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# intro

## THE ARRIVAL OF JESUS

Christmas is in the air...snow falling, lights twinkling, people shopping...and a baby crying- a baby, who changed the world, a savior who daily wants to engage our hearts throughout the year and throughout this season of Advent. The season of Advent encompasses the four Sundays before Christmas. A traditional way to celebrate Advent is with an Advent wreath of candles. The candle flames can be seen as the growing light of Christ who is coming again in all fullness into the darkness of our world. We watch and wait with the Holy Spirit for Christ's coming, lighting candles of hope, peace, joy, and love; and remembering the promises of God with prayer.

This daily devotional is a way for us to celebrate Advent. This season is an important time to reflect on, remember, and dig deeper into the story of God breaking into human history 2,000 years ago. God came to earth in human form, starting as a baby; we call this the Incarnation. God came to reconcile our hearts- our brokenness- to his perfect love and goodness.

The glory and magnitude of this season and story can be dampened by its familiarity; many of us have read it, seen it, or heard it expressed in countless ways, countless times. Advent has lost much of its meaning. These daily readings are meant to ignite the power of Advent in our lives, letting God reveal himself to us in the person of Jesus and begin, renew, or grow in us a life of discipleship, of whole-heartedly following him.

Starting today, for the next 31 days, we are going to unpack Advent. At the center of it all is Jesus. He is God's self-revelation to us. Jesus is God living as a human; "Immanuel", the angel said. God has come to earth; God is with his people; God is with us; God gives us hope, peace, joy, and love- not just to know about, but to experience as we read, journal, and pray.

## THE MANGER AND THE CROSS

As the season of Advent unfolds, let us prepare ourselves to fully receive the hope, peace, joy and love of Jesus. Let's ready our hearts to receive both the manger and the cross. The manger - the humble, miraculous birth of Jesus, whose birth gives us hope of new life. The cross- the painful, ultimate sacrifice of Jesus, whose crucifixion conquers death, giving us everlasting life.

As a baby, Jesus entered this world and was laid in a cold, stone feeding trough at the back of the house with the animals. He was welcomed with a child-like faith by his parents, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the wise men. Our hope, the hope of the world, came to us in the form of a baby and changed the trajectory of humanity forever.

We are invited to enter this time of preparation for his arrival with hope. Though evil men from the beginning tried to smother the light of the world with darkness, Jesus overcame that to bring the reign of God's Kingdom to this earth. "On earth as it is in Heaven", he taught his disciples to pray.

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**READ:** Isaiah 11:1-10

**JOURNAL:** The last few years have been nothing short of challenging for many. What are a few things that have challenged your hope, peace or joy in this last year? In what area of your life do you need to seek the Lord's wisdom, understanding, counsel, power or knowledge?

**PRAY:** Ready my heart to welcome you, Jesus, into my life today.

# WAITING

The Gospel of Luke begins with a series of stories, all inter-connected with the theme of waiting; waiting for the promise of God found in Jesus. Waiting, not with the fear found in human plans or schemes, but with the hope of a promise.

Zechariah and Elizabeth- waiting for the promise of a son who, "...will be great before the Lord and filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God." Luke 1:15-17 (John The Baptist).

Mary- waiting for a son whom the Lord told her, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Luke 1:30-33 (Jesus).

Both- waiting together, sharing their promises from God in community and prayer. In Luke 1:35-56, we see Mary remained with Elizabeth for about three months, affirming that God was at work in their lives, sharing with each other the hope they had in each of God's promises to them.

Simeon and Anna- waiting in the temple for the promise of the "Lord's Christ". In Luke 2 the story moves on to find them waiting (in their case, years) for the promise of The Messiah. They were waiting actively for the Lord's promise by daily fulfilling their duties of service in the temple. Not days filled with manipulating their circumstances or worrying, rather days filled with prayer and fasting. Waiting for the consolation of Israel; Jesus.

Advent is a season marked with anticipation, expectation, and waiting for our Savior King; not the anticipation of sales or the expectations of gifts given and received, but rather of the hope and promise of Jesus, the savior of the world.

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**READ:** Luke 1:5-17

**JOURNAL:** What do you tend to get impatient about when you have to wait for it? What is a promise from God that you have faith for?

**PRAY:** Lord, give me the gift of waiting today. Waiting quietly to hear your voice articulated in the newborn cry of Jesus, the light of the world.

## THE ANNOUNCEMENT

The mysteries of the Christian faith are hidden in the Annunciation (Jesus' birth announced by the angel Gabriel), the Incarnation (God becoming flesh), the Transfiguration (Christ's appearance as God), and the Resurrection (Jesus raised from death to life). Mystery is something that is or remains unknown, something unexplained, something we can't reason out.

The season of arrival- or Advent- begins in mystery; the mystery surrounding the announcements of the coming birth of John the Baptist and Jesus.

The mystery continues when the angel appears to Mary and announces that she will bear a son and call his name Jesus. She responds by simply asking, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?". The angel leaves her shrouded in mystery when he tells her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of God will overshadow you...For nothing is impossible with God".

Mary's response is simple yet profound, "Let it be to me as you have said". She enters willingly into something that is mysterious- a promise from God- something she won't understand until the end of the story of her son Jesus, the Son of the Most High.

There is mystery in this story. Mystery that God asks us to accept and believe. Mystery in the promises to Mary and Elizabeth. Mystery in the promise to us that nothing in our lives is impossible with God.

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**READ:** Luke 1:18-25

**JOURNAL:** Like Elizabeth, what is something you have been waiting a long time for? Like Mary, what is something you are trying to trust God about even though it is a mystery to you how it will turn out?

**PRAY:** Lord I believe, but help me overcome my unbelief.

# LIGHT

The Season of Advent heralds Jesus into the world. God comes to earth. God reveals himself to us in and through his son Jesus. Immanuel, God is with us now, today.

In Luke 1:78-79, Zechariah prophesies about the promise of Jesus, “because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise (Jesus) shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The Apostle John begins his story of Jesus by telling us that light has entered the world in the person and presence of Jesus and “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” John 1:4. The life and light found in Jesus has been given to us to live-in and illuminate a dark world. So enter this season of Advent as a child of God and illuminate the world around you with the light of life, Jesus.

