

A Child

for us!



A CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONAL

A Child *for us!*

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P R E F A C E

EVEN WHEN I WAS NOT INTERESTED IN JESUS, THERE WAS ALWAYS something about the Christmas season that was magical, romantic, and exciting. I liked what the season was all about: family (and mine was a good family), giving presents (even though we never went overboard in doing so), and all the Christmas TV specials! I watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas* every year. . . and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *A Christmas Carol* with Ebenezer Scrooge, and, of course, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

When I became a Christian around Thanksgiving in 1974, it was the first time I remember really getting into the story of Christmas in the Bible. I wondered, *How did I not know this story better?* Sure, I had picked up a few ideas from church Christmas services, but in 1974 I fell in love with the Christmas story and I read it every year. It never gets old. It always remains fresh.

Christmas has the makings of a great story. There are intriguing characters: angels, shepherds, Magi (or wise men), a mad king, and a family. At the core of that family are Mary and Joseph, but there are others. They are being swept along in a drama set in motion hundreds of years earlier.

The plot is full of suspense and danger. A star that moves across the sky. A census that requires a difficult trip on the part of a very pregnant Mary. There is a crowded town and no room at the inn. A barn of sorts is found and a feeding trough-manger is used as a crib. It is a prophetic moment, full of worship. People are caught up in what God is doing in the world.

Yes! So, what exactly is God doing? What is God doing that requires angelic messengers sent to disrupt Joseph and Mary's plans and put them in a bind, in a bad spot?

It all centers on a baby, a son who is conceived by the Holy Spirit in a virgin. Yes, that took some explaining, and a lot more trust on Mary and Joseph's part. A son, you shall call him Jesus. He will save his people from their sins. He will be called *Immanuel* or *God with us*. He is a king. He is the Son of God!

It's the greatest story the world has ever heard.

More than ever, we could all use perspective and hope. The Christian themes of Christmas are joy, peace, love, and hope. In a series of 25 short reflections, you will read the Bible's story about Christmas. If you are new to the Christian faith, if you could use a fresh perspective on this greatest of stories, or if you simply want to enjoy a story you have enjoyed for decades, the story of Jesus' birth is a story for you.

May the month ahead be a time of contemplation for us, as it was for Mary: "His mother treasured and pondered all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

Pastor Brian R. Rice

USING THIS DEVOTIONAL

The word *devotional* simply means a book that has a Bible reading and a short message to help you grow in your faith. Each of the following 25 days of devotionals begins with a scripture passage for you to read. If you don't have a Bible, we recommend the YouVersion app or website. Living Word also offers free Bibles to anyone in need.

Some people prefer to read devotional materials in the morning, before they start their day. Others prefer to end their day with a devotional. The time is totally up to you.

We recommend spending a moment in silence before you read. Quiet your heart. Settle your mind, especially if you have had a hectic day, or have a busy day ahead. Open with a prayer of gratitude and ask God to reveal more of his character and will to you as you read. You might want to have a pen and notebook handy to write down any thoughts you may have as you read. Did the passage teach you anything new about Jesus? Did it make you think of more questions that you have about God?

After reading, end with a prayer. Ask God what he would like you to learn from the reading that day.

Ideally, you will start this book on December 1 and read day 25 on Christmas Day. But don't feel too bad if you miss a day! You can always make up any days that you have missed. If having a daily devotional time is a new habit for you, have some grace with yourself as you add this into your daily rhythm.

We hope this book teaches you more about God and helps you grow closer to him this Christmas season.

ASK
FOR NEW
REVELATION

MEDITATE
ON DAILY
SCRIPTURE

READ
THE TEXT

JOURNAL
REFLECTIONS
AND INSIGHTS

PRAY
OVER WHAT
GOD HAS
REVEALED

DAY 22

HUMILITY

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:6-7

DO YOU REMEMBER the scene in *Finding Nemo* where the pelicans see the fish flopping around on the dock and start crying, "Mine! Mine! Mine!?" Life can sometimes feel like we are those pelicans trying to claim a fish. We are so concerned with what is owed to us, with what we can gather and claim and stake for ourselves. But Jesus offers a totally different way of living. Jesus, even though he is God, humbled himself to come to earth as a man. What an incredible statement! And what an incredible example for us to follow.

How can you follow Jesus' example of humility? Like Christ, by not claiming what is owed to you, but putting others first. By submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Jesus was the Creator of the world, and he still humbled himself to come to earth as a baby. He humbled himself to become a man. He humbled himself even unto death on a cross.

We are not interested in serving others at times. Andrew Murray wrote, "The highest glory of the creature is in being only a vessel, to receive and enjoy and show forth the glory of God. It can do this only as it is willing to be nothing in itself, that God may be all. Water always fills first the lowest places. The lower, the emptier a man lies before God, the speedier and the fuller will be the inflow of the diving glory." By willing to be nothing, God can take us and make us into a beautiful vessel, filled for his use.

