it snow on Christmas like it does here? How many miles did they have to ride that donkey? Where was the hospital? I was born in a hospital. As a child I felt this was just another story, like in my picture books.

As I grew into my teens, I was able to realize this happened many years ago, years before I was born. There were parts of the story I did not understand. Many of my girlfriends were Catholic and their church revered Mary. In our church Mary is not a saint. She was the one visited by an angel and she had a virgin birth. That part I did not understand. That is not how babies are conceived...as a teen I knew that!

Mary gave birth to a baby boy. So, on the day Mary became a mother she was like any other women who gave birth. Needless to say, this was different. She gave birth to a special baby boy, our Savior Jesus. She would face a life of one whose son would walk the land teaching people about God. He would be criticized and loved. He would eventually give his life for all who believed.

The pain Mary or any mother feels at the death of a child is unexplainable. For Mary, this is why her son was put on this earth.

As a Christian adult I believe, but I still do not know how many miles they traveled nor what went on in that stable. All I know is that Jesus was born to all of us. A bright star brought shepherds, Wise Men and many others to Jesus that night.

It is now the year of 2020. Many still spread the news of Jesus, through words, actions and deeds.

Susie Klockow, Christ Church

WORD | John 1:1-4

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people...

If Mark, Matthew, and Luke were students in a class together, their teacher would have had some questions for them. These “Three Amigos” are known as synoptic gospels because they include many of the same stories and generally follow a similar storyline. Mark is considered the earliest written of the canonical gospels and as such, is thought of as source material for the others. It’s almost as if Matthew and Luke borrowed Mark’s homework and expanded on it. John’s Gospel, on the other hand, is categorically different. John was taking a different class altogether. His account of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection and contains stories, accounts, and language not found in any other gospels. Although Mark’s Gospel doesn’t have a birth narrative like Matthew and Luke, John’s Gospel has a birth narrative of a totally different caliber. Whereas the other gospels give us a very microscopic look at Jesus’ birth with a focus on Mary and Joseph, John gives us a macroscopic view of Jesus’ origin. John tells us that Jesus was not born in a manger, but Jesus Christ, the Word, was with God in the beginning. Through Him, John tells us, all things came into being. He was the life and light of all people. John explicitly tells us about Jesus’ divinity and connection to God the Father.

What is the greatest Christmas gift you can remember? Who gave it to you? Was it a want or a need? Was there an expectation that you would give something back in return? That the only beloved Son of God – would be given by God as a gift freely given to a hostile world is astounding. Although John does not have the nativity story that we have grown to love to hear on Christmas Eve, I believe his message can augment our understanding of the importance of God’s greatest gift to the world. For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only beloved Son – the One who was with God from the beginning – the One with whom the Spirit dwells – the Light of the world! Because John tells us this about Jesus, I believe it makes the gift of the Christ-Child in the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke even more important. Furthermore, that we are loved and saved by the Christ that John describes – shows us how much God loves each of us. As we prepare our hearts and homes for Christmas this Advent, may we be reminded of the significance of God’s gift to each of us in Christ.

*Giver-of-all,
This year as we celebrate the birth of Christ,
May we be reminded that you gave,
The greatest gift of all for all.*

Rev. Dan Stark, Christ Church

TREASURED | Luke 2:19

"But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

The word "treasure" conjures up all sorts of vivid images in my mind. I think of chests full of gold doubloons from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. I can practically see dragons guarding their gem-encrusted hordes in the *Lord of the Rings* series. I can't help but think of Nicolas Cage in those ridiculous *National Treasure* movies. What do you think of when you hear the word "treasure?"

Our Gospel lesson from Luke tells us that Mary treasured "all these words" she heard in her heart. And where did she hear "all these words?" The shepherds shared what they heard about Jesus with Mary. "All these words" were a treasure to Mary. The treasure was not jewelry or gold that had to be hidden behind lock and key. Just words.

