

Teshuvah:

A Practice of Renewal & Repentance

ADVENT 2017

PEACE UNITED CHURCH



TESHUVAH: AN INTRODUCTION BY DAVE GRISHAW-JONES

LITURGICALLY, ADVENT MARKS THE BEGINNING of the Christian year. A year has passed; a new year beckons, and with it fresh winds of grace and spirit. The stories we tell during Advent promise new life, new possibilities, new hope. The words of Hebrew prophets announce glad tidings to the poor and comfort to the lonely and bereft. Valleys are lifted up; mountains are leveled off. Something fresh is happening. Something provocative and original.

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says,

*Drink my wine
You will become me
I will become you
And all that is hidden
You will see
With your own eyes.*

Maybe you long, as many do, for a new way to experience Advent. You recognize what Advent *should* be: a month-long season of purification and preparation for the coming of Christ. But

you strain hard against cultural expectations: a frenetic pace, a materialistic holiday, a superficial romp through lovely stories and ancient traditions. Maybe this year you want to “see with your own eyes.”

Jewish friends welcome their own New Year on Rosh Hashanah in early autumn. Rabbi Michael Lerner says that the great message of these High Holy Days is that “change is possible – we are not stuck.” So it is, in Jewish tradition, that the ‘book of life’ is open from Rosh Hashanah till the end of Yom Kippur. In that book, the believer writes a new chapter and sets in motion a new year of spiritual growth, courageous transformation and holy partnership. As Yom Kippur ends, the book is sealed again. There’s an urgency to Jewish practice in these High Holy Days. Choices matter. Spirits set their course.

In Rabbi Lerner’s Tikkun Community, believers use the High Holy Days to examine changes needed in their lives and begin a full-year process of making those changes real. He writes:

By condensing the period of heightened attention to ten days, we are making sure that we have a time when these issues are totally ‘front burner’ in our consciousness. If we haven’t been able to make progress in self-awareness and steps toward change in those ten days, then, in a certain sense, our fate is sealed: we will continue to receive the karmic consequences of being the way that we are at the current moment, and to the extent that we want that to change, this ten-day period becomes a spiritual retreat and intensive short-term psychotherapy to work out what we need to be. This is not just an intellectual trip—it’s a real focus on our emotional lives and our spiritual lives as well as our societal lives.

It could be that Christians need a similar practice at the beginning of our own new year. I wonder if **teshuvah** offers that, a time-honored and provocative practice: a way to focus our emotional and spiritual lives, a way to prepare for the revolutionary coming of Christ. I wonder if the many rituals and traditions of this month will come alive as we commit to a more rigorous spiritual life.



WHAT IF ADVENT WERE TO BECOME A SEASON OF URGENT PREPARATION and deeply personal reflection? What if we received these four weeks as a holy gift in time – an invitation to do a gentle accounting of the past year and some prayerful reflection around the year to come? What if we were to labor (like women giving birth) and bring forth new life, unprecedented life? Maybe Christ’s incarnation, Christ’s love would take on new meaning and resonance. Maybe Christmas would be less of a superficial romp and more of a transformative journey. Choices would matter. Spirits would set their course.

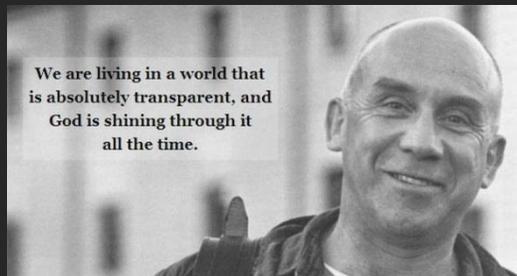
I invite you, then, to use this guide as an aid in the process our Jewish friends call **teshuvah**. **Teshuvah** has to do with repentance, renewal, a turning toward our highest and best selves. During their own High Holy Days, Jews do a careful accounting. What's out of whack? Out of alignment? What in my life (and in my world) needs to be addressed, repaired, healed, forgiven? In a famous midrash, Rabbi Abahu bar Ze'ira says, "Great is **teshuvah**, for it existed in the world before creation." Commenting on this, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes: "The implication of this remarkable statement is that **teshuvah** is a universal, primordial phenomenon...It is embedded in the root structure of the world...Before we were created, we were given the possibility of changing the course of our lives."

Let's look to this great insight for our own Advent practice. If we trust that **teshuvah** is indeed "embedded in the root structure of the world," we know (in our depths) that God partners with us in the journey of reflection, repentance and renewal. We open space for God—in our lives, in our homes, in our bodies and souls—when we dedicate ourselves to this holy and purifying process. Advent is just the time to begin! And the whole world is blessed by our courage, by our turning toward the light. Great is **teshuvah**!



Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because He cannot be at home in it, because He is out of place in it, and yet He must be in it, His place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, eliminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in the world.

Thomas Merton



We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time.

IN THIS ADVENT SEASON, WE FOCUS ON SEVEN KEY QUESTIONS in spiritual life and Christian discipleship:

1. WHAT IS OUT OF ALIGNMENT, SPIRITUALLY, IN MY RELATIONSHIPS?
2. HOW SPIRITUALLY NOURISHING IS MY WORK?
3. DID I SHOW ADEQUATE RESPECT FOR MY BODY?
4. AM I TAKING TIME TO NOURISH MY SOUL?
5. AM I BUILDING A CONNECTION TO PEACE UNITED CHURCH AND DEEPENING MY CHRISTIAN PRACTICE?
6. DID I EMBRACE AND CULTIVATE DISCIPLESHIP AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE?
7. AM I GIVING REAL ENERGY TO 'TIKKUN OLAM', TO HEALING AND REPAIRING LIFE ON THIS PLANET?



I invite you to make sacred space in your day—every day during Advent—and spend 15 minutes praying and reflecting with this guide. Maybe you take one of these seven questions, each day, and rotate around them week after week. Or maybe you take just one at a time, working it through. No need to ‘finish’ or ‘complete’ all seven: that’s not the point. Just do what you need to do. Start where you are. I imagine that the deep meanings of Christmas will begin to reveal themselves more clearly, more compellingly.

After all, Christ is coming! This is our shared belief. Even in ‘the bleak midwinter,’ God makes a way out of no way. Walls are dismantled. Fear is softened, then overcome by love. So it is that we celebrate Advent and Christmas with great joy – because we recognize that the ultimate power of the universe is God’s love, a mysterious and ultimately unnamable force of healing and transformation. God is the One who makes it possible for us to overcome our own ‘stuck’ places and turn toward our highest selves, our remarkable humanity. “What the parish celebrates during this season,” writes Nathan Mitchell, “is not primarily a birthday, but the beginning of a decisive new phase in the tempestuous history of God’s hunger for human companions.” **Teshuvah** is our response, our practiced response, to that hunger.

(1) WHAT IS OUT OF ALIGNMENT, SPIRITUALLY, IN MY RELATIONSHIPS WITH...

To acknowledge our own mistakes is an important first step. But **teshuvah** is not about getting ourselves to feel guilty, but rather engaging in a process of change. If we don't make those changes internally and in our communities and in our society, all our breast-beating and self-criticism becomes just empty ritual. In many situations and relationships, you are not the only part of the problem—but for the sake of this process, *it is your part that you are to focus on, not the part contributed by your partner, spouse, parents, children, friends, etc.* Begin to work on your part during these days of repentance and renewal! Christmas awaits!

On these days, our focus is not on what others did to us, but on what we ourselves did to lessen our connection to our highest possible selves and to God's universe!

PROBLEM	WHAT YOU CONTRIBUTE TO IT:
PARENTS	
1.	
2.	
<hr/>	
PARTNERS/SPOUSE	
1.	
2.	
<hr/>	
CHILDREN	
1.	
2.	
<hr/>	
FRIENDS	
1.	
2.	

(2) HOW SPIRITUALLY NOURISHING IS MY WORK?

What have been the problems you've faced here? Have you had good relationships with co-workers? Have you felt fulfilled in your work? Have you been involved in collective efforts to change the workplace, or the union, or tried to organize—or have you felt powerless and unable to envision changing anything? If you were in a supervisory position, did you treat your supervisees with the respect that they deserve? Did you discharge anger from work by punishing yourself (e.g. through alcohol or drugs) or by dumping on friends or lovers—or did you express that anger in appropriate ways to appropriate people or through collective action? See the Spiritual Progressive Network's important thinking about "A New Bottom Line": <https://spiritualprogressives.org/visionary-strategies/a-new-bottom-line/> Have you taken any of these steps to work toward a 'new bottom line' at work?

PROBLEM	WHAT YOU CONTRIBUTE TO IT:
<hr/>	
RELATIONSHIP TO CO-WORKERS	
1.	
2.	
<hr/>	
RELATIONSHIP TO SUPERVISORS OR SUPERVISEES	
1.	
2.	
<hr/>	
RELATIONSHIP TO THE PUBLIC/PLACE YOU SERVE	
1.	
2.	
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(3) DID I SHOW ADEQUATE RESPECT FOR MY BODY?

Did you care well for your body this past year? If not, what didn't you do that you might have done...to honor the image of God in your life, in your body, in your soul?

