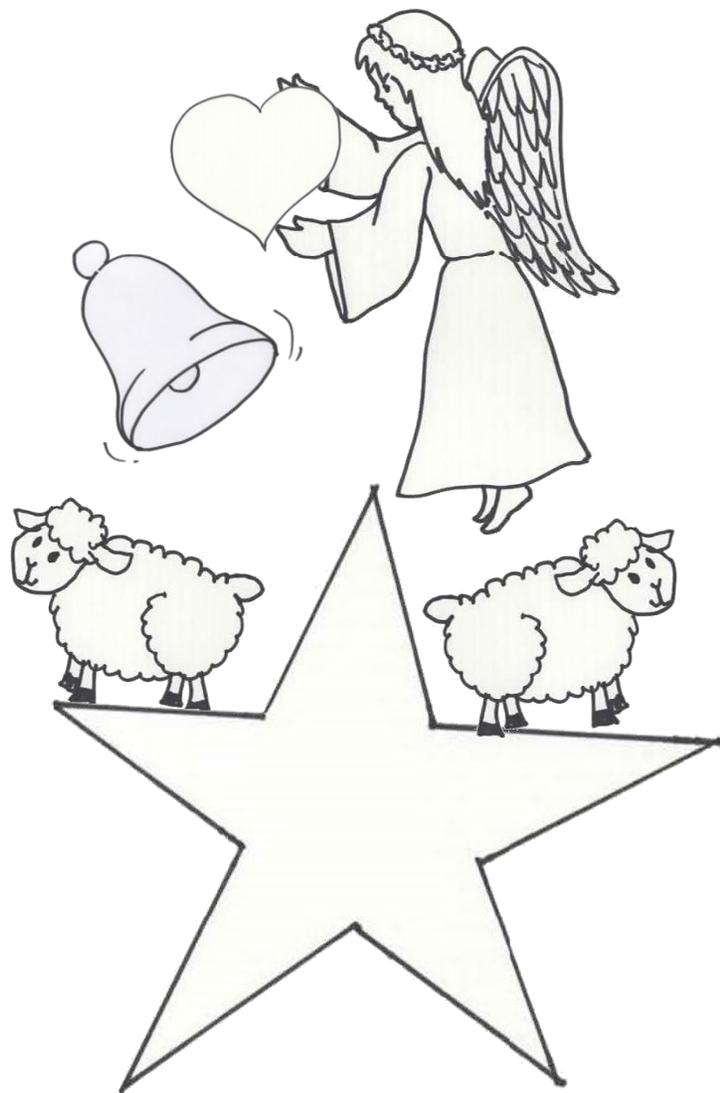


An Advent Adventure





Introduction

It's Advent again. A time of waiting for Christ to come. For some of us, especially those with long "to do" lists, the wait may not seem long enough. It can be a challenge to separate the concept of Advent from our contemporary idea of achieving the perfect Christmas.

This booklet aims to make us active participants in Advent and to think about what it means for our lives. Each day has a Scripture passage, a brief reflection, and an action to help bring the concept to life. Try to carve time out of each day. The hope is that you will be challenged, have fun, and discover new insights.

Each of the five themes has an associated symbol or image. These basic shapes are to help us visualize the key concept. For those who have artistic inclinations, these shapes can move beyond these pages to become refrigerator magnets, tree ornaments, note pads, or even pictures. There are some suggestions in the readings, but you may think of others.

You'll notice that this booklet doesn't stop at Christmas. Christmas is a beginning not an end, and so we celebrate Christmas and look ahead to the coming kingdom of God. Through it all, we rejoice in the amazing gift of Jesus—Emmanuel, God with Us.

Sunday, December 1

First Sunday of Advent

Listening

Scripture

Isaiah 2:1-5

Luke 1:26-38

Reflection

The two passages for today both involve listening as a core element of their message. God speaks to us in many ways. We need to tune our ears and our hearts to hear God's word whether it comes through the voice of an angel or the proclamations of a prophet; from the Bible; from a child, one with a perspective different from ours, or a friend; or through the world around us.