We pray, Come Lord Jesus; “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” John 8:12

We pray, Come Lord Jesus; “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” John 9:5

We pray, Come Lord Jesus; “You have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in you may not remain in darkness.” John 12:46

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**READ:** John 8:12-20

**JOURNAL:** As we see Christmas lights all around, what is one of your favorite Christmas decorations? As we remember to be light in our communities, who tends to go unnoticed? What is one thing you can do to make them feel cared for during this season?

**PRAY:** Let me be a light to the people I interact with today.

## A NEW ORDER

Within Advent is the promise of a new order of things. A new order that at-once promises a change in our lives and in our existence/view of eternity. Advent proclaims the arrival of God into our world and brings change to it.

The new order of things was spoken of by the prophets long before the virgin birth. Isaiah spoke these words, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (which means God with us)”. Isaiah 7:14

John the Baptist would be the messenger of the new order of things, as told through his father Zechariah, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.” Luke 1:76-77

Zechariah went on to speak of the promise of Jesus, as we read yesterday in Luke 1:78-79, “because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise (Jesus) shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The promise of Advent, the promise of a new order of things, is the promise into the way of peace. Where do you need peace today?

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**READ:** John 1:1-18

**JOURNAL:** In this holiday season, what is something you need to let go of to welcome more peace? What is something you need to say “yes” to in order to welcome more peace? What is an area of your life that you are afraid to open for God to dwell in and bring new order to?

**PRAY:** Lord bring me peace in the midst of my harried life. The peace of God in Christ, that passes all understanding.



## ALL IN

Mary believed the messenger from heaven, “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Luke 1:31-33.

And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Luke 1:38. Do you see what happened there? Mary believed God. Mary was all in.

All Mary had to offer God was a dwelling place for baby Jesus. Similarly, all we have to offer God is our hearts, a dwelling place for Christ. God wants to dwell with us- to be our God and for us to be his people. To be all in is to offer your heart to God. This Christmas, it’s okay if the right gifts aren’t found, if the pie isn’t homemade, and if you’re late to that annual party; welcome God into your heart, Jesus Christ himself through the Holy Spirit will live in your heart and your life will reflect His presence. That is what “all in” looks like.

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**READ:** Luke 1:26-38

**JOURNAL:** In this past year where have you seen the evidence of God dwelling in your heart and life? What is an area of your heart and life that you would like to see reflect more of God’s presence?

**PRAY:** Lord, come into every part of my heart and let every part of this season be about you and nothing else.



# ADVENT WREATH

It's exciting waiting  
for a special visitor,  
isn't it?

We clean up the house, make a special meal, maybe even count down the days. At Christmas we have a lot of fun ways to celebrate (such as trees and lights and cookies) as we look forward to honoring the birth of Jesus. We call this time Advent, which means “to come” and we can use it to get our hearts ready to worship Jesus. God sending his son to earth so that he could die for our sins is the best gift of all time – what a thing to celebrate!



### FAMILY ACTIVITY:

One way we can celebrate is by using an Advent wreath. Create an advent wreath, even simply using a circle of evergreen branches and five candles. Each Sunday light an additional candle with the center candle, which represents Christ, being lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Traditionally these candles represent Hope, Peace, Joy and Love.



### LITTLE HANDS ACTIVITY:

Bake and decorate a birthday cake for Jesus.



### FAMILY DISCUSSION:

Is there a friend or family member you are excited to see at Christmas? Jesus is the best gift in the history of the world, do you know why God gave his son to come to the earth just for you?



## PEACE ON EARTH

If only we could live a life of continuous Advent; living with the expectation that Jesus will arrive any minute now. Seems kind of impossible doesn't it? (Especially if we would have to endure Christmas Carols all year long.)

How can we find God in the midst of our daily lives? How can we experience peace on earth? So much distracts us from him, our awareness of spiritual things sometimes- oftentimes- simply goes away. Going to church becomes an obligation and reading the Bible a task. We try to work our way to God when in fact, God has come to us. Even the most spiritual of us all, whomever that might be, cannot obtain their own redemption, or for that matter, communion with God. God had to come to us and he came in the person of Jesus. Obedience and surrender to Jesus are where we find intimacy with God, the life of the Spirit, and true heart change.

Jesus put it this way in the gospels, if the trajectory of our lives is solely for ourselves then we will lose our lives. But if we are willing to lose our lives in the daily obedience and surrender to Jesus, then we will find our lives. Matthew 10:39

Mary replied to the angel of the Lord saying, "Let it be to me according to your word." Luke 1:38

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**READ:** Luke 1:39-45

**JOURNAL:** What is an area of faith that has started to seem more like an obligation to you? What is one intentional way that you could slow down today, welcoming God's spirit into your daily life?

**PRAY:** Help me to magnify you this season.

## SONG OF PRAISE

Elizabeth's words to Mary reference a song of praise known as the Magnificat, recorded in Luke 1:46-55. Mary begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Praise comes from the promise of what God would do in-and-through her life.

She continues in verse 50, "And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." Mary knows something of the character and heart of God. Mary also seems to know something about God addressing the heart of man, "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." Luke 1:50-53

Mary's desire was to elevate Jesus. To make him big in her life and in the world. Mercy is for those who desire to magnify God not themselves. If we're not careful, pride will keep us far from the anticipation of the arrival of Jesus, both now in this season of Advent and in the coming return of Jesus, the Second Advent. With humility, we are able to receive God's mercy- his gift of forgiveness for all our shortcomings, his removal of punishment, his outpouring of goodness.

Let's be people who look to magnify Jesus in our lives today and in this Advent season.

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**READ:** Luke 1:46-56

**JOURNAL:** Think of one person who you will need to show mercy to this Christmas season. How will showing mercy to this person challenge your pride? How will you actively choose humility?

**PRAY:** Lord, I surrender.

## THE MIND OF CHRIST

The mind of Christ began to grow in Mary at the announcement of Jesus' arrival. The angel proclaimed in Luke 1:35, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God."

