

THE LIGHT  
SHINES  
IN THE  
DARKNESS,  
AND THE  
DARKNESS  
DID NOT  
OVERCOME IT.

JOHN 1:5, NRSV



ADVENT <sup>Kit</sup>



## **Advent 2020**

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1:5 NIV*

## Introduction

Today begins the season called Advent. Advent means “coming” or “visit.” In the Christian season of Advent, we prepare for the “advent” of Christ. Today, we begin to light the advent candles as we move towards Christmas and the Birth of Christ, Holy God made flesh.

To help us celebrate this season, we have included in this booklet both *Weekly Liturgy* and *Daily Devotions*.

### Hey Parents!

If you signed up for kids, then you should have in your Advent Kit an Advent calendar, puzzle, and a number of crafts. For explanations and instructions, go to <http://centralcity.co/adventkids>

We’ve also included sections in the weekly liturgy geared to children. You can find these prompts set apart in gray boxes.

## Weekly Liturgy

Included are five candles: one for each of the four Sundays in Advent, and one for Christmas Eve (or Christmas morning). Each time we light a candle, we will read scripture, pray, sing, and reflect/discuss. The layout allows for multiple readers and includes a few verses from popular carols.



## Here are a couple ideas to help make this liturgy successful:

-If possible, do this as a family, with a roommate, or with a small group (virtually).

-Designate a leader. The leader will keep everyone on track.

-Before you begin, divide the readings and prayers among the group. Print off additional copies, encourage people to access online, or pass this booklet around as you go. You can find additional copies of this booklet at [www.centralcity.co/advent](http://www.centralcity.co/advent)

-When possible, take time to sing the carols. While these carols might be new for you or your family, it can be a beautiful addition to your Christmas traditions.

-Dim the lights, turn on the Christmas tree lights, make some hot cider or hot chocolate—these little things can go a long way in making this time a beautiful family tradition. It might also be wise to pick a time each week to do the Advent candles, whether you’re doing these yourself or with others. Consistency can have a big impact on your experience.

-Do not leave lit candles unattended. Anytime you light a candle, do so in a safe, appropriate way. The candle holder is shallow. If the candles wobble, use a flame to soften the bottom of the candle and then place in the holder and let cool. For a complete list of candle safety ideas, go to: <https://candles.org/fire-safety-candles/>

### Aren’t advent candles usually in a circle?

Yes. Traditionally they are in a circle, which some suggest represents the eternal love of God, where there is no beginning or end. If you’d like to capture this meaning, feel free to form a circle of evergreens around the candleholder. You can think of this candleholder as a modern interpretation of the traditional.

**The important idea to remember is Christ remains in the center.**

## Aren't advent candles usually different colors?

Yes! While we provided you with white candles, traditionally there are three purple, one pink, and one white. The color purple represents royalty, repentance, and sacrifice. While we think of Advent as "one of the most wonderful times of the year," historically it's been similar to Lent, as a period of fasting and prayer. The third week departs from this; the pink represents joy. While the period is a time of reflection and sacrifice, it's also a time of great joy! The fifth candle, in the center, is white, and it's the Christ candle, representing the reason for the season.

## Craft Time!

If you'd like to dye your candles to match these traditions, it's a moderate-to-easy craft project. It does require a few supplies, which are easy to order online. If you have kids, it might be a fun way to teach the traditions of Advent. You can find instructions for how to turn your white candles purple and pink on our Advent page here: [www.centralcity.co/advent](http://www.centralcity.co/advent)

## Daily Devotions

In between the Sundays of Advent, daily devotions have been written by members of Central City and Central Avenue churches. These have been designed to supplement your daily quiet time, but can also be read together as a family or with a group of friends.

We are praying God meets us in these words, so we are able to end 2020 more in love with God than when the year started.

### Posting a Photo Online?

Use the hastag **#centraladvent2020**



Hope

## First Sunday in Advent

*November 29th, 2020*

### Call to Worship

*From Psalm 139*

**Reader 1:** Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

**Reader 2:** If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast.

**Reader 1:** If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me

and the light become night around me,"

even the darkness will not be dark to you;

**Reader 2:** The night will shine like the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

## Opening Prayer

Merciful God, give us grace that we might cast away the works of darkness by the power of your light. Remind us of the great gift of your Son, who was there when all things were created, who came and lived among creation, and who is with us now. Amen.

## Scripture Reading

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1:1-5, NIV

## Reflection

As the seasons change, and the days are short and the nights long, we are reminded of the power of light. Light helps us see; it brings us joy; it provides warmth, gives life to the world, etc. When you consider God as *light*, what benefit do you experience God bringing to your life?

Psalms 30 says "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." One way to think of hope is to trust that even if it is nighttime, morning will come. Hope is looking to the horizon when all is dark, trusting the sun will rise again. Is there a time in your life when you felt you were sitting in darkness and hope for the future sustained you?

## Break it down for Kids

Have you ever been in a really dark room? How do you feel when it's dark? Have you ever turned on a lamp in a dark room? How do your feelings change? How does light help us? God has often been compared to a light in the darkness. Did you know God is with you, even when it's scary and dark? Just like you can turn on a light when it's dark, we can pray to God and trust God is here for us.

## Candle Lighting

### *Light candle #1*

We light this candle, representing hope, to remind ourselves that no amount of darkness can overcome the light. When the night comes, we can look to the hills and see God's light breaking through in the morning. May we never lose hope as we become people of light.

## Carol

### **O Come, All Ye Faithful**

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,  
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;  
come and behold him born the King of angels;

**Refrain:** O come, let us adore him; O come, let us  
adore him;  
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,  
sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above;  
glory to God, all glory in the highest;

### **Refrain**

## Closing Prayer

Lord, help us to look for your light. Help us to trust that when life feels dark, it is not dark to you. You have not abandoned us, for there is nowhere we can go to escape your presence. In your Son's holy name, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

November 30th, 2020

## A Bright Right

*There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

*John 1:6-13, NIV*

In the year of 2020, I find myself in roles that I am terribly unequipped to take on, including a Social Studies teacher to an audience of two. Last week I fumbled through a lesson on “Rights vs Responsibilities” within our community. As I stepped through the rigid series of questions, my brain kept circling on the fact that I always think about responsibilities, but rarely about rights. When I’m coming from a place of privilege, or haven’t experienced getting something taken away, an amazing gift becomes unseen and unopened. By focusing on responsibilities and rules within our community, I often forget the journey that brought me my inherited rights.

John the Baptist also found himself in an unusual role when he came to bear witness to the light in John 1. It is a simple yet weighty proclamation in verse 12, “But to all who did receive

him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” That verse alone takes our kingdom and flips it upside down. I want to live my life like being a child of God is my right. Sadly, I busy myself like Martha and choose to distract myself with peripheral responsibilities.