In Advent we often encounter the encouraging words of the prophet Isaiah that speak of God's redemption of and provision for God's people. We are called to learn from God. Yet this is not always easy, as Isaiah, and most prophets, often speak to challenge what is wrong and to call God's people to account. Their messages were hard to hear, and often were dismissed or ignored.

For Mary, the words of the angel Gabriel were life-changing. The passage shows Mary's openness to hearing God's word, but also her questioning. She sought clarity from God, and assurance that this was indeed God's word for her. Her response is whole-hearted.

Throughout the coming week, listen for God's voice, practice discerning God's voice among the many clamoring for our attention, seek clarity, and then practice responding.

Take Action

Identify a passage in the Bible that you have found "hard to hear" (go with the first that comes to mind). Look it up, read it carefully, and write in your own words what it means. Read the sections before and after it to understand the context. What in this has been difficult for you, and why. What do you think God is saying to you through this passage? Summarize your response on a piece of paper (or the angel symbol).



What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Monday, December 2

Listening

Scripture

Mark 1:35

Reflection

We often think of prayer as speaking *to* God, but it may be helpful to think of it as speaking *with* God—which means listening for what God has to say.

Take Action

Bring a question or concern to God—from the passage above or from your life. Explain what is on your mind, then sit quietly. If a Scripture passage comes to mind, look it up and reflect on it. If a hymn or song comes to mind, think about the words and what they mean. Ultimately, though, try to still your mind and listen for God’s voice.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Tuesday, December 3

Listening

Scripture

Matthew 21:14-16

Reflection

We are instructed not to assume that God speaks to us only through the wise and the educated. The straightforward words of a child can hold truth and understanding, and can challenge us to see things differently.

Take Action

Take time today to listen to a child. Ask about what is going on in school, or about friends or siblings, or what the child thinks about Christmas. Really listen to the child’s responses and ask follow-up questions. Don’t “teach” or explain or correct misunderstandings—just listen.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Wednesday, December 4

Listening

Scripture

Acts 2:17-18

Reflection

Wisdom and insight are not the sole property of any age or generation. It is easy to dismiss the “old fashioned, outdated” ideas of our elders or the “strange new ideas” of those younger. God’s revelation comes to all, and the wise listen.

Take Action

Find time to have a discussion with an adult from a different generation. Ask about Christmas or a current topic in the news or hopes for the future. Listen and ask questions to gain further information (not to make a point or offer your opinion). Listen for both similar and differing perspectives.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Thursday, December 5

Listening

Scripture

Matthew 8:5-12

Reflection

We can be very sure of our own perspectives and dismissive of others. We might disdain the words of a modern-day centurion or hold on to views that rest on tradition rather than God’s word.

Take Action

Seek out someone who has a different perspective than you do on an issue that is important to you. Ask that person to describe how he or she came to hold this view. Listen and ask questions to understand, not to argue or to judge. Be respectful and appreciative. Consider how this challenges or affirms your own views.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Friday, December 6

Listening

Scripture

Proverbs 17:17

Reflection

Listening is one way of showing love. It not only helps us to understand a friend, but also lets us identify ways that we can truly be a friend.

Take Action

Take time to visit with a friend. Ask how he or she is doing, and listen carefully. Let your conversation focus on what is happening in your friend's life—the good, the bad, and the mundane. How can you support, encourage, or rejoice with your friend?

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Saturday, December 7

Listening

Scripture

James 1:19-20

Reflection

James has some harsh words about the tongue. Our words can be beautiful or ugly, can bless or curse, can build up or tear down. James would say that we are what we speak.

Take Action

Listen to yourself today. What do you say to other people? How are your words helpful? How are your words hurtful? How do your words reflect what you believe? Watch for times when you should keep silent and times when you should speak.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Sunday, December 8

Trusting

Second Sunday of Advent

Scripture

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 1:18-25

Reflection

In both of these readings, God is saying “trust me.” Both hold out the promise of a future full of redemption and peace. Yet both are spoken into a difficult present.

Isaiah spoke to the people of Israel at a time when they were not acting like God’s people. While they went through the motions of worship, their hearts were far from God. Poverty and injustice prevailed; bribery and drunkenness were common; evil was called good.