YOUR LIGHT HAS COME

READ ISAIAH 60:1-3



THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOK of Isaiah has some of the most beautiful prophecies about the coming Messiah. The entire book is full of rich theology and stunning poetry. The writer was a prophet who lived in Jerusalem. Not only did Isaiah bring warnings about judgement to the people, he also brought messages of great hope. A leader from the line of David is coming. Isaiah 59 describes him as a warrior, intervening for his people, stepping in to help those he loves.

In the verses you read today, this great Redeemer's light has come, the glory of God has arrived. Even though everything around the people is dark, light is coming. Not only is the light coming, but it will be so amazing, so attractive, that nations and kings will be drawn to it.

The weeks before Christmas are a time that Christians have historically called Advent. Advent means waiting. It's a time of anticipation. It's a time to look forward. Though darkness seems to be covering everything around us, light is on its way.

Christmas is a hectic season. Between shopping and parties, cooking and decorating, it is all too easy to lose sight of what we truly celebrate at Christmas. How can you take time to acknowledge *this* moment—the moment when you are in the darkness before the dawn, the pale gray morning before the sun breaks over the horizon?

For hundreds of years, Advent has been just that, a season of waiting and anticipation, a season to watch for the light breaking, a season to see what God will do.

What do you anticipate during this season? What darkness is covering your life? What parts of you need the light of Jesus?

A CHILD—FOR US!

READ ISAIAH 9



GOD'S PEOPLE HAVE FALLEN into darkness. And yet, God does not leave his people without redemption. The people have been stumbling, searching for hope, searching for the way out. These people will see a great light, Isaiah says. This light, this deliverer, will end oppression, bring his people joy, remove those who enslave others, remove even the symbols of war.

And who is this great deliverer? Shockingly, it will be a child. He will be exalted above even the government. He will bring peace, justice, and righteousness.

Imagine what it must have been like to hear Isaiah's words. The people who heard Isaiah would have been living far from God, fearing his judgement. They would have been longing for hope, longing for a sign that God had not forgotten them. And this is the answer they received. A child? A child will bring peace, wholeness, and restoration?

God's best, final, everlasting redemptive work came in the form of a baby. How unexpected! God's best gifts often show up in unexpected ways. You might feel like these people, stumbling in the darkness, reaching for something—anything—to turn on the light. But scripture promises that "the people walking in darkness have seen a great light." In *The Message*, verse 2 says, "For those who lived in a land of deep shadows—light! Sunbursts of light!" There are some seasons that feel like we are living in a land of deep shadows, but Isaiah 9 reminds us that God will bring forth light.

LONGING FOR GOD

READ PSALM 42



HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED thirst on a hot summer day, when the sun is high in the sky? What does it feel like to wish for a drink on a day like that? The writer of Psalm 42 describes his longing for God like that of a deer panting for water. This writer is in trouble. He is struggling with hope. Even his friends are questioning his God. In the past, he has worshipped God with joy and singing, and now he is down and out. But even in the midst of his pain, he remembers to hope in God. He starts by writing about panting after water, but by verse 7 he is describing God's waterfalls and waves breaking over him.

And how does the psalmist reconcile this deep longing for God? He reminds himself of what he knows to be true about God. *The Message* paraphrase puts it this way: "When my soul is in the dumps, I rehearse everything I know of you."

Are you longing for God? Do you find that your soul is in the dumps? Perhaps this has been a long, difficult year for you. Perhaps you are approaching the Christmas season not with anticipation or longing, but with dread. Perhaps you, like the writer of Psalm 42, have been surviving on a steady diet of tears?

How can you take time today to rehearse what you know of God? Can you look back to a time when God sustained you? Can you remember a time when God brought you through something difficult? Remember God's faithfulness.

And then, like the psalmist, put your hope in God and praise your Savior. Isaiah 40 reminds us that, "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

A SIGN

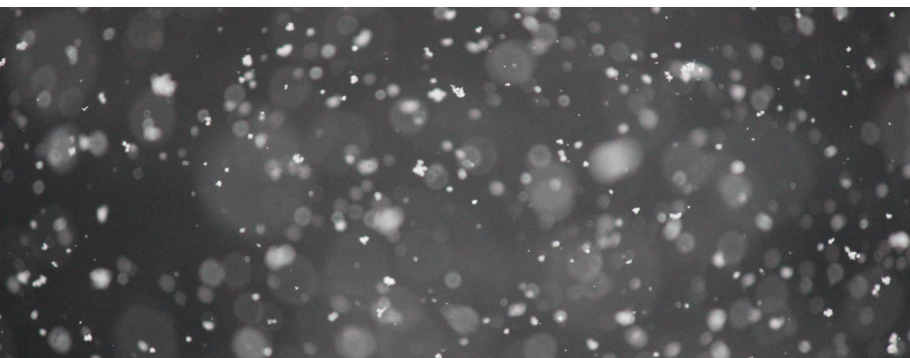
READ ISAIAH 7:14



HAVE YOU EVER WAITED for a sign? If you have waited on the birth of a child or been with someone waiting on the birth of a child, you know how excited you can become over even the smallest sign that the baby will soon be arriving. Even the slightest sign can lead to great anticipation and excitement.