Hidden treasure almost sounds like something that needs to be protected for selfish purposes. However, when it comes to Mary, or any of us treasuring something that makes us feel important, special, or unique - it's really a form of self-care. I wouldn't say that it is selfish that Mary kept the words about her son stored up like a treasure in her heart. These words were something she could pull out when she felt the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Has someone ever told you something you have treasured? I know I have received my share of nastygrams and love letters throughout the years. I do keep some of the kind letters, emails, and little notes in a drawer in my desk to pull out whenever I feel down. You could say that I treasure "all these words." Has anyone ever given you a word of encouragement or hope? What Mary does in storing the words of the angels and shepherds as treasures in her heart can remind us that it is important to hold onto things that bring us comfort, joy, hope, and meaning. We must take care of ourselves to take care of others.

This week, I would encourage you to write someone or send them a note or text of support. It doesn't have to be Shakespeare in quality. Sometimes it's just enough to let someone know you are thinking about them and hope they are doing OK. You never know whether they will treasure "all these words" and store them up in their heart.

Dear God,

Help us remember the "treasure" in our lives when we feel the weight of this world on our shoulders. Help us to share words of encouragement with those whose heart-treasures aren't nearly full enough. Amen.

Rev. Dan Stark, Christ Church

COURAGE | Matthew 1:20

While Joseph thought about this, an angel of the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, "Joseph, descendant of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The baby in her is from the Holy Spirit."

There are times in our lives where we need to have courage and do things that are hard for reasons that are not of our own doing. As most of you know I was sexually abused by my stepfather in childhood and my teenage years. As an adult I went for help to process this and in my first session I was told that I would need to get a book called, "The Courage to Heal". I was like ok. I never thought courage would have anything to do with my healing process. I went to get the book at the library, and it was a huge ring bound book. I was immediately overwhelmed.

I went to my next session and asked do I have to read this whole book? She said most of it in time. As we started the process, I had the assignment of reading several chapters in between appointments. It didn't take long, and I was really upset. Why do I have to go through all of this for something someone else did to me? I figured I would just be talking about what happened and it would be over. No, it was going to take courage to really get into the nitty gritty and face how I felt about what happened and change how it had impacted me and my life. It would be painful and triggering. It would take courage to get through.

Joseph was living his life innocently, and bam, Mary was with child. Think of all the accusations he and Mary must have had to put up with. To take the high road and follow what the Angel told him in his dream to take Mary as his wife took a lot of courage. To feel and experience pain and humiliation through no fault of your own and to do the right thing is hard. As I became healthier and blessed through having the courage to heal and not give up, so are we all blessed because Joseph had the courage to follow the Angel's message and stand with Mary to bring our Savior into the world.

Dear Lord,

Please always stay with me when I need to have courage and strength when it would be easier to just give up.

Debbie Behling, Christ Church

ONLY | John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth...

Only. Only son...When I first read this passage, tears welled up in my eyes. When I comprehended the meaning of the word “only” it was like a punch to my gut. Only means you have one of something. God’s *only* son? I have only one daughter and only one son. One of each, but only one.

Charlotte is 7. She speaks Spanish. She loves toads and frogs. She helps me in the garden and proudly shares every fact she can remember about flowers that I have shared with her. She enjoys showing off to me how good she is at videogames. She likes to lead prayers at dinner. She makes a huge mess every time she eats and somehow always ends up with a milk moustache. She loves to dance and sing. She loves art and nature. She reminds me of me. She’s my only daughter.

Elliott is 3. He never stops talking. He looks up to his sister like she’s a superhero. He likes to pretend he loves toads and frogs to impress her. He snacks constantly and makes a mess at dinner time while somehow not eating anything at all. He runs and throws things. He harasses our geriatric animals while simultaneously loving them to death. He is interested in cars, big rig trucks, trains, tractors, and construction equipment. He’s a mama’s boy if there ever was one and he looks like a miniature version of my father-in-law. He’s my only son.

When I think about my children – my only daughter and only son – John 1:14 cuts through me like a knife through butter. That God would send God’s only child into a world that would be openly hostile towards him wrecks me. Although John does not say anything about Jesus’ birth, the word *only* from today’s passage ought to bring deeper meaning to the Christmas story. The fact that God would send God’s only child to this world says something about the love of God for this broken, broken world. For God so loved this world...that God would send God’s only child to save it. That’s good news for us, but it still makes me fall apart every time I think about it.

*God who gives the only one,
What wondrous love is this?
Remind us this advent
Of the greatest gift you gave this world,
Your only one.
Amen.*

Rev. Dan Stark, Christ Church