EATING

EXERCISE

VACATIONS

QUIET TIME/
MEDITATION

SELF-RESPECT

WHAT COMMITMENTS MIGHT
I MAKE—TO MY OWN BODY,
MY OWN HEALTH—
IN THE NEW YEAR?

(4) AM I TAKING ENOUGH TIME TO NOURISH MY SOUL?

Did you care for our soul this past year? If not, what didn't you do that should have done? In what ways did you care well for your soul this past year?

In what ways did you neglect your soul? Did your soul give you any messages that you ignored? What were they?

Did you take time to read books that might have expanded your awareness of spiritual life? If not, what do you want to read this next year? Did you give yourself alone time, for meditation, for prayer, for walks in the beautiful outdoor world?

What courses (evening schools, art programs, small group studies, musical instruments or performance) did you take to expand your horizons? What would you like to take this next year?

What pleasures did you give to yourself this year? Which do you want to expand or initiate in the coming year? Did you allow yourself to go to art exhibits, plays, musical concerts, poetry readings, discussion groups, community political action activities, or other events that might have given you real pleasure? What do you want to do in this regard moving forward?

In what ways did you explore your relationship with God or Jesus or however you wish to name the spiritual dimension this past year? In what ways did you ignore that dimension of your life? Did you read any books, attend lectures or courses, or dedicate time to exploring the spiritual dimension of your life? Would you be make a commitment now to doing so in the course of this coming year?

MATTHEW 6: 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

(5) ARE YOU BUILDING A CONNECTION TO PEACE UNITED CHURCH AND DEEPENING YOUR CHRISTIAN PRACTICE?

Did you make a practice of attending weekly worship at Peace United and deepening your connection to this beloved community? If you've had a difficult time attending regularly, why is that and what would you like the new year to look like?

Did you find a setting or ministry in which to serve the church—as a leader, as an organizer or activist, as a participant in some part of our mission and shared life? Are there new ways you'd like to explore participating in the new year?

Which relationships are most important to you at Peace? How have you tended to those relationships and prioritized them? Are there ways you want to cultivate new relationships and partnerships here in the new year?

Is there something about your spiritual connection at Peace that doesn't work or hasn't work as you'd like? How have you contributed to this situation? What might change the dynamic for the good in the year to come?

WE ARE FRAIL AND GLORIOUS CREATURES

Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB

Benedictine Monastic of St. Scholastica Monastery in Arkansas

Conversion is what happens between birth and death. By putting emphasis on conversion as a process, I do not mean to disclaim the many accounts of people being suddenly and mysteriously touched by God and changed tremendously. There are too many stories of radical change in people's lives to take them lightly. However, even people who have had a dramatic encounter with the Divine, still must go through that daily purification process of continued conversion. A deep and lasting conversion is a process, an unfolding, a slow turning and turning again. We are saved every day. We are saved from our self-righteousness, our narrow minds, our own wills, our obstinate clinging. We are saved from our blindness. Salvation stands before us at every moment. It meets us face to face. It asks us to make a choice. Do we have the courage to accept it? It is costly, yet it brings life. The cross is always costly. It costs us our lives. The dust of our Lenten ashes turns before our very eyes into Easter glory. Our frailty fades into splendor. Our life given becomes life received and renewed. Transformation! This is a wondrous, glorious truth. It is the Paschal Mystery. Life meets death. Death meets resurrection. This is our hope. We are frail and glorious creatures. Our frailty need not cripple us; our glory need not be denied. Embraced and cherished as part of the process that we are, these qualities become God's greatest advantage in our lives.

(6) DID I EMBRACE AND CULTIVATE DISCIPLESHIP AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE?

At Peace United we talk about four “focal practices” in Christian life. These are practices that bring the life and teachings of Jesus into “focus” through our lives, choices and daily witness. You’ve probably noticed the four highlighted, through this past fall, in our worship bulletins. Think a bit about how you work these practices into daily and weekly life and the rhythm of your days. How can we support one another, and inspire one another, in a deeper and more dynamic practice of discipleship?

WHAT I DO IN THIS AREA

WHAT I MIGHT DO DIFFERENTLY

PRAYER:

A practice of mindfulness, connectedness and attentiveness to the Spirit of God and the voice of Jesus.

A practice of compassionate intercession for the hopes, hurts and needs of others.

A practice of praise and thanksgiving for the grace of God and the creation in all its beauty and wonder.

FORGIVENESS:

A practice of humility and honesty, and a willingness to confess when appropriate the mistakes that we make.

A practice of repentance and renewal, and a capacity for change and self-correction.