Isaiah 7 is a chapter full of warnings to God's people. There are military coalitions forming against Jerusalem, but the leader is not discussing them seriously. In the context of this back and forth about war and politics, Isaiah gives a sign: A virgin will conceive and bear a son, and his name will be Immanuel. Immanuel means "God with us"—that God is among his people, guiding them and helping them. God is working in their present circumstances, but he is working on future deliverance, too.

This probably was not the sign that kings and military leaders were expecting. It's strange that in the middle of a prophecy about military battles, coalitions, and threats there is a promise of God's future salvation through his son, but sometimes signs aren't what we expect. God has purposes that affect our daily lives and purposes that affect global history. And he is good in all things.





A BRANCH FROM JESSE

READ ISAIAH 11



IN 2018, AFTER THE Philadelphia Eagles beat the New England Patriots in the Super Bowl, there was a massive party in the streets of Philadelphia. There was fireworks, confetti, and dancing in the streets. (And, let's be honest, probably a handful of arrests when the celebrations got out of hand!)

Isaiah 11 describes an incredible scene of triumph, but it's not the raucous sort of triumph we are used to seeing when a beloved team wins a championship. It's a scene of justice, a scene of peace, a scene of lions and lambs lying down together. The enemies of the people of God will be destroyed. And this picture hinges on one key figure, the root of Jesse—Jesus of Nazareth. “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.” He will gather the people together into a beautiful display.

We are familiar with what it looks like to be fractured based on ethnic, racial, cultural, and political boundaries. However, Isaiah 11 shows us a different scene, a scene where God has gathered his people, and those divisions no longer matter. Galatians 3:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

There will come a day when all of the things that divide us fall away, and the only thing that matters is gathering together around Christ. Until that day comes, we continue to work and strive for the vision pictured in these verses.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

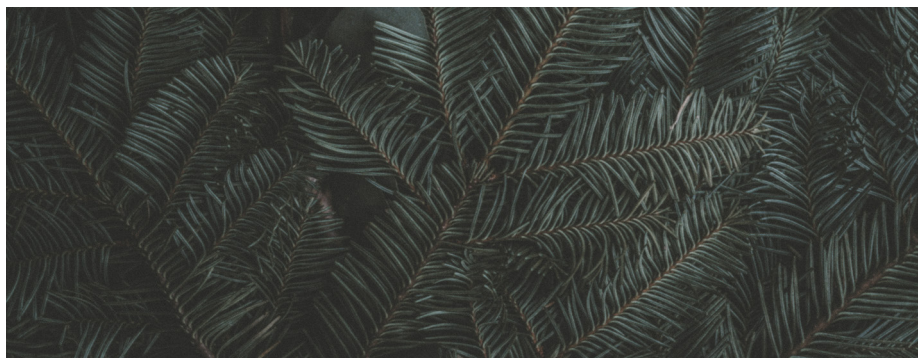
READ ISAIAH 53



ROUGHLY 800 YEARS BEFORE the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah wrote about the coming Messiah in the text you read for today. Isaiah describes a life of suffering, a life of service and humility. Isaiah 53 describes an unlikely leader. There is nothing attractive about him. He is despised and rejected and held in low esteem. Who would ever describe a leader as a suffering servant?

This is exactly the type of Messiah we have in Jesus. As we see in scripture, Jesus is not quite who we expect him to be. The people were waiting for a mighty military leader who would wipe out their enemies. Instead, they got a sacrificial lamb. They got a leader who loved his people enough to die for them. They got a leader who “was led like a lamb to the slaughter.”

Advent is a season of waiting, yes. But it is also a season where we remember that God’s answer to our prayers and our waiting are rarely what we expect. Instead of a palace, we get a stable. Instead of a military leader, we get a servant. Instead of what we deserve, we receive grace and mercy. As verse 1 is translated in *The Message*, “Who believes what we’ve heard and seen? Who would have thought God’s saving power would look like this?”



ELIZABETH AND ZECHARIAH

READ LUKE 1:5-24



LUKE'S ACCOUNT OF THE story of Jesus' birth begins with a man named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. The couple walked closely with God. They were faithful. They obeyed his commands. But they never had one thing they desired—a child. If you have walked through the pain of infertility, you know what it felt like for Zechariah and Elizabeth to wait, year after year after year. And now, they were old. The thing they wanted would never happen. Or would it?

The angel Gabriel visits Zechariah to deliver surprising news—a baby! Elizabeth will have a son! Pay close attention to verse 13: “Your prayer has been heard.” Zechariah and Elizabeth had likely been praying the same prayer for years. In their younger years, it was likely prayed with great anticipation and hope. But as they aged, they may have felt weary. They may have asked, like the psalmist, “How long, O Lord?”