The announcement of Jesus coming signaled the Holy Spirit's movement in Mary's life and now the Holy Spirit is moving and active in our lives. Peter attested to this in Acts 2:17, quoting the Prophet Joel, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh."

The Apostle Paul wrote that we have the mind of Christ and Christ Jesus is being formed in us by the working of The Holy Spirit, today. What does it mean that the mind of Christ is now being formed in us? As we mature with Jesus, we develop the ability (with the Spirit's help) to understand more and more of the will and mind of God.

The season of Advent can and should be a season of celebration. Celebration that yes, God has come to earth and into our lives. But if Advent is a celebration only, then what becomes of this work of God in our lives when the party is over? The hard work of reflection must accompany and follow celebration into our daily lives. We become better when we consistently come face-to-face with our brokenness, with God, with the Gospel.

Today spend some additional time to simply be in the presence of God. Let him love you as his son/daughter and let him speak into your life, your circumstances, your difficulties.

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**READ:** Luke 1:57-66

**JOURNAL:** What is one of your favorite ways to celebrate Christmas? What is something you can do to help facilitate taking time to be in God's presence, listening to him speak into your life?

**PRAY:** Lord, give me more of your Spirit, more of the mind of Christ.

# REVOLUTION

As the Advent story unfolds, Mary prophecies about a coming revolution, “God will scatter the proud, bring down the mighty and exalt the humble” (Luke 1:51-52). Zechariah spoke these words, “We shall be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.” Luke 1:71. These are words of revolution, of Jesus coming.

Jesus himself spoke of a coming revolution, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 in his inaugural declaration, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Luke 4:18-19

Advent ushers in the arrival of a revolution, proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of a new order of things, a new way to live, where justice and mercy reign. It is a time of the Lord’s favor when he will scatter the proud, bring down the mighty, and exalt the humble.

Advent presents us with a revolution, an opportunity to see things in a new way, to live a new way, the way of Jesus. ‘What shall we do?’ they asked John, “The man who has two shirts must share with him who has none, and anyone with food must do the same.” Luke 3:11

Who in your life can you help this holiday season? Maybe it’s as simple as a kind word or a listening ear; maybe it’s food or gifts; maybe it’s an act of service, or something else. Today, look for opportunities to be a part of the revolution.

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**READ:** Luke 1:67-80

**JOURNAL:** How can you help share God’s justice and mercy in our city? How could you translate your generous spirit towards others at Christmas into the rest of the year?

**PRAY:** Jesus, help me to live like you.

## NO DARKNESS

The words of Zechariah speak to us today as they did to his generation 2,000 years ago, “The sunrise, Jesus, will visit us from heaven to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Luke 1:79

He echoes the prophecy of Isaiah from more than seven generations prior to his, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.” Isaiah 9:2

A great light is on the horizon of the world, a light from heaven to earth that will drive out the darkness of sin and suffering. Because of God’s tender mercies, peace in the name of Jesus is making its way to earth.

“To us a child is born, to us a son is given.” Isaiah 9:6. Already born, already given, so what’s all the fuss about? The son, Jesus, is the exact representation of God and God is light, pure light. In him there is no darkness at all. “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” John 3:20-21.

The heart of God is for all people. He loves his creation, his sons and daughters, but not all people have accepted the love Jesus offers, the light of Jesus in their darkness. Today, pray specifically for those people in your life who need to experience the light of the world

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**READ:** John 3:16-2

**JOURNAL:** What does this say about God? What does this say about people? What jumps out at you? How will this change the way you live today?

**PRAY:** Be glorified in my life today.



## GENEAOLOGY & GRACE

The Advent story in Matthew's gospel begins with an account of the family history of Jesus Christ, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew 1:1

A tedious or fascinating read, depending on your perspective. Tedious, because it takes about 3 minutes to read it aloud. Fascinating, because it includes noble saints, conniving sinners, treacherous murderers, a prostitute or two, with five women in total, and a host of people we've never heard of, nobodies.

An essential read, because the genealogy of Jesus Christ sums up the theology of both the Old and New Testaments. It is so essential that one of the 15th Century Reformers, Zwingli, of Switzerland, preached that the essence of the Protestant Reformation of the church was found in Matthew's genealogy-salvation by grace alone.

The tapestry that God has woven together to make up the genealogy of Jesus Christ shows us a family where the most deserving are not always chosen. We see a wide range of godly to sinful men and women in the line, from the ordinary likes of Matthan, the great grandfather of Jesus, to the deeply flawed and sinful King David, from faithful men like Abraham, to the prostitute Rahab who was saved by Joshua, and Mary with her unconventional pregnancy; we find a host of ordinary saints and sinners, just like you and me.

It is a grace filled cast of characters that would fit right into the principle ministry of Jesus who met with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. Those in need of a savior. Those in need of a little grace.

Read it with enthusiasm because the genealogy has continued; Jesus called Paul into the story, Paul called Timothy, and Timothy called someone related to someone, who called you, and you are to call whom into this story?

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**READ:** Matthew 1:1-17

**JOURNAL:** What does this say about God? What does this say about people? What jumps out at you? How will this change the way you live today?

**PRAY:** Thank you for your grace. Help me to extend grace.

## RECEIVING

The Advent story presents us- the proud, the generous, the capable, and the competent- with a paradox. We are traditionally givers, especially at Christmas. We give to family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, the needy, and to many more; yet we find in the story of the birth of Jesus, that we are receivers. God gives to us, if we are willing to receive, something that we don't really need or want- a baby.

We no more need or want a baby than did King Ahaz when he received a prophecy from Isaiah, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Isaiah 7:14. In context, Isaiah was pleading with the king to put his trust in God, what the king thought he needed was an army, to help defend his nation from invasion. God had something else in mind, a baby. God was asking the king to believe in him rather than an army and receive a gift, a baby. God has given the gift of Jesus to the poor, Mary and Joseph; the outcasts, the Shepherds; and those unable to save themselves, you and me.

God is asking us to believe in and receive the unlikely, something that from all appearances, we do not need. God is blessing us with a gift, a baby, and asking us to receive it, instead of leaving us empty-handed and to our own schemes. Today receive the gift of Jesus and repent from any lack of faith or trust in God.