If you follow the trail of a cherished right leading to freedom, they are usually marked with trials, blood, sweat, and tears. Becoming a child of God is not immune to this experience. There was a long story ahead of John the Baptist’s announcement. Even though Jesus was always there, no one knew him. It would take God in flesh, miracles, healings, prophecies, teachings, a death, and a resurrection for us to see this as our right.

Many still don’t even know that being a child of God is a right that could bring them freedom. I surely don’t live like it is mine. Let us walk into this season as a time of reflection, to simply accept this right and know the work has already been accomplished. What a gift we have that the true light came into the world.

*What would be different in our daily lives if we lived into the promise of being a child of God?*

**Prayer:** Thank you Lord, for your unchanging promises. Forgive us when we take the rights you have given us for granted. Help us to bear witness to your light through the outpouring of the hearts you fill. Amen.

Sarah Mazzotta

## Location, Location, Location

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

*(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.')* Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

*John 1:14-18, NIV*

There are three rules for deciding the value of a house in real estate: location, location, location! The better the neighborhood, the better the value. People want to live in good places. Well, when you consider the great realm of the universe, surely the heavens are the nice part of the city, and little old earth would be the edgy part of town.

The Christmas story is a story of God leaving the heavens and moving into a place on earth, on the other side of the tracks. Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase Bible, *The Message*, translates verse 14 like this: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."

God loves us so much, God chose to live with us, as one of us.

*What would it be like if God became a human today and moved into your neighborhood?*

**Prayer:** God, the One who draws close, help us this Advent season to sense your presence. Amen.

## Child of God

*What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.*

*Galatians 4:1-7, NIV*

Paul's logic here is confusing, but that's kind of just normal with Paul. If we break it down, he makes a claim that's rather simple. He describes a situation where a future heir is subjected to oversight by guardians and trustees, waiting for the day when he can be a full heir in his father's inheritance. Paul suggests that we—all of us—were underage, in bondage to the inheritance; or the Old Testament Law. But then Jesus came, opening the door for us to move from children, slaves to others, to free people, able to live as full members of God's family!

Freedom is a central theme to Galatians, summarized in 5:1

*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.*

While the case is often made that freedom comes from Christ, it is usually tied to the story of the cross. Here, in chapter 4, Paul ties it to the Christmas story. We're invited to identify with

Jesus as a child. We are told that God sends his son to be born to save others born like him. We are invited to imagine ourselves young and vulnerable, crying out “daddy!” just like Jesus would have. And then we are told that God’s Spirit speaks through us, as a sign of our new status as children of God and as heirs.

Christmas is all about family. But family is a mixed blessing. When we survey people in the church, family consistently comes out as one of the top five things people love about Christmas, *and* one of the top five things people dread about Christmas.

There are many among us that struggle to connect with our families during this time. We argue about politics, we’ve broken off friendship with siblings, or the love of our parents has run dry—or wasn’t ever there. Christmas can make all of these conflicts painful and real. Which is why this passage is so important.

Jesus was born to set us free, and make us children of God.

Because of Christmas, you are a child of God. Because of Jesus, you are an heir of heaven. It doesn’t matter whether you love your family or dread them; you have a family with God.

This Christmas, you can be born all over again, as God’s child, loved and accepted, ready to inherit all the good that God has for you.

*What does it mean to you to be considered a child of God?*

**Prayer:** God, father of us all, remind me of your love for me. Amen.

December 3rd, 2020

## Use Me

*In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.*

*Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.*

*Luke 1:5-10, NIV*

In ancient cultures, couples, especially the wives, were looked down on for not having children. There was a lot of stigma, and it would have produced a lot of shame. Older couples like this would have been considered worthless. Yet, God didn’t see them as worthless. And by chance (or by God’s divine providence) Zechariah had the opportunity to light the incense in the temple. In doing so, he was able to have a divine encounter and find out that God had something big planned for his family.

If a committee wanted to choose a couple to give birth to someone special, they might secure a handful of great candidates. Maybe they would choose someone with kids already, or quality parents who haven’t had kids yet. But they certainly wouldn’t choose someone old or well beyond childbearing years. Yet, that’s exactly who God chooses to give birth to this special child. God uses the ones the world views as useless.



Is there an area in your life where you've experienced stigma or shame? Is there any area where it feels you have the least to offer? Is it possible God could do something special in those places?

December 4th, 2020

*What would it look like for you to lay down the shame and trust that God still has good things in store for you?*

**Prayer:** God, the One who uses those the world throws away, use me. Amen

## It Makes Sense Now

*Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

*Luke 1:11-17, NIV*

My husband and I get a lot of fun out of watching TV shows, discussing the characters, and trying to predict plot twists. Some of the shows we've enjoyed the most are sitcoms like *Arrested Development* or *Community*, or mysteries like *Broadchurch*, where the showrunners have planted running gags or whodunnit clues that pay off in later episodes—or even later seasons. There's something satisfying about the moment when those clues or gags come to fruition and you realize what the writers have been planning all along.

In today's Scripture passage, a similar moment occurs. When the angel says to Zechariah that his son John "will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous," the angel is referencing Malachi 4:5-6a, which says, "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of

the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents.” As a priest, Zechariah would likely have been familiar with the prophet Malachi’s writings and realized the angel was quoting them. The words he had heard or read many times before were now newly relevant to him. His son was going to be a successor to Elijah, calling people to repentance and obedience. This was what God had been planning all along, and the clues had been there—but only now did they make sense.

While it’s highly unlikely an angel is going to show up at your place of work and start quoting ancient prophecies about your family members, there have likely been times when God’s work in your life has become evident to you, when all the clues finally come together, and you understand just a little bit more about who God is. Even if there are instances in which you don’t see what’s going on, take comfort in the continuity of God’s work over time. There were approximately 400 years between Malachi’s prophesy and when Zechariah understood it referred to his son. And yet God was faithful throughout.

*As we draw closer to Christmas, take time to stop and look back on this past year—in what ways has God been at work? What clues have come to fruition that you didn’t notice earlier?*

**Prayer:** God, open our eyes to see the clues you have planted along the way, and help us believe you are faithful, even when we don’t see them. Amen.

Sally Hatfield

December 5th, 2020

## How can I be sure of God’s timing?

*Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”*

*The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”*

*Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.*

*When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”*

*Luke 1:18-25, NIV*

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth has very special meaning for me. As some of you know, Jim and I struggled with infertility for the first 10 years of our marriage. In the years since that time of waiting, praying, doubting, hoping and giving up, I have reflected on this text almost every Advent. And God always reveals new truths each time. This time, I kept thinking of how it feels like Zechariah is punished for his doubt in God’s ability to answer his prayer. When God reveals to Zechariah

that his prayer will be answered and Zechariah's reply is "How can I be sure of this?", we get a glimpse of our human nature to doubt and be so impatient; we feel this overwhelming need to ask God not only for the answer we want but also for it to come when we want it.