Advent is a season of waiting. Scripture teaches us that God's timing is not our timing. We wait and we pray and we ponder, sometimes for years on end. It may be that God is waiting to make things right at exactly the right time. Elizabeth and Zechariah's child, John the Baptist, would grow up to be the “voice crying in the wilderness,” calling people to prepare their hearts for Jesus. God's timing for his birth was perfect. For his parents, it was likely many years of heartbreak and pain. But God's timing and God's purposes are always greater than our own.

MARY'S YES

READ LUKE 1:26-38



WHEN WE TYPICALLY THINK of people who had their lives interrupted by God, we usually think of someone like Abraham in the Old Testament. God just showed up, made a deal with him, and decided that he would be the father of God's chosen people. And we, rightfully, hold him up as a great example of saying yes to God. Mary faces a similar situation here, but she actually has quite a bit more to lose than Abraham did.

When Gabriel visits Mary, she is a teenage virgin, engaged to a man named Joseph. In those days, an engagement was a legally binding contract. The families of the husband and wife-to-be would have already negotiated the terms of the dowry. If she were to turn up pregnant, it would be considered adultery. As a result, she would be mocked and humiliated. She could actually be stoned to death for committing adultery. By saying yes to God, she is taking an enormous risk.

Mary is powerless, insignificant. She is a member of a marginalized people group in an occupied land. By saying yes to God, she is literally putting her life in danger. Even if she lives, she cannot expect Joseph to marry her in such a state. Her reputation will be ruined. She does not have wealth, political power, influence in society, or a position of privilege. The little that she does have is her good name, and she's about to lose that. Her future marriage, her future happiness, her reputation, and even her very life are on the line.

And, almost without hesitation, she says yes. She asks a single question about the specifics of her situation, and then she responds with a rather astonishing statement: "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." No wonder she had found favor with God! She is a woman of great faith.



MARY'S SONG

READ LUKE 1:39-55



AFTER THE ANGEL VISITS Mary, she goes to see her relative, Elizabeth, and responds to her greeting with this beautiful song. Mary's song echoes Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. It is just second nature for her to respond this way. She was familiar with the Old Testament stories of what God had done for his people.

Mary begins by mentioning her own lowly state. This is strong language here! Mary isn't just saying, "Yeah, God's pretty okay I guess." No! Her soul glorifies the Lord! Her spirit rejoices in God her Savior!

Can you see her humility here? She says God has been mindful of my humble state, and still he is doing great things for me. She is aware of her low social standing. She is aware of her poverty, her gender, her lack of status. She is saying, "I am so inconsequential, but God is doing great things for me." It's grace. God is acting on her behalf, and she knows it, and it leads her to praise. But, not only is God acting on her behalf, he is acting on behalf of everyone.

Mary sings of God's mercy to those who fear him. And woe to you if you do not fear him. The world is being turned upside down. God is coming! He will tear down rulers, he will lift up the humble.

This passage of scripture comforts us because we live in a world of poverty and violence and exploitation. Sometimes it feels like the entire framework of society is crumbling. But Mary's song reminds us that while all of these things are happening, God's will is still being fulfilled. This is the movement and working of the Ruler of the universe. He brings down rulers from their thrones. He lifts up the hungry. And we can be comforted by that. God is going to redeem it all.

JOSEPH

READ MATTHEW 1:18-24



WHEN WE THINK ABOUT the major players in the story of Jesus' birth, it seems like Joseph is always in the background. We know Mary, of course, and the shepherds in the fields. The chorus of angels. The wise men and their travels. But we don't often give much thought to Joseph. What must it have been like for Joseph, Jesus' earthly father?

Even when Joseph found out that his fiancé was expecting, he had it in his mind to divorce her quietly, to keep her from public ridicule. He could have made a spectacle of her. He could have exposed her to public shame. Surely his heart was broken. His fiancé was having a baby—someone else's baby! He had every right under Jewish law to subject her to this humiliation, but he was kind enough to want to spare her from this. Instead, an angel visits Joseph and encourages him to marry Mary anyway. God is doing a new thing! And Joseph, he would be a part too!

Like Mary, Joseph was faced with a daunting task and he chose to say yes to God. He chose to walk in faith and be a part of a story that he did not fully understand. By adopting Jesus into his family, he too becomes a story of remarkable obedience. He acts with integrity and steps up to take responsibility for a child that is not his. Like Mary, his yes changed the course of history.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

READ LUKE 2:1-20



IT'S POSSIBLE TO HEAR a story so many times that you become sort of numb to the incredible truth and beauty of it. For many of us, this passage in Luke is very familiar. We hear it each year at Christmas. We read it on Christmas cards. We watch it play out in church Christmas pageants. Linus even recites it in the *Charlie Brown Christmas* special! But Luke 2 is a world-rocking, life-changing, history-altering passage.