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**READ:** Isaiah 9:1-7

**JOURNAL:** Do you find it difficult to accept gifts or favors when you cannot reciprocate? What is something you feel like God has for you that is difficult for you to receive?

**PRAY:** Your ways are higher than my ways, help me to trust and receive.

## LOVE COMES

Love comes in the Advent story, not simply as the emotion that overwhelms most of us at some point in the Christmas season, rather in power as God changes the trajectory of our lives through sending Jesus, whose life redefines love.

The Advent story on its own leaves us with a warm, fuzzy, and what most would describe, loving feelings towards others, at least for a short time. Beyond the feelings, love is revealed over the course of Jesus' life, in what he says and what he does. The love of God, lived through Jesus heals sick people; some physically sick, others emotionally sick, and still others morally sick. Throughout the gospels we read of Jesus restoring sight to those blind from birth and those blinded by their own pride and fear. When asked if he was "the one" by John the Baptist's disciples, Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them." Luke 7:22

Jesus redefines love as sacrificial love; love that cares for others instead of just ourselves; love that lives humbly rather than always seeking power or position; love that lives generously toward our neighbors. The old prophet had it right, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8

Jesus lived it and asks us to follow him and live in the way of love. Today, love people! Regardless of how you have been treated or what you feel you deserve, choose to love.

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**READ:** Matthew 25:31-40

**JOURNAL:** What is a way you can show sacrificial love to someone today? What is a way that you can live more humbly?

**PRAY:** Help me to love people like you do.

The background of the entire page is a light tan color. It features several golden starburst or star-like shapes scattered across the top and sides. At the bottom, there is a silhouette illustration of a nativity scene. This includes a stable structure on the right, a manger with a baby Jesus lying in it, a woman (Mary) standing next to the manger, a man (Joseph) standing to the right holding a staff, and a shepherd with a staff and a dog in the foreground. In the background, there are silhouettes of buildings, including a domed structure and a tower.

# NATIVITY SCENE

Nativity scenes tell us about the night Jesus was born.

Each piece reminds us of how God planned a way for us to be close to Him and have his forgiveness and love. The Mary and Joseph figures remind us that God told us ahead of time, in fact for thousands of years, that Jesus would come. The shepherds and angels remind us that we can rejoice with the heavens that Jesus was born. The wise men remind us that this is a time to worship God and give him the very best parts of ourselves.



### FAMILY ACTIVITY:

Create an interactive nativity reading

- Unpack your nativity scene or print one to put on the wall if you don't own one
- Make a list of all of the figures in your nativity set and assign a word to go with each piece (i.e. "Mary" for your Mary or "Flocks" for your lamb)
- Write each figure's assigned word on a slip of paper
- Have the members of your family draw several slips of paper from hat in order to know which figures they will get to add to the scene
- Encourage everyone to listen carefully in order to be ready to put the figures up when they hear their assigned words as the nativity story is read aloud from Luke 2:1-20 & Matthew 2:1-12
- For example, if you drew the slip of paper that reads "wise men (camel)" then you will place the camel figure into the scene when you hear "about that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem"



**LITTLE HANDS ACTIVITY:** Print and cut out a nativity scene with individual figures, then put adhesive magnets on the back so your little ones can rearrange it on the refrigerator.



**FAMILY DISCUSSION:** What is your favorite Christmas decoration in our house? Do you think Christmas is the first time the Bible talks about Jesus? Let's see if we can find another one. A few of the 44 prophecies about Jesus, the Messiah, coming:

- Be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14)
- Be descended from the family of King David (Jer. 23:5)
- Be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)
- Be presented with gifts (Psalm 72:10)
- Be preceded by a messenger (Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3)

## DO NOT BE AFRAID

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.” Luke 1:13

And the angel said to Mary, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Luke 1:30

The angel said to Joseph in a dream, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Matthew 1:20

And the angel said to the shepherds, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Luke 2:10

‘Do not be afraid’, ‘do not fear’, ‘fear not’. Opening words from God to his people, words from God to us. Easy words to write or speak, difficult words to believe and follow.

Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds believed and moved ahead, following God’s lead. Zechariah doubted and was left with his voice muted by God. He was more concerned about his own welfare, even though the angel had revealed something of the coming age to him. Zechariah had to overcome the pride of his own limited understanding and his fear of the unknown future. He would fit easily into our post-modern world, where the self-made individual reigns supreme. In spite of his unbelief, Zechariah was still a part of the Advent story. When it all came clear he could believe and speak the truths spoken to him about what was to come. We are a part of the Advent story, even though our own pride and fear stand in the way of believing and speaking to the world about what has happened in Jesus.

Believing means that we must listen. That is, listen to what God is concerned about in our lives. The Advent Story asks us to listen, believe and share the story with all the people. Today, look for opportunity and the Spirit’s leading to be bold and gracefully share the gospel.

**READ:** Matthew 1:18-25

**JOURNAL:** What are you afraid of right now? What will it take for you to believe and move ahead in that area?

**PRAY:** What in my life is of concern? Help me to obey.

## UNION WITH GOD

God begins to speak to us through the newborn cries of an infant. As his son grows, he begins to speak in our language and human things become holy. A union between God and us begins formation.

We begin to learn his language as he learns ours. Ours is often a language of arrogance, speculation, and control. His is a language of humble love.

Our language seeks for our own understanding in order to keep things under our control and satisfy our needs. His language brings light into dark places, mercy to the wounded, and grace to the shamed.

Our language sounds like ‘crucify him’ and will ultimately nail him to a cross. His language heals sick people, raises the dead, strengthens faith, and brings peace.

The language of Jesus Christ will ask for and offer forgiveness to thieves, prostitutes, sinners, and to us as well. The language of Jesus will ask Simon Peter three times, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” John 21:17. In our most noble attempt we will be no more composed or articulate than Peter was when he choked through his tears, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

The Advent story both reminds us of and offers us a deep union with God through his son Jesus- a profound and life changing union. Today, tell Jesus how much you love him. Tell him what you are grateful for and affirm your faith in him.

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**READ:** John 21:4-22

**JOURNAL:** What is a specific area of your life where you need to turn and follow Jesus? What are some specific characteristics of God that you love and praise him for?