Soren Kierkegaard said, "The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays." I love this and believe it to be true, but like Zechariah, my prayer for a child was meant to influence God and not change my nature of impatience. Life has taught me very few things can really be forced before their time and coming to appreciate the difference between God's time and my time is essential to becoming more Christ-like.

I think Zechariah learned a lesson about his need to change his human nature to doubt and control God while he was unable to speak. Would we accept that kind of hardship in order to learn more about God's timing and will for our lives? Are we willing to pray in order to change our own nature of impatience and disbelief?

Joan Chittister says, "God's time is what prepares us to function well in our time." This Advent season let's prepare, prepare, prepare and then wait for God's good time.

*Recall a time when you tried to force your timing on God. Did it work, and what did you learn about God's timing and will for your life?*

**Prayer:** All knowing God, give me what I need but only when you know I am ready to receive it. May it be so.

Denise Kilgore



Faith

## Second Sunday in Advent

*December 6th, 2020*

### Call to Worship

From Psalm 4 (NIV)

**Reader 1:** Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

**Reader 2:** How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?

**Reader 1:** Trust in the Lord. Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy.

**Reader 2:** In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

## Opening Prayer

God, when all falls away, you remain. Help us to trust you in times of trouble, knowing your promises will be fulfilled. You are good, even when all around us turns bad. You are loving, even when we see only hate. You are for us, even when everyone seems against us. We believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.

## Scripture Reading

The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.  
For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the greatness of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.  
The zeal of the Lord Almighty  
will accomplish this.  
Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 (NIV)

## Reflection

In times of stress, we try and wait for the day when we feel God, and if we could feel God, *then* we'd have faith in God. In reality, faith comes before feeling. The people during the

time of Isaiah were told of a day when God would send a king who would make all things right. But none of the people who first heard these words would live to see the birth of Jesus! They were expected to trust God in their day anyway, and the same is true for us.

*Have you ever had to trust God for something that seemed impossible in your lifetime?*

*What is the hardest thing for you to trust God for?*

## Break it down for Kids

Sometimes when we feel angry or upset, we want all of our problems to be solved. In those times, we want someone to fix it. But faith is believing in something we can't see. We trust God is here and able to help, even if we don't see God or see God doing anything right now.

A long time ago, Isaiah, a messenger of God, told the people around him that God would send a king to make things right. That king was Jesus, and he was to make things right when he died on the cross. Although these people never got to meet Jesus, they still trusted God every day. They believed even though they couldn't see God doing anything. God wants us to trust him every day just like the people of the Bible did.

## Candle Lighting

*Light candles #1 and #2.*

Today we light the candles for hope and faith. We look forward to the day God will make all things right and wipe away every tear, but we know we cannot wait to trust God. We choose to trust God today, no matter our circumstances.

## Carol

December 7th, 2020

### O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
and ransom captive Israel  
that mourns in lonely exile here  
until the Son of God appears.

**Refrain:** Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O Wisdom from on high,  
who ordered all things mightily;  
to us the path of knowledge show  
and teach us in its ways to go.

**Refrain**

### Closing Prayer

*Take a few minutes to pray on your own or as a family. If you are doing this with others, you might give space for people to pray as they feel led, with the leader closing the time.*

## Servant of the Lord

*In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

*"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

*The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."*

*"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.*

*Luke 1:26-38, NIV*

Mary was a teenager from a no-account town in the countryside. She had no special qualifications. She wasn't powerful, or rich, or overtly pious. She was scared. When the angel appeared and greeted her as "highly favored" and "blessed among women" she was, very sensibly, scared.

I'm sure the angel's subsequent explanation did nothing to make her less scared. Mary was hoping for Messiah to come, to bring healing and justice to the people of Israel. But it's one thing to hope God will bring liberation and quite another to find out you're going to have a central part in the drama. Filling the role God has prepared for her will take courage. The courage to be a mother, but extra courage too, since God's calling will expose her to judgment by her community as an unwed mother.

Mary asks how this is going to take place. The angel's response, "With God, nothing shall be impossible", reminds us that God is the God of the promise. These are the same words he spoke to Sarah (and Abraham) when he promised that a barren woman would bear a son through whom God would establish a great nation. Now there is going to be another impossible pregnancy. Now the coming of Jesus will (re-) establish God's Kingdom.

God has prepared the path for Mary to follow, but he does not compel Mary to follow it. I don't know what would've happened if Mary hadn't responded "I am the servant of the Lord", but what's important is that that is how she responded. "With God, nothing shall be impossible", but God still needs us to respond as his servants if his Kingdom is to come.

God chose an unwed teenage girl from the backwoods of a backwater of the Roman Empire to bring the hope of the world into the world. Only Mary got to bear the child Jesus. But God is capable of birthing Jesus in all of us. Even if we say and think that that's what we want it'll be scary and strange. It'll certainly be disruptive. But if we respond to God's calling "Let it be unto me according to thy word" then God will work in us and through us to bring his Kingdom to our lives and the lives of those around us.

**Prayer:** "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me according to thy word."

Daniel Phillips

## God is our Salvation

*"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.*

*"In those days and at that time*

*I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line;*

*he will do what is just and right in the land.*

*In those days Judah will be saved*

*and Jerusalem will live in safety.*

*This is the name by which it will be called:*

*The Lord Our Righteous Savior."*

*Jeremiah 33:14-16, NIV*

This prophecy was written for Jeremiah and shared with national and city leaders at the time of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. The city was surrounded by an overwhelming military force. People were starving and struggling to overcome disease. There was public turmoil, and many people were defending different strategies for survival. "We should agree to surrender and pay tribute." "We must send messengers to Egypt asking for their armies to come in our defense." "We must confess our disobedience to God and ask for God's mercy and deliverance." Jeremiah is advocating they turn to God and have faith in God's historic and eternal promise of deliverance.

Advent has always been my favorite season of the Christian year. At the age of thirteen, soon after my public acceptance of Christ as my Savior at a Sunday worship service, I entered the sanctuary of my home church at night. I lived in a small town in West Virginia, and back then the doors of the church were never locked. I entered the dark sanctuary and walked forward

to the communion rail to pray, because two weeks before Christmas, I was over-burdened with guilt and needed God's forgiveness. The night before I had been at a youth revival gathering; our youth choir sang for the service. The evangelist gave an impassioned altar call, while we sang endless verses of "Just As I Am," and I was the only teen who did not come forward to be saved. Somehow I felt coming forward just to bring the revival service to a conclusion was total hypocrisy. Many of my friends disagreed. Eventually the service ended and being stubborn, which is also my nature, I returned home with mixed feelings, being really guilty, and at the same time, really pious; really guilty for not professing my faith in Jesus and really self-righteous for not coming forward for the wrong reason. My childhood may have been quite different from your own, a little primitive for some of you, and too Pentecostal for others. Still, from your background, have you ever questioned God's deliverance or ever felt challenged by the realization that God is your only means of salvation? Have you ever felt guilty for any missed opportunity you may have had to share that prophecy of God's deliverance with others?