God could have announced this world-changing news to anyone. If we were going to announce something important in our time, we'd go to a news station or get someone prominent and well-known to announce it for us. But when God chose to share the news of Jesus' birth, he sent angels to a group of dusty, tired shepherds tending their sheep in the fields outside of Galilee.

This first announcement says something about who God considers worthy. Jesus' birth is not just for the high and mighty. It's not just for the influential, the wealthy, the prominent. The Good News of the birth of Jesus is for everyone! The uneducated, the poor, the disrespected, all people have value in God's kingdom. Jesus' birth is not Good News for some—it's Good News for all!

These shepherds might have been a little rough around the edges. They were dirty from their work in the fields, but they rushed to see the baby and then told others. Reflect on verse 20: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."



HEROD

READ MATTHEW 2



HEROD THE GREAT WAS an overpowering king. He was a builder of cities. He built fortresses and temples. He planned festivals to celebrate his accomplishments. He was ambitious. And in the middle of his ruling and planning, his plotting and leading, a few men show up looking to honor a king. Herod, of course, would have been used to people looking to honor a king. But these Magi were not looking to honor him. Instead, they were searching for the King of the Jews. Herod is disturbed. King of the Jews? Who is this newborn King?

Herod then plots to trick the Magi into revealing the location of Jesus. He needs to kill the child. There can be no ruler to threaten him. But God, through Joseph, protects the baby Jesus, and the family is able to escape by becoming refugees in Egypt. When Herod realized that the Magi had tipped off Jesus' family, he ordered all children under the age of two to be killed.

There are many powers at work in the world. There will always be corrupt leaders and ego-driven rulers who seek to diminish the work and power of King Jesus. But these leaders, just like King Herod, will always fail. The baby boy that Herod sought to kill is the true everlasting King.

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

READ JOHN 1:4-5



CHRISTMAS IS A SEASON of light. In the middle of the cold winter season, we string lights on our Christmas trees. We decorate our yards. We burn candles. We put glittering ornaments on our trees and bake cookies with shimmering decorations.

Scripture describes Jesus as the light of the world. He is the true light, the light that the world has always needed. When everything around us seems like impenetrable darkness, Jesus' light enters the world. And the darkness cannot overcome it.

There are days when it surely seems like the darkness has overcome the light. There are days when verse 5 is hard to believe. God is light, but sometimes the darkness seems even more dark. As Jesus taught his disciples in John 16:33, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

The Christian life is a life of constantly contending with the darkness; both the darkness in the world, and the darkness within our own hearts. (Fighting our own darkness is often the more difficult battle!) On the days when you grow tired, remember the promise of John 1:5. The darkness has not—and will not—overcome.

THE WORD IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

READ JOHN 1:1-14



JOHN 1 IS A SCANDALOUS chapter in a sense. Who could possibly imagine the God of the world, the Creator of the universe, willingly wrapping himself in flesh, willingly reducing himself to a wailing baby, and choosing to enter this dirty, messy world? But that is exactly what happened! *The Message* translates verse 14, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

The Word, the second member of the trinity, the immortal God, was moving into *our neighborhood*. He was coming into our streets, into our towns, into our homes, into our hearts. We call this incarnation, but that is just a big word that describes God willingly becoming a person. That is the God we serve and follow, a God of humility who came to earth to save us and teach us how to live.

N. T. Wright reminds us to read the scriptures this way: “This is what it looks like when the Word becomes flesh. Or, if you like: Look at this man of flesh and learn to see the living God.”

Jesus came down into the dirt and complications of life on earth. He knew what it was like to be human. He knew what it was like to get sick, to feel pain, to be frustrated at the limitations of a body. This is scandalous! What kind of God would ever choose this?

Dorothy Sayers wrote, “He [Jesus] can exact nothing from man that he has not exacted from himself. He himself has gone through the whole of human experience—from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. . . . He was born in poverty and . . . suffered infinite pain—all for us—and thought it well worth his while.”



GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST

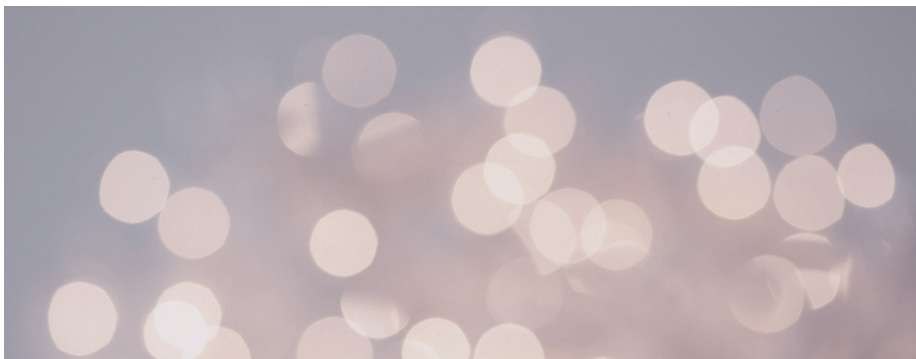
READ LUKE 2:1-15



THE HOST OF ANGELS who appeared to the shepherds outside Bethlehem brought Good News of great joy for all people. God's salvation has finally arrived! Today was the day! And this news, this Good News, would bring joy to all people.

