

## WEEK 3 – HOME FREE (JOY)

### Sunday – Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11

Isaiah prophesies good news for the Israelites captive in Babylon; this is the same scripture that Jesus reads in the synagogue at Nazareth to announce his ministry (Luke 4:16-21). During the pandemic we have often felt like captives in our own homes. Many people also feel captive to circumstances, sins, and temptations. Good News! Isaiah and Jesus bring a message from God: with Christ comes forgiveness, healing, freedom, and joy!



**THINK:** What things feel like captivity to you right now in daily life? Personally, are there sins or bad habits that have captured you? What does “freedom from captivity” look like for you?

**PRAY:** Good and gracious God, let us hear the Good News, promised for so long, and have hope. Let us live into the freedom promised in Jesus Christ. Pour out your Spirit upon us, and set us free. Amen.

**DO:** Listen to John Mark McMillan’s “Joy to the World” (UMH 246, or <https://youtu.be/HG41Q8u6luQ>). This more reflective version helps us hear the potent message: “No more let sins and sorrows grow!” (v3).

### Monday – John 1:6-8,19-28

John the Baptist is often overshadowed by his cousin Jesus, but his call to repentance and preparation is at the heart of the Advent time of watchful waiting. John testifies to the Light of the World; the Light is coming. John baptizes with water; the baptism of the Spirit is coming.

**THINK:** When quizzed by the religious leaders, John says, “Among you stands one whom you do not know” (v26). It’s quite possible that Jesus was literally standing there (see v29)! Jesus has promised to be with us always (Matthew 28:20) – is Jesus among us now, and we do not know or recognize him? Where or how might you see Jesus in your daily life?

**PRAY:** Lord, we are very deaf. We are very blind. Open our eyes to see; give us ears to listen. In these short days and long nights, when the world waits with frosted breath, let us recognize you... and rejoice. Amen.

**DO:** Jesus says “where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, I am with them” (Matthew 18:20). Plan a family devotion, or set up a phone call or video chat with family or friends to pray, and look for Jesus among you.

### Tuesday – Psalm 126

Some bibles title this psalm, “A Harvest of Joy.” The poet captures that dream-like quality of sudden joy after long sorrow. Joy, like the harvest, is not just a moment, but the culmination of a long process. Seeds must be planted and the crop tended before the harvest can be gathered.

**THINK:** The psalmist refers to sowing in tear before reaping in joy, almost as if tears water the crop. Are there times when you’ve experienced something sad or hard, but it later led to something joyful? Can you have great joy without also knowing sadness at times?

**PRAY:** Jesus, our hearts have been rough and muddy ground, torn open by the plows of distress and soaked with tears. Yet from the dirt of our lives you bring growth: deep roots, good fruits. We rejoice in the harvest. Amen.

**DO:** Make two lists. First: what were you worried about last week? Last month? Last year? Second: how have you grown since then? How have you seen God bless you, or the world?

## Wednesday – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

“Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances.” Easier said than done? All circumstances this year has meant COVID, and political stress, economic duress, racial and social distress. This sounds like a tall task, but thankfully we’ve got help: “May the God of peace sanctify you.”

**THINK:** What are the giant-sized problems facing you personally? Have you seen God at work in your life?

**PRAY:** Lord Jesus, help us remember your promise: peace you have given us, peace you have left us. Amen.

**DO:** Spend today “flipping” each moment in prayer. If something bad happens, flip it to God and find a way to see the good. And when something good happens, flip a quick prayer of thanks and joy up to God.

## Thursday – Psalm 16:7-11

This short song sings of trust and joy in God. We are reminded that God will save us, body and soul. God whispers wisdom to our hearts. When we stay close to God, we find pleasure even in the simple things.

**THINK:** How have you been pleased or surprised with joy recently? It may be something as simple as the aroma of fresh coffee or a beautiful frosty pattern on the window, or as common as a Christmas carol.

**PRAY:** O God, in your hand are pleasures forever. You are ever more ready to bless that we are to be blessed. Crack open our jaded lives and pour in joy. Amen.

**DO:** Watch the movie “Elf” and note the simple pleasure Buddy takes in everyday life. Then go out and spread a little “Christmas cheer” by bringing joy to someone in a simple way.

## Friday – Luke 1:5-25

The first story of an unexpected pregnancy in Luke’s nativity is not Jesus, but John the Baptist, conceived by elderly parents. Zechariah (v18) and Elizabeth (v25) have very different responses to this good news.

**THINK:** There are a lot of emotions around pregnancy, for everyone in the family. Think about what you would feel, hearing that someone close to you is having a baby. What do you worry about? Hope for?

**PRAY:** Lord, a baby is a bundle of promise and worry. We fear the dangers and disappointments that might confront their lives... yet we also hope for unbridled joy and blessing. Help us remember that we are someone’s baby... and we are also your children. Help us live into the joy dreamed for us. Amen.

**DO:** Ask your parents what they worry about or hope for you. How has your life brought them joy? Or if you can’t speak to your parents, write a letter to yourself from them, imagining what they would say.

## Sing-along Saturday – “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (UMH 211, <https://youtu.be/jWV0dCifn-w>)

Emmanuel means “God with us.” This very ancient hymn (the words are over 1200 years old!) explores the many titles, and prophecies Jesus carried. Each verse is followed by the reminder: “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee.” (cf. [https://hymnary.org/text/o\\_come\\_o\\_come\\_emmanuel\\_and\\_ransom](https://hymnary.org/text/o_come_o_come_emmanuel_and_ransom))

**THINK:** Although the words are hopeful, the tune is minor and pensive. What other emotions tinge and mingle with your joy in this season? Which name or title for God speaks to you right now?

**PRAY:** O Christ, we are waiting, waiting. Come to us again, and again, that we may rejoice. Amen.

**DO:** What is your favorite word or role for Jesus? Blessed, baby, brother, savior, beloved, friend? Write a verse – four short lines, and don’t worry about rhyming unless you want to – that name Jesus and describe your hope. Read it and then sing the refrain, “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.”