



All the Good

A WESLEYAN WAY
of CHRISTMAS

Lacey Warner • Amy Valdez Barker
Jung Choi • Sangwoo Kim

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All the Good:

A Wesleyan Way of Christmas

All the Good

978-1-7910-1797-2

978-1-7910-1798-9 eBook

All the Good: Leader Guide

978-1-7910-1800-9

978-1-7910-1801-6 eBook

All the Good: DVD

978-1-7910-1802-3

All the Good: Devotions for the Season

978-1-7910-1809-2

978-1-7910-1810-8 eBook



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Abingdon Press | Nashville

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2021941506

978-1-7910-1797-2

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Wesleyan Sources

John Wesley's writings are accessible in a number of published resources and web locations. In this study, we draw from the multi-volume work *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976). Documents by John Wesley, including sermons, cited in the study are listed below.

CM	<i>The Character of a Methodist</i>
ENNT	<i>Expository Notes upon the New Testament</i>
JD	<i>Journals and Diaries</i>
PCP	<i>A Plain Account of Christian Perfection</i>
PPCM	<i>A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists</i>
SCH	Sermon, "Circumcision of the Heart"
SCS	Sermon, "Catholic Spirit"
SNB	Sermon, "New Birth"
SNC	Sermon, "New Creation"
SSWS	Sermon, "Scripture Way of Salvation"
SSM	Sermon, "Sermon on the Mount IV"



Introduction

LACEYE WARNER

*The miracle of Advent is the central
belief of Christianity—not that we love God—
but that God loves us.*

The season of Advent offers time and space for Christians to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas through reflecting on the story of salvation. Advent begins the Christian liturgical year by not only recounting the birth of Christ but also Jesus Christ's second coming. In Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, God demonstrates God's love for all creation. Jesus is often referred to as Emmanuel, meaning "God is with us" (Matthew 1:23). Through Mary's willingness to carry and care for Jesus, God enters into creation, at the same time fully human and fully

divine. Jesus's birth, life, death, and resurrection embody God's unfathomable love for all creation. Advent invites the world to anticipate and receive God's amazing love in Jesus Christ.

In this book, we offer a path to anticipate Jesus Christ's coming through four chapters, each reflecting on biblical texts, Wesleyan themes, and Christian practices. By pondering God's goodness through the Christmas narrative, readers are invited to reflect on and participate in Christian practices, or good works, in response to God's goodness. These practices resemble those encouraged by disciples throughout Christian tradition as well as by the founder of the early Methodist movement, John Wesley.

John Wesley's emphasis on practices of piety and mercy—or good works—drew from the larger Christian tradition. Such practices are often referred to as means of grace. Each chapter guides participants through one of the four weeks of Advent by reflecting on *biblical passages in light of an aspect of Wesleyan means of grace, highlighted by illustrations and stories*. The four chapters respectively describe (1) an overview for preparing the way for God, (2) the impact and significance of prayer, (3) the substance of good works and caring for others, and (4) sharing in God's mission to the world.

“All the Good” of God's Love

When the biblical texts describe God as good, this describes God's actions as well as God's character. Whether in the midst of great joy and celebration or in the midst of deep tragedy, injustice,

and natural disasters, God is good because God's love is steadfast. As the liturgical refrain exclaims this biblical theme:

“God is good all the time
All the time, God is good.”

First and foremost, “All the good” indicates the simple and profound wonder and richness of God's love for all creation.

Biblical texts often refer to the message of God's goodness and love for all as the “good news.” Clearly, the message of God's love is not only “good” news, but the most amazing news. In this way, the language of good evokes the depth and texture of God's goodness that surpasses human imagination. The concept of “good news” found in the Gospels is related to the Greek term *euangelizesthai*, meaning “to proclaim good tidings.” This term, which appears throughout the Bible, indicates when good tidings from God occurred. It also has a close connection to the announcement of God's salvation in Isaiah, including prominent biblical texts read during Advent.

Related language to “good news” also found throughout the Bible includes *evangelos*, which has as its root *angelos*, “messenger,” and *angelo*, “to announce.” Significant to understanding these concepts of messenger and announcement is the notion that the message announced is not merely a verbal proclamation of abstract information. Rather, the proclamation of salvation embodies and invites participation in that salvation. The message is a present reality embodied by its messenger that invites a response. Recipients may accept this invitation to participate in the “good

news” through Christian practices or good works. The capacity to share the good news of God’s love begins with the capacity to receive and embrace God’s love and goodness.

What would it mean for us as Christians to understand ourselves as fully loved and accepted by God? What does it mean to accept God’s grace in Jesus Christ and live in response to this love and grace? While the following is a simple statement, it is infinitely profound: there is nothing we can do—absolutely nothing—to cause God to love us any more...or any less. For an achievement-driven culture this statement represents a radical reversal of one’s reality. We cannot earn more of God’s love with accomplishments, success, or piety, or by doing any more of anything to please God. God loves each one of us fully and deeply as God’s child. And likewise, as incomprehensible as this may be, there is nothing we can do to separate us from the love of God. Nothing. This is God’s *good* news.