**PRAY:** Lord, replace my language with yours.

## MAKING ROOM

Most modern adaptations of the Biblical Christmas Story leave us with the impression that Joseph and Mary came to Bethlehem and saw ‘No Vacancy’ lit up in front of every motel in town. In their culture and time, one looking for board would find a spare room or ‘inn’ on the roof top of most houses. ‘

With a census decreed by the Roman Caesar, everyone was to go back to their town of origin and be registered. Arriving late in the day, Joseph and Mary found that all of the available spare rooms or inns were occupied. The only available space was in the back of the house where the animals were kept. So they made room for Mary and Joseph in the back of the house and a manger (feeding trough) was used as a bed for the newborn.

These were the most humble of circumstances for the birth of Jesus, but they made room for him as best they could. We might be inclined to think, ‘Wow, if I were there 2,000 years ago, I would have made room for him, I would have done better.’

We have an opportunity today and every day to make room for him in our lives. Jesus tells a story in Matthew 25:31-40 about the final judgement near the end of his life here and he asks these questions;

Did you give me food when I was hungry?

Did you give me a drink when I was thirsty?

Did you give me clothes when I was naked?

And did you visit me when I was sick or in prison?

When you did these for one of the least of my brothers, you did it for me. You made room in your life for me.

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**READ:** Luke 2:1-7

**JOURNAL:** What is getting in the way of you hearing Jesus’ voice? What changes can you make to hear him better?

**PRAY:** Jesus, where can I make room for you in these ways?



## IN WEAKNESS

Many of us have tried to buy a gift for someone who has everything, someone who appears utterly self-sufficient in this life. They don't need us and it seems that nothing we buy, make, or bring would be valued, much less appreciated.

In the Advent story, God comes to us in a completely helpless manner as a newborn baby. God, revealed in Jesus, comes to us in the poorest of circumstances and is completely dependent on humanity to care for, feed, and nurture him. What a remarkable entry into this world.

God could have come in power as the conquering king that many expected. Simeon, like many other devout Jews of his day, had been waiting for 'the consolation of Israel', Luke 2:25. A time when God would comfort his oppressed and mourning people. "I wait for your salvation, O LORD", they wrote from the time of Jacob on, Genesis 49:18. They waited in their weakness for a saving king with the strength of David. But God came in weakness. The markings that God, through Jesus, leaves on our lives seem to be shown most clearly in humility, weakness, and suffering. Not gifts that most of us will readily admit that we need. Are you the self-sufficient receiver that is hard to buy for? The one who proudly wears his strengths and needs nothing?

Advent presents us with the opportunity to come into the presence of Jesus and receive the gift he brings to us; to shed our pride and come as the fourth shepherd did in the French tale, *L'Enchanteur* (The Enchanted One)-

"The first three shepherds brought gifts to share with the young couple, Mary and Joseph. They congratulated the new parents on their new baby, the starlit evening and the modest surroundings. When they realized the fourth shepherd was missing, they peeked behind the blanket hung to shield the manger and baby from the cool night air. There they found *L'Enchanteur*, the fourth shepherd, on his knees at the crib where throughout the night he whispered, over and over, "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu - Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

**READ:** Luke 2:8-21

**JOURNAL:** Where could you be less self-sufficient and more transparent about your weaknesses with others? Today's verses say that "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Has a pattern started to emerge for you this Advent season that is leaving you with a theme to ponder in your heart?

**PRAY:** Jesus, I need you. You are my king. I worship you alone.

## MIGHTY GOD

A dear friend shared this in a letter that I (Mike Kilgore) was privileged to receive at Christmas. As you will read, it was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Pastor who courageously opposed the godless dictator and government in Nazi Germany. My friend writes this introduction to Bonhoeffer's words-

"In 1940, after the Gestapo closed the remnants of the Finkenwalde Seminary and he was forbidden to speak in Germany, Bonhoeffer wrote an Advent sermon to be read to his friends and students. This was the beginning of the darkest days for Germany and for him. In a little more than two years he would be in prison and not live to see Christmas with his family and friends again. He is beginning to know that his life may end up that way, but instead of avoiding conflict with the Nazi government, he writes this sermon that asks who is this child that we celebrate."

"This child is called 'Mighty God'. The child in the manger is none other than God himself. Nothing greater could be said, God becomes a child. In the Jesus-child of Mary dwells Almighty God.

Just take that in for a moment! Don't speak, don't think any further! Sit quietly and wait before this statement, that God has become a child! Here, he is poor like us, wretched like us, and helpless like us, a child of flesh and blood like us, our brother. And yet he is God, almighty God.

Where is the divinity, where is the power of this child? It is in the divine love by which he becomes like us. His pitiable condition in the manger is his power. In the power of love, he overcomes the chasm between God and man, powerfully overcoming sin and death, he forgives sin and raises from the dead.

Kneel low before this pitiable manger, before this child of poor people and speak in faith with stammering tongue, the words of the prophets, 'Almighty God,' and he will be your God and power." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1940 Nazi Germany

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**READ:** Psalm 62:5-8

**JOURNAL:** What is the thing you tend to put your hope in besides God? Like Bonhoeffer, what might you do differently if you knew this was your last Christmas with your family?

**PRAY:** Almighty God, be my love and power.

## BELIEVE

The Biblical story of the birth of Jesus in Luke 1 brings an angel of the Lord to Mary announcing that she, though a virgin, will conceive and bear a son and call him Jesus. “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.” Luke 1:32. Mary’s response in the face of this most improbable request, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Luke 1:38

When the shepherds came telling Mary and Joseph about all that the angels had told them, “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” Luke 2:19 Mary looked into her future, a future far beyond what she or any of us could comprehend, a future that was asking her to trust in God, and she said yes.

A foundation of faith was being built in Mary, one that would persevere through Bethlehem where Jesus was born, all the way to Calvary where Jesus was crucified, and find its culmination at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples.