God is glorified through the birth of his son, Jesus. And, where Jesus is, there is peace. Jesus is, after all, known as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 53). And while all can experience God's glory and peace, true peace comes through acceptance of Jesus. True peace comes to those "on whom God's favor rests." Advent reminds us that God's peace is offered as a gift to everyone, to those who choose to receive it.

In his book, *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer wrote, "The peace of God is first and foremost peace with God; it is the state of affairs in which God, instead of being against us, is for us. No account of God's peace which does not start here can do other than mislead."



SIMEON

READ LUKE 2:25-33



SIMEON HAD BEEN WAITING. For years, the elderly priest had been waiting to see the Messiah. Simeon was a good man. He was righteous. He did his best to follow God. His is very much an ordinary story of an ordinary man trying to live a life of following God. Because of his devotion, God had promised that he would not die without first seeing the Messiah.

So, Simeon is led to the temple in these latter years of life. And Jesus, now 8 days old, is brought to the temple to be consecrated to the Lord. Simeon, who has waited for so long, finally gets the fulfillment of the Lord's promise! He meets the Messiah. He gets to take the Savior of the world into his arms. And he praises the Lord for keeping his promise, for allowing him to meet the child.

Anna, too, has a story of faithful patience. She has been a widow for many years—much of her life, really—and spends her days and nights worshipping God in the temple. She, too, is rewarded for her faith by meeting the baby Jesus.

Perhaps you are in a season of waiting. Perhaps you are waiting to see if God will fulfill promises that he made to you. Maybe you are faithful in your waiting, or maybe your patience with God has started to falter. Take heart from the stories of Simeon and Anna, who waited on God and were rewarded for their faith.

WISE MEN

READ MATTHEW 2



WHO WERE THE MAGI? They were men who watched the skies, astronomers from the East, most likely Persia (modern day Iran), who saw a new star in the sky and followed it. These were not Jewish men. They were not men who knew the Jewish scriptures and were awaiting a sign of the coming Messiah. They were observant men, men who were astute enough to recognize a changing star in the sky and know that it had significance.

Not only were they wise in their study, but they were wise in their actions. When Herod tried to trick them into revealing the location of Jesus, they were warned in a dream not to return to him, and this gave Jesus' family time to flee to Egypt.

God uses unlikely characters in his stories: sweaty shepherds, frightened teenage girls, patient old men, and a tiny baby. Through their careful observations of the sky, Gentile astronomers came to know and worship the King of the universe and give him time to escape to Egypt.

These wise men were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus, one of many indications that God's grace and salvation is available to everyone, no matter your background. When you set up your Christmas nativity this year, remember that the wise men are a reminder in the story that God's grace, forgiveness, and peace is now in the world, for all people.

REST

READ MATTHEW 11:28-30



CHRISTMAS IS A TIME of year when many of us pile on too many commitments. We spend our days in a rush, buying presents, attending parties, cooking special meals, serving others, and honoring our traditions. It is a season in which we often take on more than we should. During a time when we should be focused on the gift of Jesus, we can burn ourselves out.

In Jesus' time, people were burned out on religion. They had piled so many religious requirements on themselves (and their leaders had piled them on), and they were tired. It was if they were carrying a heavy burden.

But Jesus' way is different. Jesus offers rest for the weary. His yoke is easy and his burden is light. What kind of rest do you need in this season? Do you need Sabbath rest, a break from the hustle and bustle of a crazy time? Do you need to slow down and refocus on the true meaning of Christmas?

Or, do you need deeper rest? Do you need rest that comes from knowing God's grace is available to you, and you don't need to tire yourself out from earning God's favor?

Jesus offers peace and rest to you. Come to him, all you who are weary.

HOPE AND KINDNESS

READ TITUS 3:7



WE OFTEN SPEAK ABOUT hope and kindness during the Advent season. At Living Word Community Church, we do something each year called Seasons of Service, where people from the church show love to the community by buying gifts, sharing with those in need, and doing acts of kindness.

Christmas is a time when we remember that God's great kindness, love, and mercy was lavished on us and, because of his example, we treat others the way that he has treated us. Of course, this is something that we remember and strive to do all year long, but it is especially close to our hearts at Christmas.

This Christmas season, how can we show kindness to others? How can we follow God's example of mercy and grace and extend that to those around us (especially when they don't deserve it!)? How can we bring the hope of Jesus to our community this season?

Take a moment to pray a prayer of gratitude for the grace and mercy and kindness you have received from God through the gift of Jesus. Then, take a moment and ask God to point out who needs your hope and kindness today.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).