A practice of forgiveness when forgiveness is called for and possible, and an awareness of reconciliation as promised & holy among us.

AGAPE/AHIMSA:

A practice of love-in-action and love-in-spirit for my neighbors, adversaries and collaborators.

A practice of solidarity in the pursuit of justice, and a discipline of living into mutually respect relationships with friends in oppressed communities.

A practice of nonviolence, embracing peace in personal choices and communal strategies in every way possible.

A practice of resistance to evil and bigotry and prophetic courage when daring work is required.

COMMUNION:

A practice of financial and material generosity, and an openness to sacrificial giving and sharing of resources.

A practice of discipleship that 'takes up the body of Christ'—patterning our own physical and moral lives after the spirit and lovingkindness of Jesus' own life of body and spirit.

A practice of delight and reverence honoring the communion of all beings and all life in a single universe of God's making.

(7) AM I GIVING REAL ENERGY TO 'TIKKUN OLAM', TO HEALING AND REPAIRING LIFE ON THIS PLANET?

"Tikkun olam" is an ancient Hebrew idea linking human vocation to the healing and repairing of life on the planet: ecological life among all beings, justice for the most vulnerable and oppressed, peace between adversaries. It coincides, profoundly, with Jesus' notion of discipleship: the concrete choices we make to give glory to God through compassion, kindness and justice.

Which of our society's political, economic, or social institutions have destructive consequences to the environment, social justice, or our capacity to be loving and compassionate human beings? Have you challenged any of them in the public arena?

What concrete steps have you taken to be involved? What will you personally do to change the status quo? What will you actually do, or what campaigns or projects will you support with your money and/or your time? Maybe you offer encouragement and spiritual support to Peace United friends involved in various peacemaking and justice initiatives?

If you haven't been involved, what were the reasons you gave yourself? Which of those reasons presupposed a "surplus powerlessness" (a way in which you were actually assuming yourself less able to initiate things or take leadership than is "objectively" true)? In what ways did you buy the message that "they will never listen," or, "I can never get things to happen," or, "I'm not powerful enough to start something so I'll wait for someone else to do it," or, "Other people are not together enough, or too immoral, or too passive, so there's no point in me trying to mobilize them," or other similar messages?

If you tried to be involved, and had hassles or disappointments with other people in the process, what were those and what part did you have in making or sustaining them? What did you do to confront the problems directly? Is there a particular initiative—Sanctuary Santa Cruz, the Resource Center for Nonviolence, COPA, the Association of Faith Communities' Shelter, Friends of Sabeel for Palestinian Justice, Tent of Abraham, Prophets of Hope Jail Ministries—you'd like to make a commitment to this Advent?

IN CLOSING

So I wonder, friends, if we might **ACCEPT A DEEPER DISCIPLINE THIS ADVENT SEASON**, a more exacting one, a more consequential practice. What if these first weeks of our new year were devoted to self-examination, and an honest confessional life, grounded in the mercy of God? What kind of Christmas might we have if we were to devote these weeks to meaningful, specific acts of restitution and reconciliation--in our own lives, in our corporate and congregational settings, among us? I'm absolutely and most emphatically not suggesting a "christianizing" of **teshuvah**. I'm just agreeing with Adin Steinsaltz: it seems "embedded in the root structure of the world." And shouldn't our new year, shouldn't every new year have something to do with tapping into that?

Isaiah says, "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." Perhaps he's describing the kind of Christmas where humility, vulnerability and an undefended spirit make way for the coming of Light, the advent of Peace, the true embodiment of Messianic Love.

If you're at all curious about what such a practice as **teshuvah** might look like, check out the good work and accessible resources our friends at Tikkun have created for their own Jewish holidays! Find these at:

[HTTP://WWW.TIKKUN.ORG/NEXTGEN/HIGH-HOLIDAY-REPENTANCE-WORKBOOK-2015-5776](http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/high-holiday-repentance-workbook-2015-5776)

With gratitude for our life together, and for Christ who comes again!

Dave Grishaw-Jones

TALKING TESHUVAH:

BREAKFAST WITH DAVE GRISHAW-JONES

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23 | 8:30 TO 10:00 AM IN THE LIBRARY AT PEACE

If you find this practice meaningful and it's intensifying your experience of Advent this year, join Dave for breakfast on the 23rd. Let's spend 90 minutes breaking bread and exploring the themes of renewal, repentance and rebirth. What are you learning on your Advent journey? How is teshuvah opening your heart to new practices, new choices, forgiveness and the presence of Christ? How will this impact your own celebration and experience of Christmas? Join us for a free-wheeling and open conversation! And breakfast!