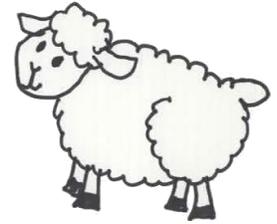
Joseph lived in a time when Israel was controlled by the Romans. His personal world was turned on end when the woman he was engaged to marry was found to be pregnant.

In the midst of hard times, God promises a future bright with hope. God also asks for trust—believe that I will do what I say, and act accordingly. For those among the people of Israel who had not turned from God, that meant not losing hope and not giving in to the evil around them. For Joseph that meant marrying Mary.

Trust is more than just accepting a concept. Trust is knowing the God Whom you are trusting. Trust is facing fear. Trust is taking action. Trust is being at peace in the midst of turmoil. Trust is patience. Trust is an essential part of building strong relationships with others.

Take Action

Look for examples of people trusting other people and/or trusting God—this can be from a variety of sources (e.g., Scripture, history, the news, friends and family). Write these on a piece of paper (or a cutout sheep), and post it where you can see it. Make a list of some of the characteristics of trustworthiness and keep it with this booklet.



What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Monday, December 9

Trusting

Scripture

1 John 4:16-18

Reflection

Our trust in God is rooted in God's power and in God's love for us. That love pushes out fear. Fear can take many forms, but almost all hold us back, tie us down, or limit our ability to be all that God created us to be.

Take Action

Identify a fear (just one) that frustrates you. Why are you afraid? What does this prevent you from doing or being? How can trust in God help you address this fear? What is the second step that you can take in facing this fear (the first step is prayer)? Take the first and second steps.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Tuesday, December 10

Trusting

Scripture

Matthew 14:22-33

Reflection

Trust in God manifests itself in action. Joseph's trust led him to marry Mary despite her pregnancy. In the passage above, we see Peter act in trust. It is important to note that Peter waited for Jesus to call him; our actions should align with God's purposes. Also, when Peter faltered, Jesus was there to pick him up. Our self-doubt shouldn't hold us back.

Take Action

Fill in this sentence: If I fully trusted in God I would _____ . Prayerfully choose something relevant to your life today. Choose one thing. Simple is great. Do it or make plans to begin doing it.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Wednesday, December 11

Trusting

Scripture

Matthew 6:25-33

Reflection

Don't worry. So easy to say, so basic—and so very hard to do. Worrying about things big and small robs us of peace and joy, consumes our energy, and distracts us from what is really important. Trust in God's care helps us let go of worry.

Take Action

Write some of the things that are worrying you on small pieces of paper then put them in an envelope labeled "In God's Hands." You may want to put the envelope out of sight or even throw it away, or you may want to keep it where you can see it as a reminder.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Thursday, December 12

Trusting

Scripture

Isaiah 40:28-31

Reflection

Humans have never enjoyed waiting. Waiting is hard and requires an abundance of patience. Patience is basically waiting with the right attitude. Isaiah reminds us that God is a God for the long haul, a God of endurance, and that the reward for waiting is to be lifted up on the wings of eagles.

Take Action

Look for a way (or two) that you can practice patience today. It could be not stressing out in traffic or in line at a store; explaining something to a child; tackling a tedious task; or anything else that comes to mind or comes your way.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Friday, December 13

Trusting

Scripture

Ephesians 4:25-32

Reflection

Ephesians reminds us that our relationships with others reflect our faith and our trust in God. We are called to live in community with others, and this can be challenging. Trust enables us to be honest and vulnerable, to give love and express care, to forgive, to confront conflict, and to encourage one another.

Take Action

Take a step to build, strengthen, or restore a relationship with a colleague, acquaintance, church member, or someone in your family.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Saturday, December 14

Trusting

Scripture

Isaiah 12:2

Reflection

Isaiah boldly proclaims God's trustworthiness. God has saved us. God acts on our behalf. God gives us God's own strength and power. We are called to trust and not be afraid.