I arrived at the communion steps of the Winfield Methodist Church with a broken and contrite heart. Crying, with tears streaming down my cheeks, I asked God to forgive me for my pride and disobedience. This may be a challenge to our more scientific and sophisticated understanding of our relationship with Christ, but at the age of thirteen, I felt the embrace of arms wrapped around me helping me from my knees to my feet and I heard these words, "Preach my Gospel, and know I am with you." I believed these words were spoken to me by the Risen Christ. I believed they constituted not only assurance of my forgiveness but my call to ministry. I was exhilarated and overjoyed, healed and empowered. At that very moment I knew that I was under God's guidance and care, that God was truly my salvation. This is just one of the reasons I love Advent.

I wrote this devotion before Election Day. Anxious about the results of our voting (I need not declare my political orientation) and aware that many other people are anxious as well, I think about the people and leaders of Jerusalem on the

occasion of Jeremiah's prophecy in today's bible scripture. The Babylonian siege is quite advanced, and the prospect of death by sword or exile under bondage imminent. I wonder how many of the people in Jerusalem not only understood what Jeremiah was asking them to do but were ready to live with faith in what Jeremiah is saying they should do—trust God for their deliverance.

We have a historic advantage and a hindsight that the people of Jerusalem did not have in Jeremiah's day. We know the Christmas story, how God came to earth to save the peoples of the world through an action plan of forgiveness and new life, and we believe in the Easter story of Jesus' victory over death and his deliverance promise for us through eternal life.

*Even with the reassurances of Christmas and Easter, where are we today? Are we still trying to come up with our own salvation plan? Are we formulating concrete strategies right now to cope with and overcome the results of our election or the spread of the COVID virus or the new patterns of Church practice that will likely be the result of recent changes?*

**Prayer:** Loving God, we continue to fear the outcomes of our next worldly challenge; we are tempted to try to make personal plans to cope with imminent change. We question what it means to trust in you more for our own salvation and for our doubts and fears and we ask for your forgiveness. By your Holy Spirit, remind us how you have delivered us in the past and through Christ we share in a victory which is eternal. Through Christ, Emmanuel, we know and proclaim you are with us now and will be until the end of time. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Steven Fewell

## The Branch

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.  
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—  
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of might,  
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—  
and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.  
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,  
or decide by what he hears with his ears;  
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,  
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.  
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;  
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.  
Righteousness will be his belt  
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.  
The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;  
and a little child will lead them.  
The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.  
The infant will play near the cobra's den,  
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.  
They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.  
Isaiah 11:1-9, NIV*

I think we can all agree 2020 has been a difficult year for everyone. There were many times when the hope meter was low for many of us, and for some it may still be hovering close to the bottom. Everything looks different than what we are used to, and we never thought we would be in a pandemic this long.

We are missing events, friends, and family. We need some joy! I wanted to get some joy so much that I considered putting my Christmas tree up the day after Halloween. I love Christmas, and the lights on the tree are just mesmerizing to me. I get lost in the lights and for a few minutes I forget about everything around me. I just sit in peace. A few friends told me it was too early and I needed to wait until after Thanksgiving. This year, I don't think I can wait. I need some joy! I need the hope of Jesus to remind me that no matter how dark things get, joy always comes in the morning. I need the Branch.

In Isaiah 11, I'm reminded this Branch will come with fruit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, righteousness, justice, and faithfulness--so many things that seem to be lacking right now. This Branch brings hope, even during a pandemic. The verses tell us He is our banner and our resting place, and I promise you, we all need a resting place right about now. We need a place where we can lay our heads and say, "I may not know what tomorrow brings, but I know Who holds tomorrow in the palm of His hands." Even though this holiday season looks so different for all of us, know the Branch is still there, and that Branch is Jesus. Things may get back to normal, or we may have to learn a new normal, but Jesus is the same every day, and I'm going to remember that. Also, I'm putting up my tree this weekend. One week after Halloween.

**Prayer:** Dearest Daddy, you are our faithfulness, justice, wisdom, and peace. You bring us joy when we can't see through our tears. You give us hope when we feel so hopeless. We still have a few weeks before Christmas, and we are all making decisions about Christmas during a pandemic. Help us remember it's ok to feel sad or even angry because of what we are missing out on, but remind us that You are with us. We can lean on You because You know. Fill us with Your comfort and peace. Be our Branch and our resting place. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Robin Blair-Ackison



## Accepting the Inconceivable Work of God

*This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

*Matthew 1:18-21, NIV*

Joseph was a man of honor and devout faith, a respected member of the community with an established carpentry business, and he was likely excited to enter a new phase of life with his betrothed, Mary. But then he discovered she had become pregnant! He was immediately torn between upholding the Mosaic laws that directed his life and protecting the young woman for whom he had such affection. Just as he was coming to terms with what had to be done, God intervened and revealed Mary was part of an unexpected, indeed inconceivable, work of God.

"The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit, and he will save his people from their sins."

How was this possible? The history of the people of Israel was full of stories about women who had been barren conceiving

a child unexpectedly. But conceived from the spirit of God? Would this son be a new Samuel, a prophet? Could this finally be a new David, a revolutionary greater than the Maccabees? Could he believe such an unexpected hope after generations of oppression, of unfulfilled messianic expectations?

Joseph was unaware of the divine encounter Mary had experienced. He did not know that what appeared to be a consequence of indiscretion was actually a product of Mary's reckless obedience to the call of God. Luckily for us, and all humanity, Joseph had his own divine encounter before he could act on his reasonable decision to dismiss Mary.

*Have you ever judged another person's ethical/moral decision (or another Christian's) as foolish, as clearly against the commands of God, against the law of Christ? While we are all called to enter a relationship of loving obedience to our heavenly Father, we need to remember each child's relationship with their Father is unique, and we connect most passionately with different aspects of Christ's call to conversion and sanctification.*

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, may we, with love and humility, allow ourselves to be disciplined by the obedience of our brothers and sisters in Christ, even when it appears foolish. Amen.

Peter Smith

## The First Advent Assures Us of the Second Advent

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

*Matthew 1: 22-25, NIV*

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew tells us all this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophets. The early church was convinced God left hints and clues concerning the coming of Christ throughout the scriptures. This is why Christ fulfills, rather than erases, the Law and the Prophets.