When the baby Jesus is presented in the Temple for a rite of purification after his birth, much is proclaimed about his future by Simeon and Anna in Luke 2. The narrative tells that “his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him.” At age twelve, after they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, Jesus answered his parents query about his behavior with, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Luke 2:49. Once again “his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.” Luke 2:51

Throughout the life of Jesus, Mary his mother was asked to persevere in faith which became treasures to her. As Priest, Romano Guardini wrote, “What was demanded of her, what is demanded of us, is a constant wrestling in faith with the mystery of God in the midst of our lives.” Blessed then, is she (or he) who has believed.

**READ:** Luke 2:22-32

**JOURNAL:** What is something specific that you are having to “persevere in faith” about right now? Hearing Simeon and Anna’s prophesies was encouraging to Joseph and Mary. Who is someone, whom you have an encouraging relationship with, that you could invest in spending time with soon?

**PRAY:** Give me strength to persevere in faith.



## CHRISTMAS TREE THANKFULNESS

Why do you suppose we bring a tree into our house to celebrate the birth of Jesus?

Legend has it that one day Winfrid, a young English missionary in the seventh century, came upon a group of men offering a sacrifice to an oak tree as an act of worship. So angered was he by this idolatry that Winfrid swung his ax and felled the oak tree with one mighty blow. According to the tale, a fir tree eventually grew from the stump of the oak. Struck by this occurrence, the missionary proclaimed that the tree represented Jesus' victory over death and the eternal life made available to us by the King of Kings.



### FAMILY ACTIVITY:

For one week, make a paper chain decoration for your tree by having each family member add a chain a day, writing something they are thankful for on each slip of paper.



### LITTLE HANDS ACTIVITY:

Help little ones create the paper used for the chain by coloring all over one side of several pieces of paper and then cut it into strips for the family to write on the other side. You can also write their answers down for them each day this week.



### FAMILY DISCUSSION:

What is a gift you are hoping for under the tree this year? How can we give gifts back to Jesus? (See Matthew 25:34-40 for a clue)



## HEAVEN COMES TO EARTH

The mind of man labors under the mystery of God coming to earth in human form and being born of a virgin. This labor of mind is not new and exclusive to the modern scientific and rational era of man. John Chrysostom, who was the bishop of Constantinople in the early 5th Century, wrote of the wondrous mystery of the birth of Jesus and how as mortal men we don't trust things we cannot see.

Twenty centuries have passed since the angels proclaimed to the shepherds, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:10-11. For twenty centuries, the mind of man has scoured these and other words for the meaning and understanding of an event that, while it marks time, does not follow the order of nature.

Early in the story, Zechariah, after being told he and his wife will have a son, asks the angel, "How shall I know this?" Luke 1:18. How will I understand this? My mind can't wrap itself around this. How will I...? From the story, we know that the angel left him mute for nine months to think this one over. Asking.

Mary and Joseph followed the prompting of the angel, accepted God's invitation, and entered the story, believing and exercising faith that God was up to something, and they had been invited to be a part of it. Trusting.

The shepherds believed the angels' prompting, "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:12. Believing.

The Wise men followed the Star and the ancient prophecies in search of Jesus and, "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." Matthew 2:10-11. Worshiping.

They rested their faith, we rest our faith, in the power of God to do his work. Trusting. Believing. Worshiping. God is now on earth. Heaven has come to earth. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Luke 2:14

**READ:** Revelation 21:1-7

**JOURNAL:** These verses talk about God being your father and you being his child. Challenge: Set a timer for two minutes and sit in silence reflecting on how God loves you, not because of what you do or in spite of what you've done, but simply for being his child.

**PRAY:** Give me rest in trusting, believing, and worshiping you.

## FOR YOU

The Advent story is God breaking into human history, God revealing himself in Jesus, here, now. “For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Luke 2:11

The word of God, now making his dwelling among us. “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:12

The heavens proclaimed the wonder of his birth. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Luke 2:14

The voice of God, now in human form for the first time, found in the new born cries of a baby. “And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.” Luke 2:16

The mystery of God, revealing Jesus through a virgin birth. “And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.” Luke 2:18

The Gospel account of the birth of Jesus does not merely record or teach history. This is a personal note and it is addressed to you and to me, and to all the people. “To you a child is born, to you a son is given”, prophesied Isaiah in Isaiah 9:6.

The story has little value without your active participation and faith. You are invited to make this birth, this child, this Son, this Savior, this Wonderful Counselor, this Mighty God, this Everlasting Father, this Prince of Peace- your own. The Gospel invites and enables all who believe to receive this as their own.

The shepherds taught us that no one is to hear this Gospel and keep it for him or herself alone. This savior is for all the people. We are to take our savior, his message to love one another, share it with our family, friends and neighbors, and to live it out in our lives. This Advent story is about the arrival of Jesus in your world.

**READ:** Romans 10:1-21

**JOURNAL:** Challenge: Set a timer for two minutes and sit in silence reflecting on how your life has changed because of Jesus and celebrate. Who in your life can you pray for and look for a chance to share the good news of the gospel with?

**PRAY:** Make your story my story.

## FOR US

The day has finally come. “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Luke 2:10-11

“Fear not,” the angels had said to the shepherds. This was followed by praise for God, “Glory to God in the highest”. And then a promise of peace, “and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Luke 2:10-14

Throughout the Advent story the angels of the Lord have always led with “fear not”, “don’t be afraid”. Fear seems to follow us wherever we go. Fear of the unknown, fear of failure, fear of heartache and sorrow, even fear of death. It is part of the fabric of life in the Biblical narrative and it should be no surprise that it is a part of our lives.

Imagine how fearful Mary and Joseph must have felt in the midst of childbirth far from home, amongst strangers (albeit distant relatives), and under the cover of darkness. God had told them to be not afraid, because He would be with them. On the night before he died, Jesus would tell his disciples to “trust in God and trust also in me.” John 14:1. He asks us to trust him.

And he leaves us with a promise of peace. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” John 14:27

The absence of fear seems to be peace and the absence of peace often is accompanied by fear. They ebb and flow in our lives. But in the midst of both, we find the Advent story- God coming into our lives in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

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**READ:** John 1:29-34

**JOURNAL:** Are you more in an ebb of fear or peace right now? So many of our fears are wrapped up in yesterday or tomorrow. How can you choose to live more in the peace of today?

**PRAY:** Lord, show me your peace in my fear.



# PEACE IN CHRIST

The Advent story has in it, and brings to us, a promise of peace.

Zechariah understood this and proclaimed that the coming Messiah would “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and guide our feet into the way of peace.” Luke 1:79. The angels proclaimed peace to the shepherds and to all the world leaving them with, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Luke 2:14

But what kind of peace? Peace to whom? Peace at what cost?

Roman history will tell you that the people throughout the empire lived under the ‘Pax Romana’, or the ‘Roman Peace’. History will also tell you that these were the times of great Caesars, grand architecture, and a cosmopolitan lifestyle across the empire. The Roman historians will not tell you that the people lived under political oppression and the heavy boot of the Roman Legions carrying steel swords. The ‘Pax Romana’ came at any and all cost to the people.

In the Biblical narrative we begin to see a very different peace described, ‘Pax Christi’, or the ‘Peace of Christ’. Zechariah proclaimed that this peace would come from the ‘tender mercy of our God’. And that he, Christ, ‘would give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.’ It would be safe to say that the average Jew or Gentile living in the first century Roman Empire lived in the shadow of death constantly. There was no tender mercy from Rome.

In order to bring perspective to this Season of Advent, this celebration of the coming of Jesus into the world, we need to answer- do we actually need this light today? Do we recognize that we are living in a dark world and in the shadow of death?

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**READ:** Psalm 23

**JOURNAL:** Peace does not necessarily always mean easy. In what area of your life have you confused the two? List some specific examples of “goodness and love” that you are thankful for today?

**PRAY:** Lord, shine your light in my darkness and in the world’s.

## WORSHIP

Wise men from the east came seeking the child. Following a star, a prophecy, and a promise. The wise men are depicted as kings from the east. Kings coming to meet the king of the Jews. “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” Matthew 2:2.

They ran the gauntlet of Herod and from the story we can infer that he was not interested in a competing king, whether from the Jews or anywhere else. The wise men followed the star to Bethlehem, “and behold, the star they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” Matthew 2:9-10

In traditional nativity scenes, the three kings are usually dressed in regal splendor, with crowns adorning their heads; portrayed as kings meeting a king with all the pomp they could muster after a long camel ride. But a careful reading of the narrative tells us something quite different. “And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.” Matthew 2:11. They fell down and worshiped him.

Any sense of royalty on their part was swept away by the overwhelming awe and wonder of being in the presence of Jesus. Occasionally he does that to me, how about you?

The kings or wise men are always depicted with gifts in hand, appearing to be carefully portioned and in beautifully jeweled gift boxes, Matthew’s narrative tells a different story. “Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.” Matthew 2:11. This leaves me with a sense that they simply opened their saddle bags and poured out all that they had before him. Occasionally I open my treasures...How about you?

Worship God today in every circumstance.

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**READ:** Matthew 2:1-12

**JOURNAL:** What is a treasure in your life that you want to lay before Christ? What is a way you will choose to worship Christ today?

**PRAY:** Overwhelm me with your presence.

# COMFORT

The Advent Story is a story of waiting from its beginning: Zechariah waiting for words, Elizabeth waiting for her first born son, Mary waiting for the fulfillment of a promise from God, and Joseph waiting for the fulfillment of marriage.

The world seemed to be waiting as well, but waiting for what?

After the birth of Jesus, Luke's account tells us this, "Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him." Luke 2:25

Waiting for the consolation of Israel? Let's read on.

"And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, (some forty days after the birth) they brought him (Jesus) up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord." Luke 2:22. There this young family was greeted by Simeon in the Temple. Luke tells us that, 'it had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ'. That day Simeon, "came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.'" Luke 2:29-32

An old man waiting for a promise to be fulfilled, the consolation of Israel. Relief, comfort, solace.

We wait, having the testimony of their stories and the comfort of The Holy Spirit. We wait on the Lord, with hope and peace.

**READ:** Luke 2:33-40

**JOURNAL:** What does this say about God? What does this say about people? What jumps out at you? What should you do with this today?

**PRAY:** Give me your hope and peace as I wait for your return.

# CHRISTMAS FOR EVERYONE

People celebrate  
Christmas all over  
the world but in  
many different ways.

In South Africa, they enjoy deep-fried caterpillars on Christmas day and in Greenland the special dish is Mattak which is raw whale skin served with blubber. In Venezuela they head to church on roller skates. In Slovakia the most senior man of the house throws a spoonful of pudding at the ceiling, the more that sticks the better. Do you think any of our traditions might seem funny to people in other countries?



### FAMILY ACTIVITY:

Learn to say Merry Christmas in different languages and then let's pray for people around the world that have to celebrate Christmas in secret as persecuted Christians.



### LITTLE HANDS ACTIVITY:

Cut out a star from heavy paper and punch holes in it, give your preschooler string with tape rolled around the ends for them to thread back and forth through the star.



### FAMILY DISCUSSION:

What is one of your favorite Christmas traditions? Since we are free to worship Jesus in our country, what is an extra way we could do that this week?

#### ITALIAN:

“Buon Natale”  
(*bwon nuh-tall-a*)

#### THAI:

“Suk San Wan Christmas”  
(*sook san wan krees-mahs*)

#### MALTESE:

“Il-Milied It-Tajjeb”  
(*il-millit it-ti-yup*)

#### AFRIKAANS:

“Geseende Kersfees”  
(*ge-see-end-de kurs-fee-z*)

#### POLYNESIAN:

“Ia Orana no te Noere”  
(*yo-rah-nah noh tay noh-ay-ray*)

#### HUNGARIAN:

“Boldog Kara'csont”  
(*bahl-dah kah-ri chah-nyew*)

#### HAWAIIAN:

“Mele Kalikimaka”  
(*Meh-leh kah-lee-kee-mah-kah*)

#### FRENCH:

“Joyeux Noël”  
(*Joh-wah no-el*)

#### CHINESE:

“Sheng Tan Kuai Lob”  
(*shung than kwi lub*)

#### SPANISH:

“Feliz Navidad”  
(*feh-leez nah-vee-dah*)

#### TAGALOG:

“Maligayang Pasko”  
(*mah-lee-gi-yong pas-ko*)

#### SWISS-GERMAN:

“Shone Weinachten”  
(*shon wi-eh-nahk-tehn*)

## IN HUMAN FORM

Christianity bears up under 20 centuries of testimony that God came to earth and made his dwelling among us in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The prophets of old foretold his coming for hundreds of years before history recorded his birth, life, death and resurrection.