Take Action

Identify some things that you can do to strengthen your trust in God. Write these on a piece of paper (or on a sheep cutout) and put it where you will see it (perhaps alongside your sheep from Sunday). Choose one thing from your list and begin to put it into action. Share some of the things on your list with a friend or family member so that you can encourage each other.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Sunday, December 15

Seeking

Third Sunday of Advent

Scripture

Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 2:1-12

Reflection

Isaiah 35 speaks of a highway that will be traveled by God's people and will lead them to Zion. They are promised that they will see the glory of the LORD. This image of a journey points to the fact that in this life we are continually seeking God. The joy comes in that God travels this path with us and creates oases for us along the way.

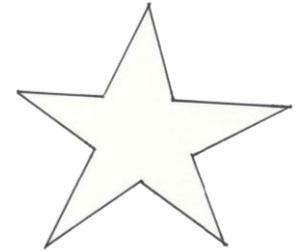
In relating the story of the wise men from the East who sought the baby Jesus, Matthew highlights the importance of seeking Jesus. Even those who are not children of Israel are summoned to seek and find Jesus. This quest was their focus from the time they first saw the star of Bethlehem; it defined their lives and led them to take definitive action.

Seeking begins with a goal and involves many actions. Most often it requires time, energy, and perseverance. It includes asking questions, seeking signs and asking for direction, making investments, looking for pointers ("clues") and making adjustments when necessary, sharing the journey with others, and maintaining focus.

In both passages, the end result is joy! While there are many challenges, the journey is clearly worth the time and effort.

Take Action

On a piece of paper (or in a star cutout), put in words what you are seeking this Advent. What does it mean for you to seek the baby Jesus and to seek the kingdom of God? What do you hope to find, and what difference do you think it will make in your life? Your goal may be simple or complex, big or small. It will reflect where you are now as well as where you would like to be.



What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Monday, December 16

Seeking

Scripture

Isaiah 55:6-11

Reflection

Isaiah challenges us to “seek the LORD while he may be found.” God wants us to seek, because it opens our minds and hearts to God. When we are content with where we are and what we know of God, we close ourselves to God’s continuing work in our lives and in the world.

Take Action

Ask questions and identify resources. God welcomes our questions; they are part of seeking God. Make a list of questions related to what you are seeking this Advent. Also list potential resources for finding God’s answers.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Tuesday, December 17

Seeking

Scripture

Isaiah 7:13-17; 55:12-13

Reflection

God gives us signs that point to God’s current and future activity among us. They may point to good things or to bad. We see both warning and hopeful promise in our two passages from Isaiah. God is at work in all circumstances; we just need to look for the signs.

Take Action

Look carefully at the signs you see today (literal signs)—in store windows, in front of buildings (including churches), on highways. What do they say about humans and about God? What warnings do you see? What encouragements? Compare these with what you see in Scripture.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Wednesday, December 18

Seeking

Scripture

John 1:35-42

Reflection

Seeking and finding both involve commitment. Many people heard Jesus speak, but few accepted the call to follow. When we invest the things that matter (our time, resources, energy, caring) in God’s kingdom, we “raise the stakes.” This investment challenges us to grow and offers us the amazing opportunity to see God at work first hand.

Take Action

Make an investment in the kingdom of God. This could be in the form of time, energy, creativity, money, or possessions. Focus on the community in which you live, worship, work, or go to school. Look for something that stretches you.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Thursday, December 19

Seeking

Scripture

Psalms 66:4-5

Reflection

Sometimes God’s actions are bold and clear, as proclaimed in Psalm 66. We are encouraged by seeing them and recalling them to others. Yet God also works in less dramatic ways, through God’s people.

Take Action

As you go through your day, look for evidence that God is at work among us. Be mindful of the people around you and what they are doing, of the natural world, and of human-created things. Write down what you observed—and how you saw God working, as a reminder and encouragement (perhaps on a star cutout).

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Friday, December 20

Seeking

Scripture

Acts 2:42-47

Reflection

It is easy for us as Americans to see our journey as a solo venture. Our history presents much evidence to the contrary, but the ideal of the “rugged individual” persists. The wise men remind us that most often our journey is in the company of others, and this is reinforced by the picture of the early church in Acts. We journey together—and are richer for it.