The Jews had been waiting for the fulfillment of their messianic expectations for generations. In the advent of God in Christ, the hopes and dreams of God's people were exceeded beyond their expectations. Christ appeared as the new Prophet, Priest, and King. As Christians, we await the advent of the kingdom of God in full. We do our best to live into the reality of God's beloved community, but we know that this new life and new community will not be fully consummated until Christ returns in glory and transforms us and all creation in resurrection.

In the fullness of time, at God's appointed time, our Redeemer was revealed. All the promises made to God's covenant people found their fulfillment in Christ. The Church now waits for the

fulfillment of God's promise of resurrection, the revealing of the New Jerusalem, and a world in which God is All in All. God fulfilled his promise to put his Word and Spirit in our hearts, to make the seed of Abraham a blessing to all nations, and so we can be confident in the promise of Christ's return. Indeed, the God who began this new work in us will surely bring it to completion.

May this ancient carol be your hymn of praise and hope.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear*

*O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;  
From depths of hell Thy people save,  
And give them victory o'er the grave.*

*O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine advent here  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight*

*O come, Thou Key of David, come  
And open wide our heavenly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery.*

Peter Smith

## Who would you call?

*At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" Luke 1:39-45, NIV*

Up to this point in the story, Mary had a lot of problems to deal with. Joseph was about to divorce her and only refrained when he was told otherwise by an angel! Other than Joseph, most people didn't know about the pregnancy. Mary held this secret in her womb. If people found out she was pregnant outside of marriage, she could face enormous trouble. All that to say: she was carrying a lot, and most likely carrying it by herself. Imagine the moment when she went to see Elizabeth and was received with nothing but praise and encouragement.

There are not enough Elizabeths in the world. Life is hard and can be at times overwhelming—and that's before God shows up and sends you on a mission that will make everyone question your sanity. We need people who will listen, support and encourage.

*How do you model this kind of supportive listening?*

*Who can you call, email, text or talk to that you can say an encouraging word to? Does someone come to mind? If so, stop what you're doing and act on it!*

**Prayer:** God, the One who encourages, send someone my way to be an encouragement to me, and help me reach out and speak to someone to be encouragement to them. Amen.



Joy

## Third Sunday in Advent

*December 13th, 2020*

### Call to Worship

Nehemiah 8:10-1 (NIV)

**Reader 1:** Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared.

**Reader 2:** This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

**Reader 1:** Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.

**Reader 2:** All the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

## Opening Prayer

God, you set our days, and we know that in the midst of trouble, you invite us to rejoice. You invite us, broken people in a broken world, to fight against injustice and stand for what is right, not out of sorrow, but out of joy. For even your Son went to the cross for the joy that was set before him! Help us to leave behind shallow pleasure and embrace the kind of rich joy that comes from a life well lived. Amen.

## Scripture Reading

And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their

inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as he promised our ancestors.”

Luke 1:46-55 (NIV)

## Reflection

The verses we just read are lyrics to a song, shared by Mary and inspired by one in the Old Testament. The song is about rejoicing because God shows up and sets things right. God has brought justice, or making things fair and right for everyone, after people weren't treated fairly.

*If you had a magic wand and could fix something wrong in the world, what would it be?*

*What are some ways you have seen people being treated unfairly? What can you do today to make a difference in the lives of the people you just mentioned?*

## Break it down for kids

What makes you happy?

God wants us to be happy, but God wants everyone else to be happy too. When everyone is treated the same, and everyone gets the same chances we get, then God is happy too. As someone who loves God, there is no greater joy than when God helps the world be a better place for everyone. This is what Mary is so happy about when she's singing this song. She wasn't always treated the same as other people in her community, but God chose her to be the mother of Jesus, and this made her super happy. She is given a chance she never expected to have! Do you believe God wants you to be happy? Do you know God wants to give you a chance to do something special too?

## Candle Lighting

*Light candles #1-3.*

Today we light the candles for hope, faith, and joy. We look to the future; we trust God today, and we celebrate the good things God is doing in this world. We recognize more work needs to be done, but we refuse to become discouraged, for our joy will be our strength.

## Carol

### **Joy to the World**

Joy to the world! The Lord is come:  
let earth receive her King;  
let ev'ry heart prepare him room,  
and heav'n and nature sing,  
and heav'n and nature sing,  
and heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
nor thorns infest the ground;  
he comes to make his blessings flow  
far as the curse is found,  
far as the curse is found,  
far as, far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
and makes the nations prove  
the glories of his righteousness  
and wonders of his love,  
and wonders of his love,  
and wonders, wonders of his love.

## Closing Prayer

Give us joy, but not the kind that would distract us or make us lazy and selfish. Give us joy—rich, unshakable joy—to inspire us to never grow weary in doing good. Amen.

December 14th, 2020

## He is Peace

*"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
though you are small among the clans of Judah,  
out of you will come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel,  
whose origins are from of old,  
from ancient times."  
Therefore Israel will be abandoned  
until the time when she who is in labor bears a son,  
and the rest of his brothers return  
to join the Israelites.  
He will stand and shepherd his flock  
in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.  
And they will live securely, for then his greatness  
will reach to the ends of the earth.  
And he will be our peace  
when the Assyrians invade our land  
and march through our fortresses.  
We will raise against them seven shepherds,  
even eight commanders,  
Micah 5:2-5, NIV*

Are you not still drawn to awe when you read words predicting the birth of Jesus? Micah wrote these words over 700 years before Jesus arrived on the scene. 700 years. Over and over, these prophets, big and small, were preparing the nations to receive Jesus, and those sensitive enough to stay vigilant recognized the Prince of Peace when he came.

"He will be their peace" feels different for this year. I feel myself reading with desperation attached. A simple prayer feeling so heavy:

Bring us peace.  
Bring us sanity.  
Bring us unity.

But God nudged me to take a closer look. If we ask Jesus to just bring us something, it feels a bit impersonal. It's as if we can just ask for something, He will bring it, then take off for His next holy errand. God wants us to know Jesus isn't just the "bringer of peace." He is Peace. We have to be needy for Jesus and need His Peace by needing Him. It felt like God wanted to rephrase it:

Be our peace.  
Be our sanity.  
Be our unity.

And then I reread the passage, and it literally said that the first time. I just totally missed it: Jesus is our Peace.

*Do you call on Jesus for Him to bring you peace, or do you call on Jesus for Him to be your peace?*

**Prayer:** God, thank You for Your perseverant heart for us, that You continue to be our peace, even when we have blinded ourselves to seeing You as the source. Forgive us for when we choose to see other things before You, good and bad. Help us to remember you in those moments. Amen.

Christina Schirtzinger

## The Unexpected Way

*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)*

*And everyone went to their own town to register.*

*So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloth and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

*Luke 2: 1-7, NIV*

Do you ever wonder if this passage is where Hallmark got their baseline plot for their Christmas movies? Troubled young person travels to their hometown, maybe bringing along a new girlfriend or boyfriend, sleeping arrangements are always weird, and someone is always isolated and put out. We know that by the end, everyone has a warm and fuzzy feeling of love and everything is magical, perfect, and golden. Today I am struck that this isn't exactly how it was going down in Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph travel all this way for the census, and now it strikes me that we don't know much about their relationship. It is doubtful Mary had ever met Joseph's family of origin before. I wonder if she felt isolated? So Joseph comes home with his bride-to-be, who is pregnant with a baby that is not his. I don't think any of the visit was comfortable, physically or relationally. Yet, it was perfect. Even in the Old Testament, it was prophesied that an eternal ruler from the line of David would

be born in Bethlehem. This added to the doubt—Mary lived in Nazareth and so when she said that she was pregnant with the Son of God, this couldn't be who she said it was. The Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, not Nazareth (Micah 5:2). In all of the uncertainties, God worked to bring forth His will in the most unexpected way.

As our uncertainties in life grow, so must our trust and hope in the Lord. Our God will find a way and will use even the most mundane thing like a census to work for his good and purpose. In our isolation, we must look at the lesson, and search for where God could be working.

*When you are feeling isolated, what could God be speaking into life through you?*

**Prayer:** God, spill your Holy Spirit into my heart, my life, and the places I feel isolated and new. Increase my trust and faith in you, God, that I would be able to search for the truth you exhibit. I am in awe of your righteousness and goodness. May the prophecies that have been laid out for generations continue to move me to action. You alone are all-knowing. I am thankful for the birth of Jesus, in the loneliest of spaces so I may be made new. Grow in me the faith of Joseph and the obedience of Mary for your glory. Amen.

Lauren Fuchs

## Do Not Be Afraid

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

*Luke 2:8-12, NIV*

Most people have seen *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, the now iconic program based on the Peanuts cartoon characters. One of the highlights of this show is when blanket-carrying Linus hits the stage and starts with these verses. And this is when I start to get chills, because even a little boy with his security blanket understands that the wonder of Christmas is when our Messiah appears as a lowly baby to lowly shepherds in a field, and even then, we should fear not: this is good news that will yield great joy.

Imagine being a shepherd, living and working in the fields at night, watching sheep. You're dirty, most likely tired, on the outskirts of the city, and generally not too esteemed among the people, too. Then imagine a light so bright and bold, an angel of the Lord, coming to you. Yet you don't know what this angel, this beautiful light is. What is happening? Are you in trouble? (My first thoughts when in the unknown!) The shepherds were afraid, but the angel's first words are those of assurance and comfort: "Do not be afraid. I bring you great news." Then, these tired and worn shepherds were the first to learn of the birth of our Savior: the Messiah and Lord.

Isn't it just like Jesus to have an angel come to the least among us and provide greetings of comfort and assurance? Fear is often one of the greatest feelings we experience when facing the unknown, but not only are the shepherds told, "Do not be afraid," they are told why. Jesus does not enter the world just to be great news. He is a cause of joy. His announcement to the shepherds brings calm and an explanation why: our Savior has been born.

*How many times have we faced uncertainty and fear this season? This year? How do we take the message from the angel and find comfort still today? In what ways do we allow Jesus to be our calm, our good news, and our joy?*

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, thank you for coming to us- those who are tired, lonely, afraid, and maybe not always esteemed by others. Thank you for giving us comfort and assurance to not be afraid. Thank you for being a source of good news. We ask for more of you in this season. Fill us with great joy, and help us be more bold in sharing your good news with those among us.

Andrea Fogt



December 17th, 2020

## The Message From Heaven

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,*

*and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

*Luke 2:13-14, NIV*

As a musician and choral conductor, I love the imagery of the heavenly host, singing together in praise of God and with a message of peace for humanity. I've performed settings of this text by Handel, Vivaldi, Rachmaninoff, and several others, in addition to carols containing the words in Latin, "Gloria in excelsis deo." Although the Scripture doesn't specifically mention angels singing while they praised God, I'm keeping with tradition here.

In William Barclay's Bible commentary, he writes that births in ancient Palestine were times of great joy and celebration. Family, friends, and local musicians would gather near and wait for the announcement that a baby had been born. (Incidentally, if it was a boy, they would burst into song. If it was a girl, they would all just shrug and go home. I'm using all of my self-discipline to stay on topic and let that go for another day.) Barclay writes the following:

*Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem and therefore that ceremony could not be carried out. It is a lovely thought that the minstrelsy of heaven took the place of the minstrelsy of earth, and angels sang the songs for Jesus that the earthly singers could not sing.*

Here is a picture of God with His angels, bursting forth like a proud Papa and pulling out all the stops to proclaim the power and the beauty of the occasion. In this defining moment, ushering in a new era of humanity, God chooses to communicate his message in just two sentences.

First, *glory to God in the highest*, no matter what, in all circumstances. Whether I feel like it or not, that's the reality of things.

Second, *peace on earth to those on whom His favor rests*; not on those who go to church, not on everyone but me, not on those who follow the rules, but on all humankind. All of us with whom He is pleased. Peace.

**Notes:** *If you have Spotify, I made a playlist of some of my favorite choral arrangements of this text from the past 400 years: [bit.ly/luke21314](https://bit.ly/luke21314)*

**Prayer:** Lord God, just as You burst into that night and declared Your Presence, peace, and concern for humankind to the shepherds, burst into our hearts this season with the same message. Open our eyes and ears, Holy Spirit, that we may hear and internalize the angels' message, a message that was echoing through the heavens long before and will continue long after that night. Help us to hear what was and is there all along. Help us to proclaim that same message with our lives that others may hear, too.

Molly Rule

December 18th, 2020

## Shepherd Evangelist

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*

*So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.*

*Luke 2:15-18, NIV*

When the shepherds were told to look for a baby, they were told they would know when they found the right baby, because the one they were looking for would be lying in a food trough.

Why would God choose the shepherds to be the first to see the baby Jesus? They were poor, low class, night-shift shepherds. They likely smelled bad and were viewed by most people as untrustworthy.

Why would God choose them? Here's one possible reason: they wouldn't think it strange to lay a baby in a feeding trough! As shepherds living on the land and raising their children off the land, that wouldn't make them uncomfortable.

Maybe God chose them, in part, because Mary and Joseph, and especially the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, were the kind of people and circumstances the shepherds would be comfortable with.

I wonder: If Jesus came today and was born in a homeless shelter, or was laid in a bucket and nursed next to animals—how would we respond? Would we be able to worship Jesus, or would we be distracted by the surroundings?

Shepherds were able to move past these distractions and see Jesus for who he was, and as a result, they went and told everyone they saw!

The shepherds became the first evangelists. They told people what they had seen and experienced.

*How might your expectations for how things should be keep you from worshipping Jesus when he's found in some unlikely places?*

*Who could you share Jesus with this Christmas? Who could you invite to church this Christmas?*

**Prayer:** God, the One who is too good to keep to ourselves, give us courage to share your good news with others.

## Mary, Did You Know?

*But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*

*Luke 2:19-20, NIV*

Garret chose to propose to me in a very intimate and quiet way. It was just the two of us picnicking at a park. No family popping out of trees with arms wide, no friends screaming congratulations (that all would come later) but in the moment, it was just the two of us: thanking God for His goodness, sitting in our bliss (and nervous excitement) and reveling in the promise of what our life was going to hold.

It was so special, and I treasure those moments we had alone together before the excitement and chaos of sharing the news and wedding planning began. I think God gave Mary and Joseph a hidden gift in allowing them to give birth intimately and privately, just the two of them, in the stables away from everyone else.

Before the shepherds arrived, there was a moment when it was just a new mom and dad, and their newborn baby boy, enjoying the first joys of being a family. There was a period of time before the arrival of the shepherds, when Mary and Joseph of Nazareth and their brand new baby were just a normal family, and a certain conversation with an angel nine months prior seemed a long time ago and maybe even hard to believe. Then the shepherds arrive, and this family picture and newborn baby are far from normal. We see God's words coming to pass, His plan to save the world is at work.

Mary's reaction is different from that of the shepherds and those they share the news with. The shepherds are overjoyed

with happiness and praise for God because the word was fulfilled just as it was told them. Mary also sees the Word of God fulfilled as the shepherds echo the same words about her new baby that the angel Gabriel shared with her, but Mary "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Mary appears to calmly take it in and sit in the wonder of God acting in her life. The fact that she "treasures" the words of the shepherds means it is good news to her ears as well, but that she also "ponders" shows that she wonders what exactly this good news means for her, her family, and the baby boy lying in her arms.

Reading this scripture, I couldn't help but hear the words to one of my favorite Christmas songs:

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?

Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?

This child that you've delivered will soon deliver you.

*God speaks to us in many ways and we can react very differently. Do you find yourself more likely to quietly ponder and reflect in your heart like Mary, or are you more likely to be filled with overflowing awe and persuaded to shout good news from the rooftops like the shepherds? Are there times when one serves a better purpose than the other?*

**Prayer:** God, help me to be more like Mary and treasure up your words and promises to hold close to my heart. Let me sit and ponder the Christmas Miracle so I can fully understand Your love. Help me to be more like the shepherds and to break out in praise over who You are. Allow me to share your glory and shout your goodness to the world like they did. Amen.

Claire Mater



Peace

## Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 20th, 2020

### Call to Worship

Psalm 29:10-11, NIV

**Reader 1:** The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;

**Reader 2:** The Lord is enthroned as King forever.

**Reader 1:** The Lord gives strength to his people;

**Reader 2:** The Lord blesses his people with peace.

### Opening Prayer

Prince of peace, give us peace by making us agents of peace. Amen.

### Scripture Reading

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. - Luke 2:13-16 (NIV)

### Reflection

When the angels arrived on the scene they sang a song of praise. Ever since, songs have defined our Christmas season. This song was a cry for peace. In the Old Testament, *Shalom* was a concept that meant more than just an absence of war. It was a word referring to community wholeness, a community where everyone had what they needed and were loved and accepted.

*What Christmas song most helps you get into the Christmas spirit? Which one helps you best focus on giving praise to God and Jesus?*

*What does it mean for our communities to be “whole” or “not lacking”? What needs to happen in our homes, cities, nation, for there to be “Shalom”?*

### Break it down for kids:

The people in the Bible spoke many different languages. Many times, they spoke *Hebrew*, and in that language there's a word called "Shalom." Today, it can be used in many cultures; it can mean hello or goodbye, but in the Bible it often means "peace." This kind of peace means everyone is getting along and everyone is treated fairly.

*Do you find it easy to get along with your friends and/or siblings? Is it easier or harder to get along with them during the Christmas season?*

*Do you know what it means for something to be "fair"? How can we as a family make sure everyone is treated fairly?*

### Candle Lighting

*Light candles #1-4.*

Today, we light the candles for hope, faith, joy and peace. We look to the future; we trust God in the present; we rejoice in the good and work to bring Shalom into the world.

### Carol

#### **Hark! the Herald Angels Sing**

Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King:  
peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled!"  
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,  
join the triumph of the skies;  
with angelic hosts proclaim,  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

**Refrain:** Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King"

Christ, by highest heaven adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord,  
late in time behold him come,  
offspring of the Virgin's womb:  
veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
hail the incarnate Deity,  
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,  
Jesus, our Immanuel.

### Closing Prayer

*Take a few minutes to pray on your own or as a family. If you are doing this with others, you might give space for people to pray as they feel lead, with the leader closing the time.*

## Waiting for Good Things to Come

*Read Luke 2:25-38, NIV*

Do you remember as a kid waiting for Christmas to come?

Poring over the JC Penney Christmas catalog, opening another window on the Advent calendar, counting the minutes until the school bell would ring on that last day before break?

It was a time of waiting, of anticipation, and of excitement for that day to come. There was no anxiety that the day might not come or that it would be bad when it did. But rather waiting with hope, knowing the good day would come: it was just a matter of when and how soon.

Interestingly, Jesus' life was bookended by people who were similarly waiting with hope for a good day to come.

The first are Simeon and Anna, who are featured in this passage. Both are aged, devout people who had followed God as best they could in what had been a rather dark time for God's people. And both were waiting, hoping for the day when God's Messiah would come.

Simeon, described as someone "waiting for the consolation of Israel," took the infant Jesus in his arms and blessed him, saying he would be "a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Anna had been frequenting the Temple for worship, waiting for the coming Messiah, likely for well over 50 years. On this day, she gave thanks to God for the coming of the Messiah, and "spoke of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem."

At the other end of Jesus' life, as well, we come across another person who was anticipating the coming of God's kingdom. In Mark's gospel (15:43), shortly after Jesus had died, we see a man named Joseph of Arimathea who plucks up the courage to go to the ruling authorities and request Jesus' body so as to give him a respectful burial.

He is described as a man "who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God." And so despite the fact of the hoped-for Messiah's death, he still acted with courage based in the firm knowledge that somehow God would work things out even if it wasn't in the expected way.

And work things out, God did!

For us, on the other side of the resurrection, we have more of the story, but we too must also wait in hope.

Jesus rose from the dead and conquered sin and death, but the years roll on over the nearly two millennia since that bright Sunday morning. We pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," and we see some good things, but also many things wrong in the world.

Theologians have said we live in the "already and not yet," and there's something to that.

We've begun the story; maybe we've even passed the highest point of the drama, but we're not yet to the final chapter where God once and for all makes all things right.

Jesus came, God-enfleshed, as a baby on that first Christmas way back when. That was the first Advent (or "coming"). He dwelt among us. He lived, died, and rose again.

Now we too must wait with hope (cf Roman's 8:23). Just as Simeon, Anna, and Joseph of Arimathea waited for the first Advent, so too we await with eagerness the second.

We don't know when it will be...it may be today or not until two more millennia hence...but the day will surely come when God makes all things right once and for all.

May we, this Christmas season, look forward with hope to that day!

*What areas of your life could you use an infusion of hope this Christmas season?*

**Prayer:** God, help me today to remember all will be made right one day and to look forward with hope to that day.

Jeremy Gott

## Foreigners

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

*When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:*

*"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel."*

*Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."*

*Matthew 2:1-8, NIV*

Men, traveling for miles, likely over a period of months, came looking for Jesus. They had studied the prophets of old and knew the King would be born in Bethlehem. Somehow, from their studies of the stars, they knew it was happening in their generation.

Bethlehem and Israel in general would not prepare room for Jesus. There would be no room for them in the Inn. Jesus was right there in their midst, and they would miss him. But from the other side of the world, seekers would come and find him.

Foreigners would show the world what really mattered.

It's common for people of any race or nationality to consider their views and perspectives as the best. It's very common, but that doesn't make it right. This story of the men from the east reminds us that sometimes other people from other cultures can show us what we should be looking for. If we look to them, they can show us Jesus in ways we never thought possible.

*How familiar are you with the church in other parts of the world? Is there a foreign expression of Christianity (or any religion) that has helped shape your faith?*

**Prayer:** God, the One who draws people from all nations, draw me in as well. Help me not to miss Jesus who is in our midst. Amen.

## Practical Provisions

*After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

*Matthew 2:9-12, NIV*

I imagine the Magi, or Wise Men, were very disheartened by their time spent in Jerusalem. After a long journey from the East, they were unable to find the King they sought and learned little was known concerning his birth and they would need instead to continue searching in a new city. The star was a much needed encouragement to the wise men as well as a very practical guide to Bethlehem and the King they were searching for.

The gifts presented to Jesus by the wise men of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were gifts fitting for a king. Gold, as a precious metal, was an acknowledgement of royalty; frankincense was acknowledgement of Jesus' priesthood, and myrrh was anointing oil connected to death and burial (a little bit of a depressing gift for a new mother to hold, yet beautiful in light of her understanding of Jesus's purpose). The gifts given to Jesus were both symbolic of who He is, but also practically met the needs of this young family as many scholars believe these gifts were used to support their time living in Egypt.

This passage ends with a dream that warned the Magi not to go back to Jerusalem. This dream was God's way of providing protection to Jesus from the harm Herod would bring to him.

This scripture is a reminder to me of the way God has continued to provide throughout my life. At times it is hard to see exactly how God is working, or at times I can wonder if He is even near, but being able to remember God's faithfulness in the past allows me to have faith in the present.

*What times in your life has God provided in either a practical or supernatural way?*

**Prayer:** God, thank you for the ways in which you provide for me. I pray you can help me remember your faithfulness in the past to increase my faith in the present.

Garret Mater





Christ

## Christmas Eve

December 24th, 2020

### Call to Worship

*From Isaiah 9 (NIV)*

**Reader 1:** The people walking in darkness, have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

**Reader 2:** For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

**Reader 1:** And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

### Opening Prayer

O God, who makes us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that as we joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, so may we have sure confidence in him to provide when we face life's fears. Amen.

### Scripture Reading

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 (NIV)

**Suggestion:** You might also consider reading the Christmas story as it's found in **Luke 2:1-20**

### Reflection

Immanuel means "God with us." The Christmas story is about God moving into the neighborhood or becoming human like us. It's about how far God would travel to be with us.

*When have you felt the closest to God? (Maybe about a particular church service or favorite worship song?) When have you felt the furthest from God?*

### Break it down for kids

Who are some of your best friends? Did you know God wants to be your friend too? It says in scripture that God is with us, which means God wants to be friends with us too! But unlike other friends, God will always be there—right now, later tonight, and in the morning. God never leaves! Christmas is about God coming to earth, to live among us, and now Jesus lives here forever through God's spirit in our hearts. (cont. on next page)

### Here's what we've learned so far:

**Hope:** *God is our light. God can protect us when we are scared.*

**Faith:** *God is here, and we believe in God even when we can't see God.*

**Joy:** *God wants us to be happy, and everyone else too.*

**Peace:** *God wants everyone to be treated fairly.*

**Christ:** *God will never leave us*

### Candle Lighting

*Light all five candles.*

Today we light all five candles: **Hope:** We continue to hope in God, even when it's dark. **Faith:** We believe in God, even when we can't see God working. **Joy:** We rejoice in the good things God is doing. And **Peace:** we partner with God in bringing justice and peace for everyone. Finally, we light the **Christ** candle to celebrate the great distance Jesus travels to be with us: there is nowhere, in life or death, that can separate us from God's love, in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

### Carol

#### Away in a Manger

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,  
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.  
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,  
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,  
But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.  
I love thee, Lord Jesus! look down from the sky,  
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay  
Close by me forever, and love me I pray.  
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,  
And take us to heaven to live with thee there.

### Closing Prayer

Thank you God for never leaving us. Thank you God for coming to us. Thank you God for the gift of your Son, our Savior. Thank you, God. Thank you. Amen.

Notes:

## Acknowledgments

A huge thank you to everyone who contributed a devotion and helped edit.

Also, thanks to Tim Martin at Ohio Is Home for his creation of the wood candleholders. You can find similar products from Ohio is Home by going to [ohioishome.com](http://ohioishome.com)

Finally thanks to James Graves who designed the icons that were included throughout the book and on the candleholders. You can follow his work on Instagram: [@visualjams](https://www.instagram.com/visualjams).

When the days become shorter, and the sun hides behind overcast skies, we are reminded that the weather can reflect our moods. This year has had it's fair share of "overcast skies." We trust that the light is there, but we wonder why it's not shining as brightly!

We're no different from many who have struggled before us. And like our great cloud of witnesses, we trust that God meets us in the darkness.

**The light of a candle can fill an entire room.**

Christmas is about how God came to dwell amongst us. Light came into the world, and the darkness could not overcome it.

Join us this Christmas, as we read scripture, light candles, and warm our hearts at the light of Christ, who is, and who was, and who is to come.



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