The first Christian act is therefore not a practice of obedience—of earning God’s love. The first Christian act is to accept being loved by God, to experience the overwhelming giftedness and freedom that shapes a relationship with God in Jesus Christ, to understand oneself as “beloved.” To understand the good news that God loves us so much is to reflect on the story of Advent and Christmas. God sent God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Son of God, to live, teach, suffer, and die for our sins and the sins of the world. This is the miracle of Christmas and the meaning of Advent.

The season of Advent reminds Christians of the simple yet amazing salvation story, our story, the good news of God's love for all. We do not practice Advent for God, but rather for us. Advent is a gift. The season of Advent provides space to remember God's salvation for all creation in Christ. During Advent as a new Christian year begins, we prepare our hearts and spirits to embrace the wonder of God's love. Advent allows us, once again, to live into the freedom from sin and death through God's salvation. Reliving what God has done through the birth of Jesus Christ to Mary and Joseph, our hearts and minds are directed Godward. The following chapters offer a guide to reorient our focus from the distractions of this world to God's infinite love and goodness, preparing us for Jesus Christ's coming at Christmas.

“Good for All”: Receiving and Sharing God's Love

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in his “The Character of a Methodist,” answered the questions “Who is a Methodist?” and “What is the mark?” with this response: “A Methodist is one who has the love of God shed abroad in [one's] heart” (CM, 9:35). For Wesley the marks of Methodism were not religious opinions or distinctive doctrinal commitments setting them apart from other Christians. Grounded in biblical texts, Wesley turned to the simple, and at the same time unimaginable, reality of God's love. This love embodied in Jesus Christ invites all to receive God's love and then to practice love through holiness of heart and life.

When our identities have been permeated by the “Beloved”-ness of knowing God’s love for us and all creation, we are then empowered and animated to respond. We respond by fulfilling the great commandments to love God and neighbor by participating in good works. John Wesley and others in Christian tradition called these good works the “means of grace.” The cultivation of practices of loving God and neighbor demonstrated by our participation in the means of grace in response to God’s love for us frames the Christian faith.

The theme of love of God and neighbor is a persistent thread throughout the Bible. The refrain to care for widows, orphans, and strangers echoes throughout biblical texts as a response to God’s love: from Israel’s time as strangers in a strange land and later as a nation, through Jesus’s birth and incarnation as God with us, as well as his ministry conveyed in the Gospels, into the early church described by the Epistles. This theme of loving God and neighbor is the heart of our Christian faith. Similar to the essentials of food, water, rest, relationships, and exercise to sustain human life, practices of loving God and neighbor provide the essentials for vital lives of faith within Christian community.

The symbol of the cross is a reminder of the two-dimensional character of our relationship with God. Through Jesus Christ’s death on the cross and resurrection, God offers grace and love through reconciliation and forgiveness of our sins in the gift of salvation. The vertical portion of the cross represents God’s gift of grace and love in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Our

response to God's love and grace in Jesus Christ elicits our response of gratitude to God demonstrated in love and compassion to our neighbors. The horizontal portion of the cross demonstrates this love for and with our neighbors. In looking at the cross we remember God's love for all and our response in love to others and creation.

In this season of Advent, as we await the birth of the Christ child, may we remember and know God's goodness and love for us.

Overview of Chapters

In chapter 1, I begin by reflecting on Luke 3:4-6 and John the Baptist's call to "prepare the way of the Lord." This chapter addresses why Christians practice Advent. With other biblical texts, the chapter explores God's goodness and creation's need for God's grace in Jesus Christ. Good works do not earn God's grace; rather, they are our grateful response to God's love and a demonstration of our love for others. Drawing from John Wesley and the early Methodist movement, I describe God's grace as prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. Good works—or means of grace, as Wesley called them—allow believers to respond to God's grace and participate in sharing God's love with others. Practices pursued by early Methodists, from keeping journals to providing microloans, offer examples for contemporary Christians to consider.

In chapter 2 Sangwoo Kim reflects on Luke 1 and Zechariah's prophecy of Jesus Christ's birth. Zechariah's devotion to God and

openness to receive and share God's vision inspire our practices—especially practices of prayer during the season of Advent. Through prayer we listen for God's grace and guidance. As Wesley explains, prayer and works of piety cultivate an openness to receive God's love and vision for our lives. Praying in Advent prepares our hearts to receive Jesus Christ at Christmas and to follow God's call for sharing God's love with the world.

In chapter 3, Jung Choi reflects on Luke 1:46b-55 and the obedience of Mary and Joseph to follow God's call beyond their comfort and understanding. When we respond to God's call, even when unimaginable, the beauty of God's love for us, neighbors, and all creation unfolds. As Wesley demonstrates through his account of works of mercy, our response to God's love is always connected to love for all, including the poor and marginalized.

In chapter 4 Amy Valdez Barker reflects on Luke 2 and the birth of Christ from her own experience of being born on Christmas Eve and becoming a young mother similar to Mary. While Wesley maintains faith as central to salvation, Wesley encourages the early Methodists to allow God to perfect us in love. We receive perfection in love when we respond to God's grace by sharing God's love with others. Sharing God's love takes many forms, including service, advocacy, mission, education, and more. Through sharing God's love, God invites all to share in God's mission with Jesus Christ to the world.

We look forward to sharing this season of Advent in this collection of writings as we reflect on God's goodness in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit as we prepare for Christmas.