Take Action

Spend time with other Christians. Ask them what God has been teaching them lately, what things they are seeking from God, and where they see God leading them. Share with them insights from your life. Encourage one another.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Saturday, December 21

Seeking

Scripture

Hebrews 12:1-3

Reflection

Life has a way of distracting us and drawing us off course. The wise men could have been drawn away at many points. Distractions come in an array of forms—both crises and celebrations can pull us off course. Perhaps the most dangerous obstacle may be the ordinary. Hebrews reminds us of our purpose and encourages us to maintain our focus.

Take Action

Revisit your star (or piece of paper) from Sunday. Consider your “goals” for Advent. Assess your “to do” list (literal or mental) in light of these goals. How well do they align? Consider what you should do—or not do—to maintain focus.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Sunday, December 22

Preparing

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Scripture

Isaiah 40:3-5; Luke 3:4-6

Luke 1:39-56

Reflection

Pop quiz: List the top five things you need to do to prepare for Christmas. Put down what first comes to mind. I would guess that many of our lists have the same elements and include things like grocery shopping, house cleaning, tree decorating, card writing, gift shopping, and present wrapping.

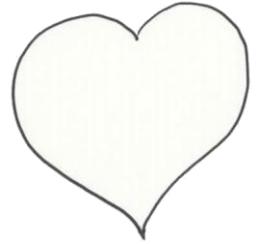
Now consider what the list would look like if God were writing it. Isaiah and Luke challenge us to prepare the way of LORD by making crooked pathways straight and removing the obstacles presented by mountain heights and valley depths. What are the crooked paths in our lives? The mountains and the valleys?

Mary brings another perspective to preparation. She prepares by focusing on God's power and work in her life, and by praising God. She allows God's power to renew her. Mary also takes some time away, going to visit her older relative Elizabeth—in essence, Mary rested. We rarely think of renewal and rest as part of preparation. Surely, we think, preparation must mean action.

We all know the verses of Joy to the World: Let every heart prepare Him room! Our challenge is to heed the words of Isaiah and the example of Mary, and to make our hearts ready for Jesus.

Take Action

Carve out time to decorate a heart shape. When you have finished, stop and rest. Look at your heart and consider some of the ways that God has shown you love. Reflect on what it means to have God with us in Jesus. Thank God and quietly spend time in God's presence.



What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Monday, December 23

Preparing

Scripture

Luke 1:76-79

Reflection

We don't often consider ourselves to be like John the Baptist, but we are called not only to prepare ourselves to receive God's gift of Jesus, but also to prepare the way for others. We don't have to look far to find people living in darkness, conflict, and despair. We just need to be willing to reach out through both word and deed.

Take Action

Today, take note of people that you see who are living in darkness. Find a quiet time to pray for them, asking God to show you to whom and how you can reach out. Write this down so you don't forget, and make plans to take action.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Tuesday, December 24

Preparing

Scripture

Luke 2:4-7

Reflection

We know these words of the Christmas story by heart—perhaps courtesy of A Charlie Brown Christmas as much as Sunday school. We all know the phrase “no room at the inn.” For some of us finding room even in the stable of our lives might prove a challenge. Yet consider how much we lose if we fail to do so.

Take Action

Think about one way that you can prepare your heart for Jesus. Then identify one way that you can clear some time in your life in this day before Christmas to do it. Don't worry if it's something small.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Wednesday, December 25

Rejoicing

Christmas Day

Scripture

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:8-20

Reflection

Isaiah proclaims “unto us a child is born.” These are familiar words; we have heard them often and perhaps even sung them. They are full of excitement. We can almost hear the trumpets and the great company of angels praising God.

Yet when the promised child is born, the first to hear—from the angel and accompanying heavenly hosts—are not kings, generals, or people of influence, but rather simple shepherds. These were “night shift” shepherds, doing a hard, dirty, and mundane job out in the fields. No one, not even the shepherds themselves, would have expected them to be the first to hear of the birth of the long-awaited Savior.