Other religions, nations, and empires have declared their leaders to be god but none have stood the test of time. The Roman Emperors in Jesus' time had declared themselves to be god of the empire. Most all died at the hand of conspirators and all lie dead in a grave. In current times the leading dictatorial family of North Korea has declared themselves to be god, but they too have died and can be found in tombs.

The Christian witnesses stand alone on the world stage with the claim that God has revealed himself in human guise and form; that in Jesus Christ, we see and hear from the divine nature of God himself. It was in this man Jesus that the first century church found God, and it was in God that we have come to know our true selves and our destiny as human beings.

“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” Matthew 2:6 and Micah 5:2

When Christ is King in our lives, we bring His Kingdom to earth. As Christians, we are in the world but not of it. In situations today, look for areas where the world is setting the precedent in your life more than God's will is and surrender those areas to him.

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**READ:** Psalm 102:12-28

**JOURNAL:** What does this say about God? What does this say about people? What jumps out at you? How will this change the way you live today?

**PRAY:** Let your will be done in my life and through my life.

# SALVATION AND LIFE

When Jesus came, salvation came. But it doesn't stop at salvation. We are saved not only from something- sin and brokenness, but we are saved to something-life and that abundantly.

We have celebrated the birth of Jesus through the term Advent, a coming into being. Jesus' incarnation is not only about his coming into being, but it is about bringing the world and each of us into a new being, into being with God. When we trust in Him for salvation, it is not merely a moment, but a continual encounter. He makes himself at home in us and we, by faith, live with him at the center of everything. When He is in us, our entire demeanor, our thought life, our relationships, our very being, take new life.

Jesus' incarnation was not a one-time event that occurred 2,000 years ago, and experiencing God is not about individual occurrences. We are not just saved by Jesus, we are transformed to become like Him.

Our daily lives are significant because God's power and presence are in them. Let today be significant, by acknowledging God's amazing incarnation into the world and into your life.

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**READ:** 2 Corinthians 5:11-2

**JOURNAL:** What does this say about God? What does this say about people? What jumps out at you? How will this change the way you live today?

**PRAY:** Align my heart and my life with you in the center, Jesus.

## FLIGHT FROM TERROR

The Advent story takes a harsh and brutal turn near its end. On the way to find Jesus, the wise men made a respectful and obligatory stop in Jerusalem to visit the reigning king, Herod. In today's lexicon, his would be a terrorist state. He ruled with no mercy and at great cost to those under his control, including his own family. Herod killed his wife, two of his sons, and two brothers-in-law during his reign over Judea.

The story takes a horrific turn. "Then Herod...became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men." Matthew 2:16

No Christmas card or crèche scene to depict here. Joseph and Mary with Jesus, fleeing for his life to Egypt, and Herod, only interested in destroying anyone- especially any 'king'- who might threaten his power, control, and kingdom. All of the forces of evil have come against the Kingdom of God on this earth, on Jesus. Political expediency seemed to have prevailed.

"But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel'...But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene." Matthew 2:19-23

More than thirty years later, Herod's grandson Antipas, would conspire with Pilate to wipe out the threat that Jesus posed to their respective kingdoms. Evil would once more appear to win the day. But as we know, the Kingdom of God would prevail in three days time. And he said to them, "'Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Mark 16:6-7

From the beginning of his life, Jesus faced persecution, and as we know, it was persecution that ended his life. Jesus' life faced terrible turmoil, our lives are sure to face it too. But with God, Jesus overcame. We can trust God to overcome the strife in our lives.

**READ:** Matthew 5:1-16

**JOURNAL:** What does this say about God? What does this say about people? What jumps out at you? How will this change the way you live today?

**PRAY:** Lead me into your goodness, away from evil.



## MERCY V. INJUSTICE

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us).” Matthew 1:23. God Incarnate. God has broken into human history. God has come to earth. God is with his people. God is with us. God is with you and me.

John was born with fanfare and the embrace of the whole community. Family, friends, and relatives rejoiced (Luke 1:58). Jesus was born far from home, hidden from plain sight and under the cover of cold and darkness. No family present, only strangers. “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” Luke 2:7

There was no place for Jesus in this world, he was uninvited and only welcomed by the marginalized shepherds. “

And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:12

The story of God in Christ is a story of poverty and injustice. Simeon’s words would likely haunt Mary, “and a sword will pierce through your own soul also, so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” Luke 2:35

The language of the story from the beginning is power versus oppression, mercy versus injustice, peace versus chaos, and grace versus condemnation. Mary’s words, “And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” Luke 1:50

Many of us bristle at this language, but nonetheless, this language will continue in this story all the way to Calvary and beyond; into our lives today.

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**READ:** Matthew 28:16-20

**JOURNAL:** What does this say about God? What does this say about people? What jumps out at you? How will this change the way you live today?

**PRAY:** Make me merciful, a peace-giver, and gracious.

## RESOLUTIONS

As the new year comes and resolutions and goals begin to form in our minds (and maybe our actions \*wink wink), let's remember that God is for us. God cares about us- he cares about you individually.

We should desire to be improving, but the ultimate improvement to ourselves comes from and through Jesus. He came to make us new, to make us into his likeness. How we behave, what we accomplish, only matters if it stems from a heart changed by God. We can try to be good on our own, but our efforts will fall short. Eventually our heart will trump our disciplines. Rather than focus on disciplines, focus on heart change, turning away from our own desires and toward God's.

God's greatest goal is relationship with us. Intimacy with God leads to the life of the Spirit, life to the fullest. Do you want to be better? Seek intimacy with God this New Year and each new day.

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**READ:** Psalm 51

**JOURNAL:** What does this say about God? What does this say about people? What jumps out at you? How will this change the way you live today?

**PRAY:** Create in me a clean heart, oh God, and renew a right spirit within me.