LOVE

READ 1 JOHN 4:19



1 JOHN 4:19 LAYS OUT the case for unconditional love clearly. We love because God first loved us. Because we have experienced what it is like to receive that sort of unconditional love, we can then extend it to others.

In *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis wrote, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable . . . The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers . . . of love is Hell.”

When we love others, we open ourselves to the potential for hurt. We open ourselves up to be disappointed by others. And yet when we choose to love, we receive God’s blessing and affirmation, as well as knowing the joy of blessing others. God does not give us the option to avoid love. Instead, we love because he first loved us.

JOY

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18



DID YOU KNOW THAT some Bible scholars refer to these verses as the “impossible commands”? Can you imagine receiving this letter? Paul, your example, someone whom you respect, has written your church this letter, and you read these words: “Rejoice always.” Rejoice always? Who is always joyful? What was Paul trying to tell us with these impossible commands?

Paul is telling us that joy is part of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Joy is a mark of the Christian life. In his book, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, Eugene Peterson wrote, “Joy at the beginning, joy at the end, joy everywhere in between. Joy is God’s creation and gift. No authentic biblical faith is conceivable that is not permeated with it.” As believers in Christ, our faith is infused with joy.

But that joy does not mean that we skip through life, refusing to acknowledge anything sad or disappointing. For Christians, joy looks a little bit different. That is because our joy needs a source, and that source is Jesus. Henri Nouwen said that, “Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing—sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death—can take the love away.”

When Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians they were experiencing persecution because of their faith. And in the midst of this, in the midst of their severe suffering, Paul writes to them and tells them to “Rejoice always.” This is only possible with Jesus as the source of our joy. Trials will come, but they don’t have to steal your joy.

HUMILITY

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:6-7



DO YOU REMEMBER THE scene in *Finding Nemo* where the pelicans see the fish flopping around on the dock and start crying, “Mine! Mine! Mine!”? Life can sometimes feel like we are those pelicans trying to claim a fish. We are so concerned with what is owed to us, with what we can gather and claim and stake for ourselves. But Jesus offers a totally different way of living. Jesus, even though he is God, humbled himself to come to earth as a man. What an incredible statement! And what an incredible example for us to follow.

How can you follow Jesus’ example of humility? Like Christ, by not claiming what is owed to you, but putting others first. By submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Jesus was the Creator of the world, and he still humbled himself to come to earth as a baby. He humbled himself to become a man. He humbled himself even unto death on a cross.

We are not interested in serving others at times. Andrew Murray wrote, “The highest glory of the creature is in being only a vessel, to receive and enjoy and show forth the glory of God. It can do this only as it is willing to be nothing in itself, that God may be all. Water always fills first the lowest places. The lower, the emptier a man lies before God, the speedier and the fuller will be the inflow of the diving glory.” By willing to be nothing, God can take us and make us into a beautiful vessel, filled for his use.

IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

READ COLOSSIANS 1:15



COLOSSIANS 1:15 TELLS US that Jesus, the Son, is the image of the invisible God. Not merely *an* image, but *the* image. What this means, is that when we look at Jesus, we see God. We can follow the example he set during his time on earth. He loved others, he spoke truth to power, he healed and sacrificed and served.

We, too, bear the image of God. Not in the same way that Jesus is the image of God (since he himself is God), but because we are created in his image.

The people around us are also made in the image of God. How can you see God in those around you? Do you attempt to see God in those around you? What about your enemies? How would it change the way you feel about them to remember that they, too, are created in the image of God?



WEARING JESUS

READ ROMANS 13:11-13



THIS PASSAGE SHOULD SPUR you to action! It's an alarm clock, waking us all up from a nap. Salvation is here and Christians have work to do! Consider Paul's exhortation: "The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."

That means, we should be busy going about the work that God left for us to do. Love God. Love your neighbors. Don't wait to do something for someone else. Serve the poor. Speak truth to power. Spread Jesus' love around, everywhere you go. Wear the light of Jesus like armor, protecting you in everything that you do.

Colossians 3:12 reminds us to, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."

Wake up, sleepy Christians. There is work to be done.





GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO ET IN TERRA PAX HOMINIBVS

SALVATION IS HERE!

READ JOHN 3:16



JOHAN 3:16 IS ONE of the most well-known passages in all of scripture. Even if you aren't a Christian, it's likely that you've encountered it somewhere. A national clothing chain prints it on their shopping bags. A well-known football player painted it on his face during games. People have it posted it in social media bios, printed it on bumper stickers, and pasted it on billboards.

It's well-known for good reason, because it sums up the heart of God's rescue mission. It sums up the meaning of Christmas, the meaning of Easter, and the purpose of Christ's coming to earth.

It was all for the love of us. A child—for us!