Perhaps as remarkable is shepherds’ response. They heard the angel’s words and left their flocks to go to Bethlehem. It would have been easier to hear the message, to talk about it, but not go to see for themselves—to hear but not respond. Responsible shepherds stay with their sheep. Would they be welcomed or turned away? Why take the risk?

And, yet, they boldly went—hurried even—to see the child. They returned to their flocks praising God and told anyone who would listen what they had seen and heard. How will we respond to Jesus? Will we drop everything and go? Will we tell what we know and have experienced?

Take Action

As part of your celebration today, in whatever form it takes, share the story of that first Christmas with those around you. Then tell them how it has changed your life, and invite them to tell their stories. There is no need to be “theological”—tell your story in your own words, and listen to the stories of others. And rejoice!!



What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Thursday, December 26

Rejoicing

Scripture

Ephesians 5:19-20

Reflection

Humans are programmed to sing. God's creation is filled with song. Songs can change the way we think and feel. Ephesians calls us to encourage one another with songs, to continually carry a song in our heart, and to give thanks.

Take Action

Listen closely to the songs you hear today. What are they saying? Which ones lift you up, which drag you down? What are your favorite hymns or praise songs? Why? Sing. Sing Christmas songs. Sing songs that lift you up. Sing your favorite hymns and praise songs. Sing even if you aren't particularly good at it.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Friday, December 27

Rejoicing

Scripture

Philippians 1:3-6

Reflection

We aren't in this alone. Our personal commitment of faith draws us into a community. This is a wonderful gift! We have people to encourage us, challenge us, walk with us, mourn with us, celebrate with us, work with us, and grow in faith with us. As Hebrews reminds us (remember Saturday's reading), this community is not bound to one place or time, but encompasses all whose faith has touched our lives.

Take Action

Make a list of people whom you are thankful for (perhaps in a bell cutout) and put it where you can see it. Write a note thanking someone for making a difference in your life.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Saturday, December 28

Rejoicing

Scripture

Philippians 4:4-6

Reflection

Rejoicing isn't always a host of angels singing. It isn't always big. It isn't just for special occasions. We are called to rejoice always—in the quiet moments of our lives, in the midst of the mundane, in the company of those who know have seen our best and worst. Rejoicing is a way of life.

Take Action

Consider the ways that God is present in your daily life. Make a list of the things in your daily life for which you are thankful. If you are artistically inclined, cut pictures of things you are thankful for and make a collage in a bell shape that you can hang as a reminder.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Sunday, December 29

Rejoicing

Scripture

Luke 2:21-35

Reflection

Simeon reminds us that rejoicing is much more than mere happiness and celebration. Rejoicing has depth, and shadows, and heartache. The path ahead is not always smooth and strewn with flowers like Palm Sunday; sometimes it is rocky and filled with thorns, like Calvary. Yet joy endures in the certainty that God is present and at work.

Take Action

Think about some times when joy was mixed with sorrow. Can you identify God's presence in those times? If so, in what ways? Were you aware of them at the time? Take time to thank God.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Monday, December 30

Rejoicing

Scripture

Isaiah 42:9

Reflection

We can rejoice that God is a God of new things. Christmas was a new thing, and God is still at work in our times. We are not bound by the past, by the things that already have taken place. God's redemption is for us, today.

Take Action

Do something new today—simple is great. Reflect on your experience. What went well? What didn't? What was easy? What was hard? What did you learn? How does this relate to doing something new for God? In what ways are you excited about taking a new step in faith? In what ways are you scared?

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

Tuesday, December 31

Rejoicing

Scripture

Isaiah 60:1-3

Reflection

We may look back as we consider the prophecies of Isaiah and the Christmas story, but both ultimately call us forward. They are an exhortation to act on our faith, to share what we know of God, to look ahead. Christmas is a beginning, not an end. God is with us! We can do wonderful things—both great and small. Let your light shine.

Take Action

Look ahead. Prayerfully consider what God is calling you to do and be. Fill in the following sentence: Because Jesus has come to dwell with us, I will _____. Write it down. Share it with someone who will support and encourage you.

What I Learned

My Prayer for Today

What I've learned about. . .

Listening:

Preparing:

Trusting:

Rejoicing:

Seeking: