

2020 Advent Devotional Guide

West Hills Church
Omaha, Nebraska

Introduction

The season of Advent reminds us that we are a people who wait. Each December day grows darker, but we believe that the light will return. We remember that Jesus will return to us – that his arrival will fulfill hopes, just as it did 2000 years ago. We wait, but not always patiently or with bright hopes. In years like this, even our prayers can be a little darker. As we grieve losses on many fronts, we find ourselves telling God that we're ready for the wait to be over. "Any time now, Lord". Maybe that's a bit impertinent, but it rings true for many of us this year. And it is a prayer. It's a glimpse into that space we have held open for hope.

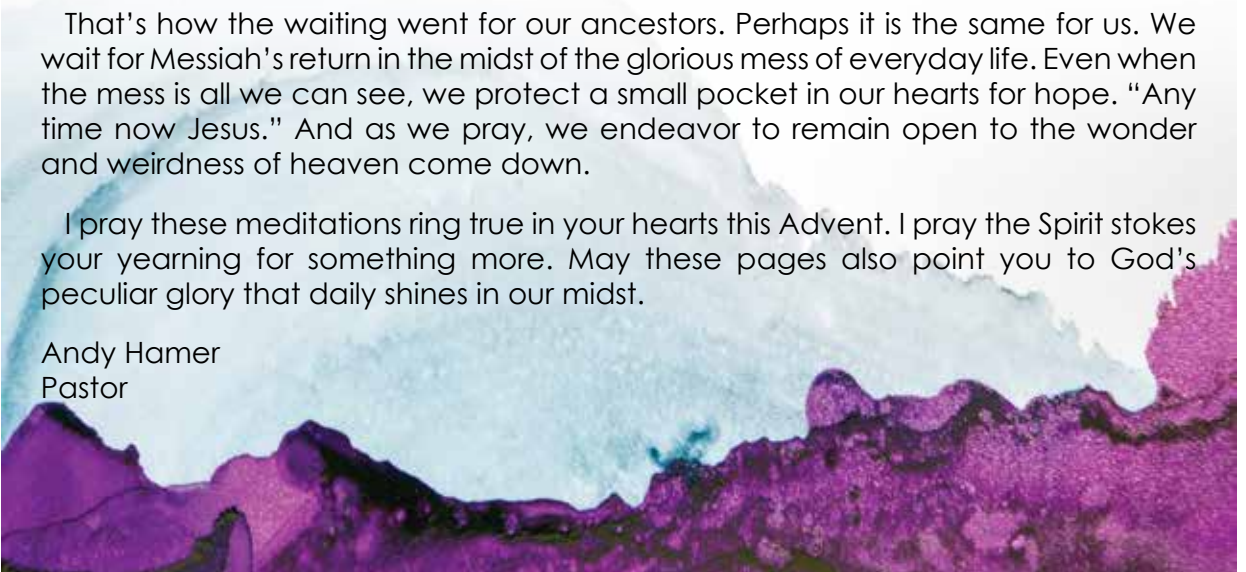
Our spiritual ancestors were also familiar with waiting. To be sure, they lived their present lives, but always they looked ahead for God take some decisive, saving action. Now, when we read about their lives, we find that at least some things haven't changed. They struggled to hold open their hope in the midst of political intrigue and petty family squabbles. They dealt with plagues and famines, but also with the frailty common to every human life. We read words written in dark moments of longing for Gods help, "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1). We can almost hear the ancient ones saying, "God, now would be good. Please."

Through the centuries God's people held to their hope, or they didn't. Some forgot why they were waiting, and others found it anew. When their Messiah finally arrived, they almost missed him. Jesus was weird as much as he was wonderful. Evidently, when heaven breaks into earth, it has a tendency to upset cultural norms and even religious expectations. Yet, at the same time, Jesus fulfilled other expectations beyond imagining. His was a light that defined all others.

That's how the waiting went for our ancestors. Perhaps it is the same for us. We wait for Messiah's return in the midst of the glorious mess of everyday life. Even when the mess is all we can see, we protect a small pocket in our hearts for hope. "Any time now Jesus." And as we pray, we endeavor to remain open to the wonder and weirdness of heaven come down.

I pray these meditations ring true in your hearts this Advent. I pray the Spirit stokes your yearning for something more. May these pages also point you to God's peculiar glory that daily shines in our midst.

Andy Hamer
Pastor



The Meaning of Advent

Advent (Latin: adventus, “coming”)

The season of Advent begins on the Sunday nearest November 30, and continues through the four Sundays before Christmas Day. This year Advent begins on November 29.

As Christians, we celebrate Easter to mark Christ's death and resurrection, but Christmas is important as the celebration of His birth. Like the season of Lent, Advent is a time of reflecting and preparing for the coming of the King. We can think of this coming in three ways:

1. The season of Advent represents the coming of the King as a human child. In the form of a baby in a manger, Jesus came to us.
2. The season of Advent signifies the coming of the King in our own hearts, to which we witness year round.
3. The season of Advent reminds us of the second coming of the King, the time at the end of the age when He will return in all His glory.

The Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath is composed of four candles in a circle of evergreen. Sometimes there is also a central candle called the Christ candle. The four candles are for the four weeks of Advent, one being lighted on each Sunday. They can represent attributes (faith, hope, joy, peace) or characters from the Christmas story (prophets, angels, shepherds, Magi). The Christ candle is not lit until Christmas Eve. The evergreen represents the everlasting life found in Christ, and the circle further symbolizes life without end.

The Advent wreath itself signifies the progress from darkness to light. The world had waited in darkness for the Light to come into the world. Jesus himself said, "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12)

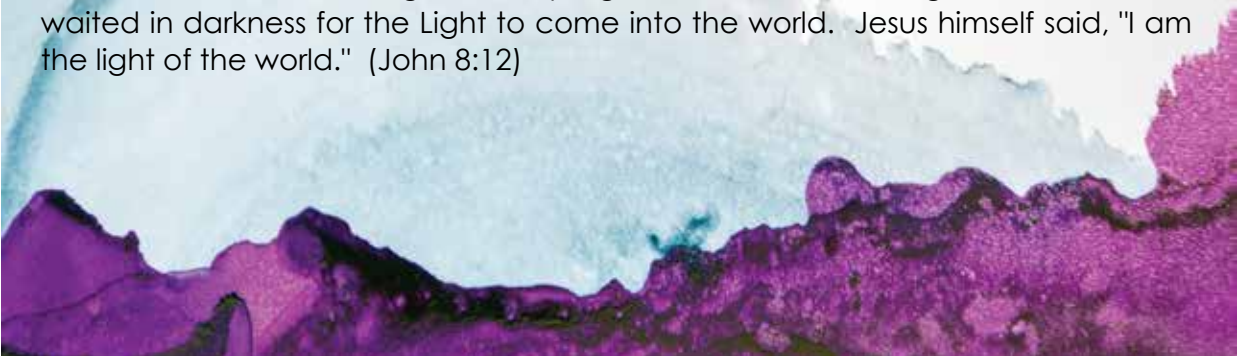


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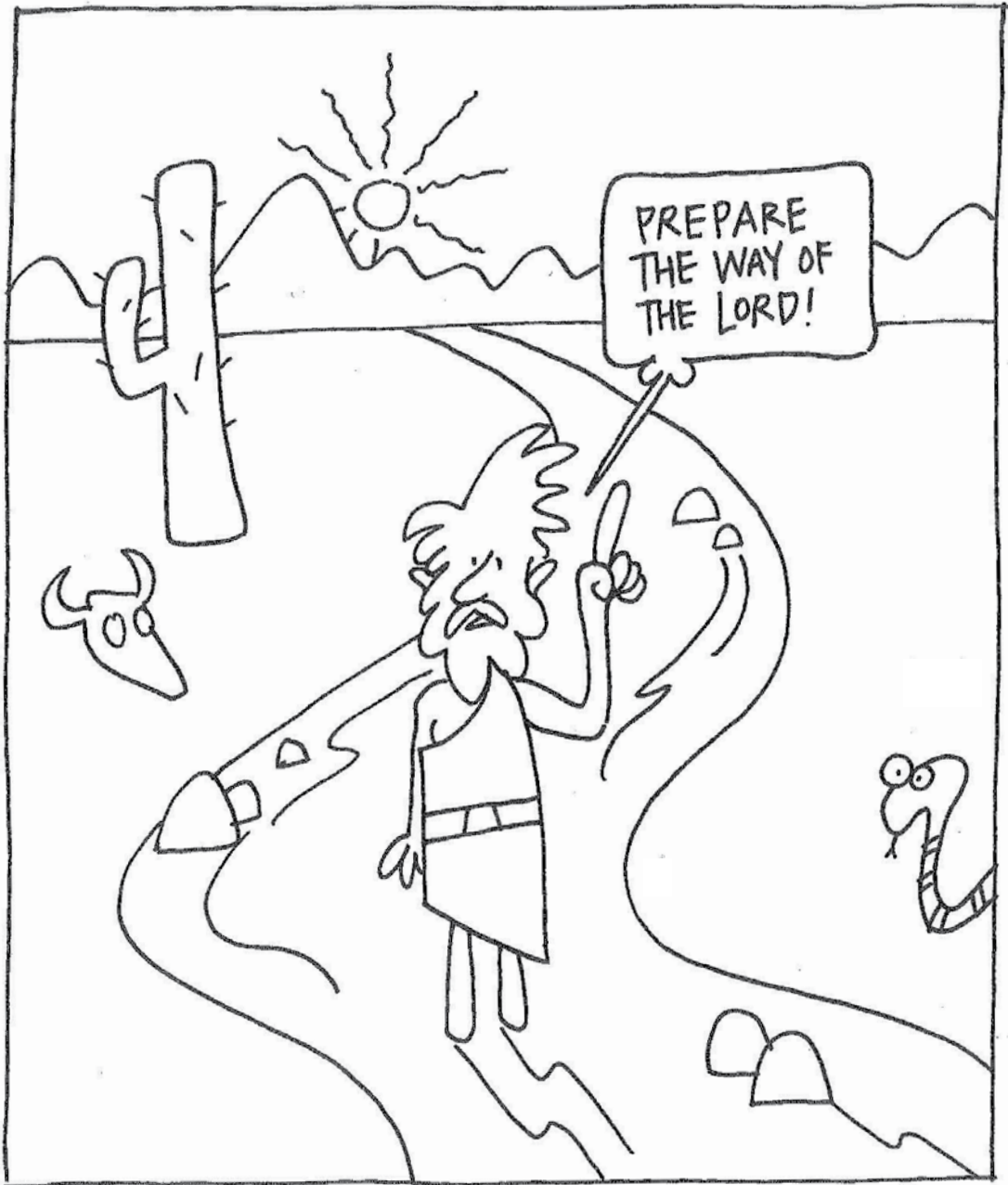
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COLORING PAGE FOR HOPE





Week One

HOPE



FAITH @ HOME

WEEK OF NOVEMBER 29

Some ideas for exploring hope during the first week of Advent

You might like to read Isaiah 64:1-9 in a few translations this week.

Parents with littles – if you just need one or two ideas, the don't-miss ideas for young children are in PURPLE. Many of these are scalable for older and younger audiences by adjusting the language.

Black font is an all-play for children, teens, and adults.

The word Advent means coming. Each week of Advent, we light a candle as we look forward to celebrating Jesus' coming. The first week, we light the candle of hope and remember the prophets who waited and hoped for the coming Messiah, Jesus.

READ

- * 1 Kings 18:16-39 — talk about the similarities to Isaiah 64:1-2
- * Isaiah 29:16 — talk about the similarities to Isaiah 64:8

REFLECT

- * Isaiah is angry at the beginning of this passage about the wrongs and injustices in the world. He wishes God would come and fix it. Do you ever feel this way? When?
- * At the end of this passage, Isaiah's attitude changes to one of hope. What makes you hopeful?
- * Notice how the passage uses the words "us" and "we" to signify community. How can you bring hope to in your community — your family, friends, neighbors?
- * Have you ever felt so excited that you couldn't wait and had to tell everyone? Do you think the prophets felt this way about the coming of the Messiah?
- * What does it mean to anticipate or hope for something?
- * Why did God send prophets before Jesus came? Why are the prophets important?
- * What does it feel like to wait for something that seems far away?
- * As we prepare to celebrate Jesus's birth how can we look with hope towards Jesus' second coming?

DO

- * Draw a picture of the wrong or sad or disappointing things you wish God would fix.
- * Play with clay or play-doh. Shape a heart and ask God to make your heart soft and mold-able as we wait for Christmas.
- * Get out your advent wreath or make one out of toilet paper tubes.



<https://tinyurl.com/yyyjrgow>

WORSHIP VIDEOS

- * [Search YouTube - O Come, O Come, Emmanuel by Pentatonix](#)
- * [Search Vimeo West Hills - Come Thou Long Expected Jesus](#) and talk about the different Bible stories portrayed in this video and help your child see how they pointed to the hope of a Messiah
- * [Search Vimeo West Hills - Light the Light the Fire of Life](#)

When I was six years old, I received a big, beautiful doll, with curly brown hair for Christmas. I named her “Christiana” after one of our neighbors and “Juanita” after the lady who cut my hair. One day, my sister Kay suggested that I dye Christiana Juanita’s hair a different color. After much discussion, we took my mom’s face cream and smeared it all over my doll’s hair. For two hours, I waited in vain for her hair to change color. Finally, my oldest sister came into my room and washed the cream out of my doll’s hair. Needless to say, her curls were gone! I responded by covering Christiana’s hair with a towel, and I did not let her look in a mirror for weeks. I also hid some resentment in my heart, as I watched my sister Kay show off her new doll “Linda’s” beautiful blond curls, while my doll was now “curl-less” and in hiding!

Fast forward a number of years. Linda and Christiana Juanita were stored in my parent’s basement while my sister Kay and I went off to college and started our adult lives. We still revisited the “doll story” periodically and had a good laugh! However, our paths changed in that we went different directions in our faith. While in college, my sister became very interested in Eastern religions, and that interest continued for most of her adult life. While in her 50s, however, she developed stage four breast cancer, and lived with cancer for over five years. During this time, it was amazing to see how God used His people to touch her life, and her soul, in a million different ways. Many of these believers, and prayer warriors, were from West Hills Church. About a week before she passed away, Kay came to know the Lord. It is a new birth – almost like a Christmas miracle! At Kay’s Celebration of Life service, many funny stories were told, including the story about our dolls. But the best story of all is the story that so many of us share this Christmas Season – the story of new birth and a loving Savior.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1

The Lord said “the time is coming when I will fulfill the promise that I made to the people of Israel and Judah.... The people will be rescued and live in safety.”

We hear stories of people being rescued every day from accidents on I-80, from hurricanes and fires, and thanks to the work of health care staff; from the ravages of a virus which has plagued our country and world.

If we think about it, the Bible is full of stories of miraculous rescues. In the Old Testament: Moses from the bulrushes, Joseph from slavery, David by fighting the Philistines. In the New Testament, stories of rescues are common. Paul was rescued on the road to Damascus, the blind were healed, the dead were brought back to life, evil spirits were excised, seas were calmed and, yes, even a little baby in a manger was rescued from an unscrupulous king.

Today we are grateful we have been rescued from the power of sin – yes, the world is still hurting and perhaps now more than ever we need the power of a living Christ who is more than willing to rescue anyone “at any time.”

So this year, how about a different perspective? When we see and hear the bright lights and sounds of Christmas, why not keep our ears tuned and listen for the sounds of the ambulance/rescue squad and remember that Christ continues to “rescue the world” everyday Oh, that we would be willing to be helpers to rescue the world “any time now.”

Today's scripture speaks of hope and trust, seemingly rare commodities these days. The psalmist proclaims, "You are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long." Easy for David to say; he never had to deal with disease and politics and hardship and.... Oh, maybe he did.

I'll tell you up front, I love Advent. Just thinking about the season makes me smile. Trees and lights. Carols. Gifts. A time of hope, joy, expectation, and anticipation. Awaiting the coming of Christ.

We have a tradition in the O'Reilly household. Each year, we get my mom a Waterford crystal Christmas ornament from Ireland. Well, my mom is 91 years old. If she gets Covid, to say it would not be good is an understatement. So, what's going to happen? Are we even going to have Christmas this year? So much uncertainty.

In a season of such light, there is sure no shortage of darkness this year. The Covid pandemic, the economy in the toilet, unemployment, racial unrest, political polarization. The hits just keep coming. Cynicism, fear, and despair should be up next. And yet, God says, put your trust and hope in me.

A gentleman in our Tuesday morning men's Bible study has a saying. God is still driving the bus. We may not like the route. We may want to know where we are going. And we would like to know any time now. But, despite everything, we can be assured God is still driving the bus.

God is the only one who can bring hope into a seemingly hopeless circumstance. Advent season is a time of expectation. A season of hope.

So often we get caught up in the wrong things at Christmas and forget the simple and incredible miracle of the birth of Christ. How do I keep my focus on Christ?

My hope is that we would recognize the true meaning and wonderful gift that Christmas is. God sends his Son to be with us. I think we can take that to mean God loves us. That we truly can trust God. What a wonderful, hopeful thing.

My prayer this Advent season is twofold. For the joy of Christ to be in each heart and for courage to shine the light of Christ in a needy world. Expect a miracle! Merry Christmas!



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3

As we sat around as a family to study our verse and brainstorm on ideas on what to write about, Christmas memories and traditions quickly became our obvious theme. Ironically, presents never came up. Granted, we have a minimal budget to spend on Christmas presents, so maybe the dream present has never been received. But I don't think that's it. We don't overspend because we don't have to: we are already blessed with all the things that make Christmas special in the Meyers household.

We talked about memories of time spent with family and the beauty of the winter drive to and from family. We decided that the favorite Meyers tradition is the day we go get our Christmas tree. The weekend after Thanksgiving we go to the Christmas tree farm to find the perfect tree. We bundle up and head out. The car is filled with anticipation. We walk around the tree farm comparing one tree to another. Everyone gets an equal vote so it can be quite a spectacle some years.

"This one has a bad spot"

"Can we hide it against the wall?"

"This one is quite tall."

"Will it touch the ceiling?"

We weigh all the pros and cons until we find just the right tree for that year.

It never fails. Each year we end up with a tree that is too big for our living room, but no one cares – it's the perfect tree! We try to stand the tree up just right. It's a tricky task with the way some of the trees end up growing (which, of course, we never figure out till we are already home). Then we pull out the lights and ornaments. Mom "oohs and aahs" as she pulls out every single Christmas tree ornament Ian has ever made. Another Meyers tradition is that we buy a new ornament as a family each year. We swap memories as each ornament reminds us of the theme for that particular year. And just like that, we've made another Christmas memory!!

Christmas is such a special time of year – Jesus is born! We hope you are surrounded by friends or family this season and that the days leading up to Christmas are filled with memories and traditions that make you smile. Most importantly, may the gift of a Savior fill you with joy.

The Meyers Family
Isaiah 7:14

Introduction

In today's passage, a reference from Isaiah 40 describes the role of John the Baptist in preparing the way for the Messiah: "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" Below are some wilderness scenes that come to mind.

Wilderness Snapshot #1

In Isaiah 40, the people of God had been in exile for 150 years. Jerusalem, the center of their faith, had been overrun by the Babylonians. This wasn't supposed to happen to the people of God. Their lives had been upended by a foreign entity. God's people must have felt abandoned and alone in the wilderness. Why had God been silent for so long?

Wilderness Snapshot #2

In January of 2014, I was in my 12th year on a church staff in Kansas City. After Sunday morning worship services on January 12, the pastor stopped by my office, and with a stern look on his face, summoned me to a meeting the following day with a few members of the personnel committee. I knew this special invitation wasn't to give me a raise. Instead, they fired me. The meeting lasted 15 minutes, but for me the effects endured 3 years. My life was turned upside down that day, and I entered into a time of wilderness. I felt disconnected and abandoned by God. Unfortunately, I was also severed from the congregation that had been my spiritual home. Why did I have to experience this season of wilderness?

Wilderness Snapshot #3

It's 2020 in the United States. We're experiencing a time of upheaval, disruption, and division that will be studied and dissected for years to come. It seems that nothing is neutral, and everything is questioned. For Christ-followers, it feels as if we have entered into a wilderness. Where is God in the pandemic, in the racial strife, in the political division? Has God forsaken us?

Epilogue

Though difficult for us to comprehend, God has not abandoned us. He is still sovereign and at work in the world. Is it possible God is using the events of 2020 as a refiner's fire to mold us into his likeness? Are we being reminded that we don't have everything figured out and we can't "fix things" on our own? I believe the wilderness we're experiencing this year will actually prepare a way for God to do a new thing - to take us in a new direction on the path of following him.

Kevin Gibson
Mark 1:1-8



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5

What words would you use to describe 2020? Let a few adjectives roll around in your head, attaching no judgment or analysis.

My guess is that most of the adjectives would have a negative connotation. Maybe you connect with verses 3 and 4; you're feeling fearful or weak (physically, mentally or emotionally). Have your knees given way?

2020 has been a wilderness year for many. We can relate to Isaiah. A parched land, with a loss of comforts and a lack of certainties. We survey a harsh landscape—the unsparing stealth of a novel virus and the divisive rhetoric of politicians. We are so thirsty for community.

Isaiah speaks to this desert space in our hearts. The discouragement in our heads. The question of “When will it end?” He reminds us that the wilderness is where we learn to trust God and not ourselves, and we are just passing through. Paraphrasing Isaiah:

Hold on. Be strong. This won't last forever. Make no mistake: soon you will be rejoicing. Close your eyes. See the purple crocus burst into blossom! Hear the water gushing forth, bubbling and filling every thirsty crack in the gasping ground. Hear those shouts of unbridled happiness? Life rising up, flourishing once more. Your Redeemer is coming to save you and your joy will be complete!

Isaiah sees up ahead that a Redeemer is coming to save. This is our reality and our hope, too.

Finally, in verses 8 through 10, Isaiah reminds us of the way home—the Way of Holiness. It is for God's beloved children, and it leads to the very presence of God. There is no sickness. There are no screens. We no longer grasp at the illusion of control, yet we are confident. This Way is ours to walk, today and into eternity.

We do not sing when worshiping in the sanctuary these days. I am thankful just to be in the space, just to see the kind faces, but, when it comes to the lack of physical singing, it feels like I put a stopper in my spirit. It's not normal to hum “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” and our souls know this. After the service, I get in my car. I take off my mask. I turn up the radio. I open the windows, despite the late autumn chill. Song springs forth. He is, indeed, my strength for today, and my bright hope for tomorrow.

Sarah Weller
Isaiah 35:1-10

COLORING PAGE FOR PEACE





Week Two

PEACE



FAITH @ HOME

WEEK OF DECEMBER 6

Some ideas for exploring peace during the second week of Advent

You might like to read Isaiah 40:1-11 in a few translations this week.

Parents with littles – if you just need one or two ideas, the don't-miss ideas for young children are in PURPLE. Many of these are scalable for older and younger audiences by adjusting the language.

Black font is an all-play for children, teens, and adults.

The word Advent means coming. Each week of Advent, we light a candle as we look forward to celebrating Jesus's coming. The second week, we light the candle of peace as we wait and prepare for the coming of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

READ, WATCH & REFLECT

- * This passage talks about an end to the long wait for the Messiah and a beginning to the preparation for his coming. Think about an experience you have had of preparing for something big. Perhaps a wedding, a graduation, or starting a new job/school. Talk about your experience if you are with a group. Discuss how it felt to prepare for this big event.
- * Isaiah 40 talks about preparing a road, a way in the desert, by leveling mountains and filling valleys. To help any younger members of your group put this in a modern context, discuss ways we might prepare for the arrival of a very important person today. Here are two YouTube video options you may consider watching: the Obama White House preparing for the arrival of the Pope - <https://tinyurl.com/y4of2fhn> or Princess Diana arriving at her wedding ceremony - <https://tinyurl.com/y6tdrse3> (this video is lengthy, you may want to preview and choose a short section). Discuss why the role of the Messiah is even more important than a Pope or a princess.
- * Read corresponding verses in the New Testament discussing who was to help pave the way for Jesus' coming: Luke 3:3-7 and John 1:19-34.

Waiting for God's Promises

- * Think of a time you waited on God's promises. If in a group, discuss your experience and share how the waiting felt to you.
- * Isaiah 40:8 tells us "grass withers and flowers fade, but the word of our God endures forever". Talk with your group or reflect on your own about how this verse relates to the Israelites long wait for the Messiah. Discuss how it relates to our own waiting for God's promises including Jesus' return.

Jesus is Our Shepherd

- * Our passage in Isaiah also speaks of Jesus as our shepherd and comforter. How is this image of Jesus as a shepherd different from how we usually perceive a king relating to his people? If in a group with children, discuss the differences between worldly kings and Jesus.

DO

Craft activity for families: Create a shepherd Christmas tree ornament to remind your family of the role of leader, comforter, protector, and nurturer Jesus plays in our lives.

Click the link below for detailed instructions:

<https://tinyurl.com/yymy27my>



WORSHIP VIDEOS

- * [Search YouTube for Peace on Earth by Casting Crowns](#)
- * [Search YouTube for Peace Has Come by Hillsong Worship](#)
- * [Search Vimeo West Hills - Light the Light the Fire of Life](#)

My favorite Christmas is an easy one. It's one I will never forget. It was December 25, 2001. We usually spend Christmas at my parents' house. We have brunch and then open presents. We always take turns opening gifts. I was anxiously waiting my turn and it wasn't to receive a gift. I was SO excited to give my mom the very last gift to open. My husband, Terry, was on standby with the camera ready.

My mom carefully untied the ribbon and wrapping paper. This is how she opens gifts. I'm more of a "rip it open!" person. My heart is beating fast because I'm excited and she is taking forever! This is news I've been waiting to share for several weeks now, but I wanted it to be really special. As she lifted the lid off the box, she pulled out a baby outfit. Terry snapped the picture as she held it close to her heart. I'm so glad we have that photo. It's so special to me.

Babies bring excitement, joy, and hope. My favorite Christmas song is "Mary, Did You Know?" There is something about this song that makes me emotional when I hear it. I think about Mary. Was she excited? Was she afraid? Did she fully understand God's plan? "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? Mary did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new? This child that you delivered would soon deliver you."

God's greatest gifts to us are the promises wrapped in the newborn Jesus. When we think about Jesus, do we feel the excitement, joy, and hope? Are we excited to share the news? It's the greatest gift we could ever receive and what we should be celebrating every Christmas.

Time goes by quickly and my "baby to be" is now 18 years old and in college. I can't wait to see what her future holds. Likewise, that newborn Jesus now sits at the right hand of God and I can't wait to see what OUR future holds. It will be amazing.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8

I often think of the books of the Old Testament prophets and envision the anger and disappointment of God and the doom and gloom of a people who have turned away from their God and have embraced their own misguided way. Too often, I see my reflection in the words of the Old Testament prophets, and I'm challenged to rethink how I'm following God. But amidst the story of Israel as they wait for the coming of the Messiah, I'm reminded of the benefit I have; the perspective that comes from knowing how their wait played out.

Advent is a time of hoping, of waiting, of longing, of rejoicing. In Zephaniah 3:14-17, I'm reminded of the joy in Advent. Zephaniah says, "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!" As we patiently wait for the coming Christ, Zephaniah's words resonate. We are called to sing, to shout, and to rejoice because we know that Emmanuel — God with us — is coming.

And greater even than the knowledge that the Messiah is coming, Zephaniah reminds Israel that, "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with singing." Advent is a time to remember the love that God has for us — a love so great that he sent his only Son to be with us.

This Advent, I'm making a commitment to spend time in the books of the prophets who faithfully called to Israel, calling them out of their sin and into the light and love of God. Join me in rejoicing over the coming Christ and in the joy that God is in our midst and rejoicing over us.

When I was a child during the Christmas season, I would turn off all the lights in my family's living room, find my favorite Christmas cassette tape, *Alabama Christmas*, and lay in the dark staring at the Christmas tree lights while listening to music. I loved the glow of the Christmas tree in that dark space and how the tiny lights on the tree reminded me of the far away stars.

I may no longer be in the dark living room of my childhood home, but I am living in a time of great doubt, sadness, distance, and lament right now. I have felt pushed and pulled and let down by our world. It weighs on me. I feel a great longing that defies definition; I sense the darkness and the uncertainty of the future and deliverance from this time.

This feeling is not unlike the feelings of the Israelites in the centuries before the coming of the Messiah. They, too, were pushed and pulled, defeated, and felt the darkness. God's people cried out and asked, "How long, Lord?" Perhaps they were also saying "Any time now, God."

In this time of Advent, I want to lean into that feeling of darkness and longing. As I search for the light of the Lord, I am reminded how God sent his son to be the Light of the World, and that Jesus will come again. The glow of this promise gives me that same sense of calm and peace I had as a child in my living room. Come, Lord Jesus, any time now. Come, my friends in Christ, "descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord." We have hope for the Kingdom to come, that the "mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it." Come, Lord Jesus.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10

Much like the world Micah's prophesy spoke to, we too are caught in the throes of uncertainty, violence, political and economic unrest, and a very real concern for the health and safety of our loved ones.

We do not need to look very far to see or know fear, fragility, and discontent. Whether personally, in our communities, our country, or across the world, we are living in a uniquely challenging time. We long for peace and security.

The promise of Micah is that God will be faithful. He will stand and shepherd his flock. He will guide us to do better. He will be our strength, and that strength will many times appear in unexpected or surprising ways.

"God, during this advent season, please help us to look for your presence where we least expect it. Let us be guided by your strength in our times of fear and worry. Let us be attuned to the voices of the powerless, the fearful, and the vulnerable. Prepare us to welcome you into our hearts, our words, and our actions."



The Madigan Family
Micah 5:2, 4a

As you read this, there are two weeks until Christmas. This means we are in the heart of the Christmas season. Elementary and high school students are getting excited about the two weeks of Christmas break that is right around the corner and college students are likely preparing for (or completing) their first semester final exams. In fact, eleven years ago today, December 11, 2009, was the last day of class of my sophomore year of college and I was also preparing for a round of final exams.

I mention this because my Christmas experience in 2009 was very unique and memorable. As some of you may recall, a blizzard swept into Omaha starting on December 23rd and it dropped almost 12 inches of snow from Christmas Eve into Christmas Day 2009. At the time, I had a small snow removal business with two of my brothers with about 20 to 25 customers around the neighborhood.

Normally, I would have spent Christmas eating too much, opening presents, and binge-watching Christmas movies. But in 2009, I spent Christmas Eve and Christmas Day shoveling snow with my brothers and my dad. Yet, the memories from that Christmas are some of my best. To be clear, the fond memories I have are not from the snow removal itself (it was about 20 degrees outside and the wind gusts averaged about 20 miles per hour).

The fond memories from that Christmas are of the interactions with our customers. Many of our customers were largely home-bound that Christmas and responded as if we were stopping by to see them on Christmas rather than just clearing the snow. This offered me the opportunity to share Christmas with many people I wouldn't have seen otherwise. I also recall that shoveling snow allowed me the time to focus on my relationship with God in a way that is often absent in the midst of all of the Christmas festivities.

The scripture reading for today, Malachi 3:1-2, says, among other things, that "the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come." In a unique way, I felt this messenger while shoveling snow late at night on Christmas Eve in 2009. This shows that God will always offer us opportunities to further our relationship with him, as long as we are open to them.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12

We give thanks to You, Lord above
For guiding and showing us what it truly means to love.
You listen to our thoughts and listen to our prayers,
You've protected us even when we thought you weren't there.
We say Your name with an exalted praise,
Seeking to live how You did every day.
We spread Your name and lift it high,
And will cherish Your life for the rest of time!





Week Three

JOY

FAITH @ HOME

WEEK OF DECEMBER 13



Some ideas for exploring joy during the third week of Advent

You might like to read Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 with a joyful tone in a few translations this week.

Parents with littles – if you just need one or two ideas, the don't-miss ideas for young children are in PURPLE. Many of these are scalable for older and younger audiences by adjusting the language.

Black font is an all-purpose for children, teens, and adults.

The word Advent means coming. Each week of Advent, we light a candle as we look forward to celebrating Jesus's coming. The third week, we light the candle of joy (it's the pink one!) and remember the shepherds who told the joyful news of Jesus' birth.

READ

- * 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 - talk about where joy comes from
- * Psalm 126 — talk about how verses 1-3 might fit with our response to what God did for us at Christmas and what he does for us today
- * Revelation 21:3-7 – talk about any connections between what is foretold about Jesus' coming in Isaiah and Revelation

REFLECT

- * A mission statement is a simple message to tell the world who you are and what you are about. What is the mission statement of some businesses or organizations you know? What is the mission statement of West Hills Church?
<https://www.whcomaha.org/mission-statement/>
- * Do you think this passage from Isaiah might be Jesus' mission statement? If you were explaining Jesus' mission to someone based on this passage, what would you say?

- * Individually or as a family, think about ways you prepare your heart for this season.
 - ◇ What do you look forward to?
 - ◇ In what ways are you more generous in Advent and Christmas?
 - ◇ What would it be like to prepare your heart in this way every day?
- * Write down a few words or sentences that describe how you would like to prepare for every day. Include something about how you would like to treat others, how you would like to see the world, and what you can do to make it better every day.
- * Consider writing this on special paper, dating it and putting it on your Christmas tree – your own mission statement to go along with Jesus' incarnational mission.

-Above ideas adapted from *Faith Formation Journeys*

DO

- * Draw a picture of the wrong or sad or disappointing things you wish God would fix (or use the one you made during the first week in advent). On another piece of paper, draw a picture of what it would look like for God to fix those things. Glue or tape the solution picture over the problem picture. How does it feel to know that Jesus is coming back again to right all the wrong things?
- * Read or watch *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. What did the Grinch discover about Christmas joy? Is there anything you would like to add to what the Grinch learned?
- * Play the Isaiah 61 Scavenger Hunt game. This can be done cooperatively as a family, or can be done using Zoom for different teams to play against each other competitively. If you do it competitively, each playing site will need one unbiased facilitator to hide the clues. <https://tinyurl.com/yyjjez2f>
- * Check out this group's way of spreading Christmas joy, and think about how you can use YOUR special gifts to spread joy, too: <https://tinyurl.com/y2haju37>

WORSHIP VIDEOS

- * [Search YouTube for - Go Tell It On the Mountain by Christmas Songs and Carols](#)
- * [Search YouTube for Joy to the World by Pentatonix](#)
- * [Search Vimeo West Hills for Light the Light the Fire of Life](#)

Waiting! We all have to learn to wait. We wait for election results. We wait for the pandemic to be behind us. We wait for children to return to school. We wait to return to our workplaces. We wait to return to church and worship together and share coffee and conversation. We wait to gather with family and friends. We wait for the simple act of moving about our days without wearing a mask. We wait to see what the days ahead hold for our country, the world, and our communities, and loved ones. We wait!

I recall one Christmas at age 10, one of the last Christmases my dad was alive. I wanted a three-piece luggage set with a vibrant blue paisley design. I saw travel in my future even then, and I still love paisley designs! I remember the waiting and how the wait overcame me one day. I sneakily searched the house until I found my gift. Then, I waited again until Christmas Day and acted surprised when I opened them. I learned a lesson in waiting that day.

Advent is a season of waiting and preparing. The momentary excitement of finding the luggage ruined the wait and anticipation. We need to trust that God has purpose in our waiting. He doesn't want us to rush the process. He wants us to desire and have the full experience. He wants us to be able to embrace the fullness of joy that is made sweeter because of the waiting.

Today's Bible verse leads us to His living water. Through His word we can trust Him when the wait overwhelms us. The waiting will be rewarded, and the masks thrown aside. The gift will be opened and the whole world will sing and shout His praise with JOY!





TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15

It is hard to imagine any other response than fear in Zacharias' situation at seeing an angel appear before him. There is something rightfully terrifying about encountering the spiritual realm. It should create in us a sense of awe and reverence, or holy fear. Even still, the first thing out of the angel's mouth was, "Do not be afraid," as if to say "I know that what you are seeing is shocking, confusing, and frightening, but please hear me out before you run away or shut me out." Zacharias' and Elizabeth's inability to conceive and all of the cultural shame it would have created for them in a time when people believed that infertility was a sign of spiritual disfavor would have undoubtedly been weighing heavily upon them. The truth is that the angel had good news for them that would change not just their lives but the lives of many. They were not just receiving a son. The Lord was sending one who would prepare the way for the Great Deliverer to rescue the world.

The holidays are not a joyful time for everyone. We live in a broken world made up of broken people where there is division, pain, suffering, loss, and loneliness that become painfully obvious during this particular time of the year, but there is one promise that we as believers can cling to through it all. God sent His one and only Son into the world to save us from our iniquities by becoming the perfect sacrifice, and one day He will return to make everything new.

Just as God intervened in Elizabeth's ability to conceive, He can intervene in our most impossible situations, but even if He doesn't do what we think should happen, our hope and confidence remain in Jesus, the Savior of the world. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, let us remember that our God is the God that makes impossible things possible and that He is coming back to restore all things.



The bells ring at the church and the snow falls across the streets and hills in the city. There is music in every home, a light in every window, a smile on every face. Christmas night is a wonderful night, the night that Jesus was born.

As these advent days pass, we remember the brave woman who said “Yes” to Jesus as a young girl, the virgin Mary. The angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her that she would be with child by the Holy Spirit. Mary was ready for Jesus long ago, and Advent is when we get ready to welcome Jesus today.

Just as Mary did, we must get ready for the Son of God. We open our hearts by spreading words of love and kindness to our neighbors, we open our hands by reaching out to our communities, and we open ourselves to Jesus during this time of advent by worship and prayer with our loved ones.

Advent Prayer:

During this advent season, let us remember Mary and her sacrifice, to pray for love like hers, and to allow Jesus into our hearts, homes, and lives.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17

Life has a way of giving us what we hope for, but in a completely unexpected way. It seems the only thing consistent in life is inconsistency. Things that first appear to us as a curse, quickly become a blessing and things we are convinced will make us happy, prove to be the very things that create in us a feeling of emptiness.

I can only imagine the emotions Mary must have felt when she first found out she was going to be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. She was chosen to give birth to the living Son of God, and He would be the responsibility of Mary and Joseph. If I were given a task like that from God, it would not be long before I would crumble under the pressure.

Mary must have been terrified. Joseph must have been confused, maybe even angry. I'm sure the news of Mary's divine pregnancy seemed, at first, like a huge burden for Mary and Joseph. I'm quite confident Mary and Joseph didn't plan on rearing the second person of the Holy Trinity. This came to both of them as a massive surprise.

Lucky for us, we know how the story ends! Jesus not only becomes Mary and Joseph's pride and joy, but ultimately saves the world from sin and death. The fear, confusion, and pressure were all worth it in the end. This story proves that even within God's glorious plans for our lives, we will all still come face-to-face with fear, worry, anxiety, doubt, confusion, questioning, and big surprises along the way.

It can be difficult in the moment to see how God is working in the background of our lives. Pain, fear, and worry have a way of fogging up our eyes so we can only see what's right in front of us. However, when we are nearsighted, rest assured that God has 20/20 vision. God sees the big picture, even when we do not. Mary and Joseph, just like us, had to trust that God was in control even in the midst of their hardships. Jesus was and is the long-awaited gift that generation after generation hoped for. Hope arrived, but in a way that nobody saw coming.

Pregnancy is a time of waiting with great expectancy. It sometimes is not an easy journey. At some points it feels eternal. There is an excitement for all the things you cannot see yet but can only feel. I am grateful to have felt the incredible movement of a baby wiggling in the womb. To me, it is one of the very best things about being pregnant. There were moments in my pregnancies that I had scares and unknowns. It was easy to want it to be over with and have my baby in my arms. To skip past the suspense and get to the end. However, I knew I had to wait. The wiggles coming from the baby within many times served as a reminder of what was to come and to keep my eye on the prize.

I imagine the leaping in the womb was a reminder to Elizabeth and Mary of what was yet to come. Is it easy to want to rush things when there is a wonderful gift at the end. To push past the anticipation and just get right to it. I think of Christmas as a child in this way. The anticipation of Christmas Day is sometimes unbearably exciting. The “JUST GET HERE ALREADY” feeling! How many more days? But there is something to be said for the anticipation. There’s a glee in the just-get-here-already feeling. Christmas really wouldn’t be the celebration it is without all the anticipation, would it? The build-up can sometimes make the final gift so much more thrilling.

This reminds me of my own love for Christmas Eve. It is a day full of expectancy, but also happiness. I know what is to come and what we get to celebrate the next day. But I also love sitting in the waiting. I take comfort in relishing the giddiness of tomorrow. I think of the Holy Spirit in this way. It is an unseen feeling, yet a reminder of why I should be filled with delight. It swoops in at times as a reminder to regain our focus. To rest in what is yet to come. It isn’t visible yet, but it is coming. The baby in Elizabeth’s womb couldn’t comprehend what it meant to be in the presence of the Lord, but he sure could feel it. And he just couldn’t contain himself. He had the excitement of any day now and it made him leap.

An Abundance of Hope, Gratitude, Joy

Have you ever been completely surprised? Truly surprised at an event like a birthday party in your honor, or by an unexpected delivery or gift? Perhaps a member of the church nominating committee contacted you to consider a call to serve West Hills Church in a new way. Were you speechless, confused, excited, or possibly scared?

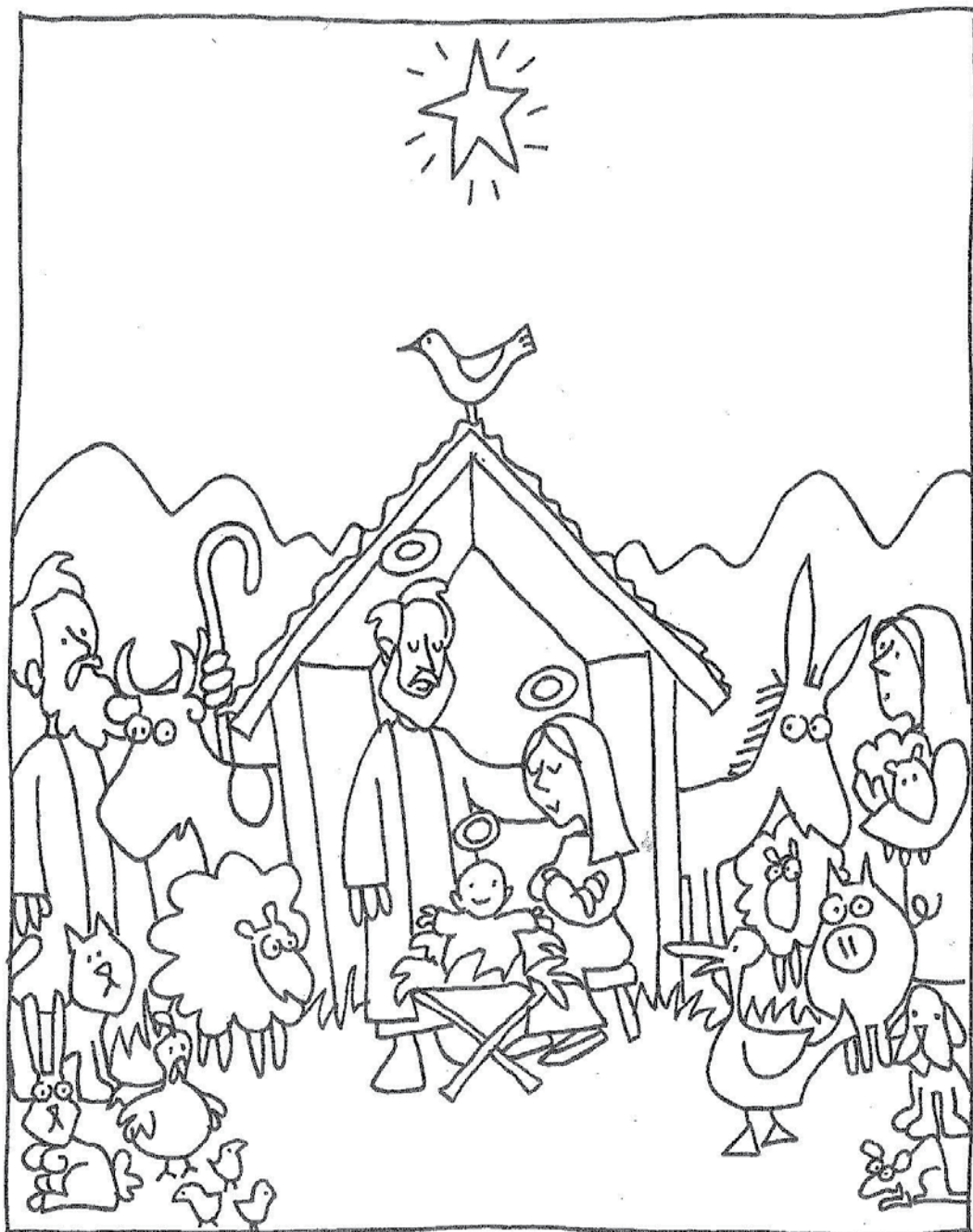
When Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced that God had chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah, he said, "You have found favor with God." He proceeded to tell her what her Son would do (Luke 1:31-33). For hundreds of years, thousands actually, God's people had looked forward to the coming of the One sent from God to deliver His people. The Old Testament practices of offering sacrifices for sin were ongoing reminders of Israel's sin. The temple sacrifices pointed to the One who actually would remove the penalty for sin by paying it in full Himself. The Magnificat was Mary's response to Gabriel's message from God that He had chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah. "My soul magnifies the Lord."

A young woman wanted to put together a special Christmas gift for her mother-in-law. She invited all of the family members to write out memories or qualities they were thankful for in her. She put each on a colorful card in a clear glass jar and gave it to her mother-in-law. On a birthday a few years later, she asked family for new contributions to the "Thankful Jar". The recipient was humbled. I suspect that each of us would be touched to receive such a gift.

Mary's response to God's surprise reminds me of the Thankful Jar, which I would call the "Joy Jar." For gratitude begets joy, and Mary's response was one of rejoicing in who God is and what God had done and was about to do. (Try listing the verbs that describe God's actions!) "And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation."

What is your default response to a "surprise" in your life? Do you focus on your own emotions—that is, how you feel? Or do you consider how God may be at work in your life, relationships, or job? Mary's response was focused on praising God for who God is, her Savior, the source of her hope. She recognized her own need and rejoiced how God was bringing his promises to fulfillment.

COLORING PAGE FOR LOVE





Week Four

LOVE

A decorative header image featuring four lit Advent candles with yellow flames and orange-red tops, set against a dark blue background with white stars and snowflakes. The candles are decorated with blue and white patterns.

FAITH @ HOME

WEEK OF DECEMBER 20

Some ideas for continuing to reflect on the idea of love during Advent

You might like to read Isaiah 54:1-10 in a few translations this week.

Parents with littles – if you just need one or two ideas, the don't-miss ideas for young children are in PURPLE. Many of these are scalable for older and younger audiences by adjusting the language.

Black font is an all-play for children, teens, and adults.

The word Advent means coming. Each week of Advent, we light a candle as we look forward to celebrating Jesus's coming. The fourth week, we light the candle of love and think about the great, redeeming, incarnational love of God for His people.

READ

- * John 3:16
- * John 12:34
- * John 15:13
- * Galatians 2:20
- * Ephesians 5:2
- * 1 John 4:9-11, 19

REFLECT

- * What comes to mind when you think of God's love?
- * Is God's love different than people's love? Why or why not?

DO

Try these activities teaching about God's unconditional love:

<https://tinyurl.com/y5uplbj9>

Try these ideas for a family night focused on loving others:

<https://tinyurl.com/y5xsxave>

Watch these videos about God's love:

- * <https://tinyurl.com/y3k7ha8n>
- * <https://tinyurl.com/y2rmxbxq>
- * A local favorite: Douglas Talks: God Loves You!
<https://tinyurl.com/y2jdmf2f>
- * For teens and adults:
<https://tinyurl.com/y4yl75zx>



WORSHIP VIDEOS

- * [Search YouTube for When Love was Born by Mark Schultz](#)
- * [Search YouTube for God's Love Is So Wonderful, a song about God's love for little](#)
- * [Search Vimeo West Hills for Light the Light the Fire of Life](#)

An interview with a nine-year-old: "John 3:16-17 is my favorite Bible passage."



What do you like about it? It's reassuring.

Do you think many people know this verse?

I bet a lot of people have memorized this because it's reassuring and tells us that God loved us so much that he sent his one child so that we can be together with God.

What does it mean? Now that Jesus has come, we only have to believe in Jesus, open our hearts to his love and forgiveness, and he will come into our hearts and change our lives.

Why would this be part of the advent devotional? I've never thought about this being a Christmas verse, but it really is,

because Christmas is when we celebrate that God sent Jesus to us.

Do you think it was easy for God to send Jesus? I don't think so, because he loved his son, and he knew that Jesus would die, and knew that people would be angry that Jesus was upside-downing their kingdom and wouldn't like that change and would be mean to him.

How do you think Jesus felt about coming? Probably not too happy, because he knew he would die. He knew he would rise again, but he knew that to rise again he would have to die.

So why do you think Jesus came? He knew it needed to happen. He wanted people to be with him, and they couldn't unless there was something to take away the sin. And his dad asked him. That's an important part.

What does all the sin talk have to do with Christmas? That's what Jesus came to do. He had to come and be perfect God in person form to take away our sin. Jesus – God – came on Christmas to save the world from Satan and death.

How does this make you feel? It makes me feel loved. And it makes me feel really, really special that Jesus would come into the world to die for me – for us – and that he loves us that much. He died a painful death of a criminal, and he loved me enough to die for me – like that, when he wasn't a criminal.

How does that make you feel about God? That he really, really loves us. He loves us more than he wanted to keep his own child safe in heaven with him.

Jason, Jessica, and Catie Scheopner

John 3:16-17



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22

The wonderful thing about Christmas Scripture passages is the anticipation of Advent and the arrival of Christmas. In preparation for Advent we keep saying, "Any time now this child will be born!"

This is one of my favorite songs from Handel's *Messiah*. I remember singing this several years ago in the University Chorus my freshman year at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

There were a lot of us, like 200 people. And there was the orchestra. We performed *The Messiah* in the old coliseum. We had a marvelous professor conducting the chorus. He had a great sense of humor and a tremendous love for music, both vocal and instrumental.

One of the challenging parts of "For Unto Us" is the long run of notes. I promise not to get technical. He did not like 200 people doing their own thing on those runs. He decided that per section (soprano, alto, tenor, base), whoever started their run with the melody would actually sing the words and the rest of the section would sing "pohpohs" (think long 'o'). (Not even sure how to write that word!) For example, first sopranos would sing "For unto us a child is bornnnnnnnn," and second sopranos would "pohpoh". We worked on perfecting it so you could not tell we were singing two different things! The hardest part was not laughing when we first learned how to sing this way. Even when we performed in the coliseum, everyone in the chorus had smiles on their faces as we sang. There is something about watching a group of people enjoying what they are singing, as opposed to being so focused they miss their own message in the performance.

To this day whenever I sing along with this song, I sing my "pohpohs!" It is truly one of many of my fondest Christmas memories. It makes me smile!!

I have heard it said that God is never late, rarely early, but always on time. At just the right time the Word became flesh. Jesus both transcends time and enters time. What John tells us is that Jesus has been around for a while - from the beginning of time. He tells us that Jesus was with God as co-creator of all creation, and that life and light reside in Jesus to such a degree that he can give life and dispel darkness through the light he brings with him.

After giving the cosmic context for Jesus' entrance into the world at his birth, John begins to testify as to what he and his companions saw and heard. He starts proclaiming the good news that God, in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, has "moved into the neighborhood."

I remember hearing Eugene Peterson speak on John 1:14 while Lisa and I were attending a conference in Colorado. Peterson recounted the story of new neighbors moving into his neighborhood from New York. He shared how all eyes were on this family as they unloaded all of their worldly belongings for all to see. It was not a middle-of-the-night secret operation that was kept hidden. He recalled how the unpacking ritual gave him the sense that his new neighbors had come to stay. God pitched a tent in our campground.

While Jesus may have been born deep in the night, he lived his life in a very public way – all the way to the last words he spoke on the dark day of his death. He walked where the people walked, he worked a job like other men in his society, he studied the Scriptures, and he prayed often – alone and with his Father.

John testified that Jesus came with life and light and was full of grace and truth. His glory would be on full display, for all to see – to behold. John is telling us to look at Jesus. Just before John begins to narrate Jesus' passion, he wrote,

Then Jesus cried out, "Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24

In this time of quarantine, we miss the big family gatherings where you pack everyone around the table....always room for one more! With that in mind, here's a new way to arrange your Christmas nativity set this year.

In his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Ken Bailey writes of "critical flaws" in our simple, black-and-white reading of Luke's text: Joseph and Mary were renounced by their family. Arriving in Bethlehem for the census, there is no room for them at the inn. They are forced to reside in a stable where Jesus is born and placed in a manger. Rejection and loneliness.

Don't let the culture of here and now take away this truth: Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, was born in the bosom of family, not rejected at birth, fully embraced in community. In the culture of the place where family and hospitality are important, a pregnant Mary was cared for by the women of the family. The "inn" is actually a small guest room in a house already stuffed with other family members there for the census. The Greek word used for inn is "katalyma," which is more like a guest room.

This, to me, is the good news of his coming: he came to be with us, and he got that start with us, in the warmth of a house filled with family, which is what we all celebrate at Christmas...and how we celebrate it!

At a memorial service, I heard a wise pastor explain that sometimes we water down translations from the original words. He gave me new perspective on Psalm 23. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" is better translated as "surely goodness and mercy shall RUN AFTER ME, PURSUE ME, all the days of my life."

God-with-us, Emmanuel, Jesus, the same one whose grace and mercy doesn't merely follow me, but actively runs me down, is bold enough to live his name and be born packed within the bosom of family.

We all put out our lonely manger scenes with animals, feeding trough, and those three kings who come later. But right now to keep in tune with the real story, run down all those trolls and pocket pals and stuff them in. It's Christmas! There is always room for one more!

Julie Burgess
Luke 2:1-14

Kenneth Bailey, "Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels," InterVarsity Press, 2008.
<https://www.1517.org/articles/three-hidden-hebrew-treasures-in-psalm-23>

Mary thought her experience was over. The rough trip to Bethlehem, finding a place to rest and then the thrill of giving birth. Time to rest? Not hardly. A bunch of shepherds show up excited about a strange encounter with angels proclaiming a savior had been born. Was Mary amazed? More likely a little giddy – no surprise to her. I mean, what else could happen? She was no more surprised when an angel appeared telling her she would be the mother of the Savior. Luke tells us she treasured the words of the shepherds in her heart.

Memories. I recall an Elvis Presley song called “Memories” that begins with the lyrics “Memories, pressed between the pages of my mind – sweetened through the ages just like wine.” I suppose Mary pressed everything she experienced like pages in her heart, reliving them as Jesus grew and likely as well when she witnessed Him on the cross.

Memories. I have a cardboard box labeled “Jack’s Box”. In it are keepsakes, tangible treasures collected over time. Handwritten notes from my mother, scorecards from major league games, college grades. I keep adding to the box and it is very poorly organized – just stuff that means something only to me. And the collection keeps growing – more things stored in a box, but the memories are really pressed in my mind. I dig into it occasionally when some event triggers a distant memory. And around the Christmas season I reflect on Christmases past; especially memories of family gatherings.

Memories. Judy and I lived in an apartment in St. Paul, MN, and our first Christmas found us putting up a Christmas tree. We did it up right! How proud we were until after a few days it started dropping its needles – to the point the week before Christmas it was completely bare. Embarrassed, we snuck out during the night and put it in the dumpster. That Charlie Brown-like tree is still a fond memory.

Memories. What images come to you as you reflect on your life; especially during special times of the year like Christmas. Some are likely sad – most, hopefully happy. What memories are pressed between the pages of your mind? Now imagine Mary’s. I’ll bet you can’t match hers!

Thanks to everyone who had a part in bringing this devotional guide to life! This includes writers, editors, and proof-readers. This is our gift to West Hills.

In this year when we have been separated and socially distant, may this guide bring our hearts and spirits together, as we journey through this Advent season together.



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