In the *Jesus Storybook Bible*, Sally Lloyd-Jones describes this love as a *Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love*. God's salvation is here, and it is available to everyone! It's unconditional and it's forever. No earthly love could ever compare to the love that Jesus has for you.

In the midst of presents and eating and celebrations today, don't forget to express your deep gratitude to God for his love to you this Christmas, and each and every day.

Merry Christmas, Living Word.

God's readiness to give and forgive is now public. Salvation's available for everyone! We're being shown how to turn our backs on a godless, indulgent life, and how to take on a God-filled, God-honoring life. This new life is starting right now, and is whetting our appetites for the glorious day when our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, appears. He offered himself as a sacrifice to free us from a dark, rebellious life into this good, pure life, making us a people he can be proud of, energetic in goodness.

—Titus 2:11-14, MSG

LIVING WORD TRADITIONS

CAROLS

Singing Christmas carols is a beloved Living Word tradition. Like many churches, we love sharing the music of the season. We love how the music of this season moves us and tells of peace on earth and joy to a weary world.

Our Worship Arts team works hard, usually starting in October, to plan the special music for our Christmas Eve services. Our staff and dedicated ministry partners spend hours practicing and rehearsing to bring these music specials to our congregation. In addition to singing time-honored carols, our team works to introduce new music to the congregation each year. We are so thankful for the musicians of Living Word sharing their time and talents with our church community each Christmas.

What's your favorite Christmas carol? Do the lyrics have special meaning for you?

CANDLE LIGHTING

At each of our Christmas Eve services, we have a tradition of passing the candle flame, person to person, representing how we pass the light of Jesus from person to person. Then, in our darkened auditorium, we lift the lights high and sing "Silent Night" as a church family. The moment is a special one for many Living Word attendees, moving many to tears.

Light is a recurring theme in the Christmas story, from the star that led the Magi to find Jesus, to the Advent candles that many Christians light on the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day. At Living Word, passing the candle flame from person to person is a special time of coming together as a church family.

How can you share the light of Jesus this Christmas?

SEASONS OF SERVICE

At Living Word, we are always looking for ways to tangibly reach out to our local community and follow the example of Jesus in serving others. During the Christmas season, Living Word shares the love of Jesus with our less fortunate neighbors in the York community by giving gifts and serving through outreach opportunities. Having just celebrated Thanksgiving, we acknowledge how blessed we are and naturally want to reach out to bless those around us.

We have Seasons of Service opportunities year-round, but they are especially sweet at Christmas. We provide gifts for local children's homes and afterschool programs, pack shoeboxes to send around the world for Operation Christmas Child, and provide gift cards to teen mothers in York City. Groups from Living Word ring the bell for Salvation Army donations outside of local department stores. Through our partnership with Servants, handy volunteers show up to make small repairs in the homes of those in need. We also help set up a toy shop for children with incarcerated parents.

If you would like to be a part of our Christmas Seasons of Service, please check the website for more information.

How can you serve with your time and/or financial resources this Christmas?



CHRISTMAS EVE OFFERING

For more than three decades, Living Word Community Church has had a Christmas tradition that is one of our favorite ways to serve together.

Each year we raise money to give to local and global organizations that work with the most vulnerable people. We prioritize organizations that work with women and children, people living in poverty, the homeless and hungry, those in recovery, and others. And the best part? We give away every cent of every dollar raised.

We have so many partnerships with local leaders who lead effective organizations to get vital resources to those people who have the greatest need. We are deeply committed to York County and these organizations make a tremendous impact here.

We give away every dollar donated. There are no administrative costs. Your gift to our Christmas Eve offering is part of the thousands of other donations given. They all add up to a great deal of resources to bless many, many people. And you know your one gift is going to a wide variety of worthy organizations, both locally and around the world.

It is a team effort of generosity that makes a local and global impact.

This is what Christmas is all about—the story of giving. God gave his son, Jesus, for the world. We give generously, and often sacrificially, because God first gave Jesus.

Each year the focus of the Christmas Eve offering changes a bit. Some years we have more of a focus on global needs. In other years, the focus is more local. Every year we provide gifts in some combination to both global and local groups. Visit the Living Word website at LWCCYork.com/missions throughout the month of December and watch the videos that promote the groups we will support this year.

We invite you to be part of this great tradition at Living Word. Pray about the gift you will give to those in need this year. We welcome you to be part of blessing others this Christmas.

There are three ways you can give a gift for the Christmas Eve offering:

- ☞ Bring or mail a check to Living Word Community Church and note in the memo: Christmas Eve Offering. On Sundays, you can drop the check in the red boxes on the wall in the back of the auditorium.
- ☞ Give online at LWCCYork.com/give and select Christmas Eve Offering in the drop-down menu.
- ☞ You can also give a cash donation at one of our Christmas Eve services.

Thank you!

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Living Word Community Church is a grace-filled church
helping followers of Jesus flourish and reaching
our community with the love of God.

LWCCyork.com



LIVING WORD COMMUNITY CHURCH

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