



THE LORD
Comes

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS DEVOTION BOOK

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Advent Meditation

For use individually or as a family

(If using an Advent wreath, light the appropriate candles)

Leader: Jesus Christ is the Light of the World.

Group: The Light no darkness can overcome.

Leader: Stay with us Lord for the hour is late

Group: And the Day is almost over.

Leader: Be our light and scatter the darkness

Group: And hear our prayer and praise.

Read the day's devotion and prayer.

(Optional—After the prayer at the end of the devotion, have everyone share a short special prayer—thanking God for something, asking God for help or healing for someone, or a simply word of praise that the Lord comes to save you!)

Complete the day's "Activity." Then read the closing blessing:

Leader: May our Lord Jesus come quickly by his grace, with his power, in his glory.

Group: Amen.

Other Devotion options:

- Sing a verse or two of your favorite Advent or Christmas hymn during your devotion time (perhaps at the beginning or as a closing)
- If you have children, seek to include them in the devotion—have a child read the Bible passage or the closing prayer.
- In your prayers, include the weekly advent prayer listed at the beginning of each week. Or use Luther's Morning / Evening Prayer as a closing prayer after the blessing.



FIRST WEEK OF
Advent

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Protect us by your strength and save us from the threatening dangers of our sins; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Sunday—November 27th

The Promise of a Savior

Genesis 3:15

Did God really say...?" With that question the serpent sparked destruction. The woman and her husband, who was with her, doubted God. They ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result they got to know evil; they got to know death.

They became ashamed of their bodies. Their children would be doomed to death, experiencing death in their first two sons—the murderer and the murdered. The serpent was sparked destruction and deserved to be crushed.

So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel."

The woman and her husband were filled with shame. They were facing what would be centuries of suffering and death. They heard God's curse. While that's not often the way we think of these words, they are a curse to the serpent. They were not spoken to the woman or her husband. They were not spoken to you. This was a curse spoken to the serpent. The offspring of the woman would be God's curse to the serpent and his promise for you.

Jesus Christ, born of the woman, died for you and crushed the serpent's head, just as promised. He is the enemy of the serpent, the end of the serpent's power. In Jesus' life and death, God has provided a covering for your shame.

In Jesus, the woman got more than just an offspring and a new name (Eve means the mother of the living). She received the promise of eternal life over death, just as God promised.

PRAYER:

Dear promised Savior Jesus, you conquered the serpent for us. Prepare our hearts for the celebration of the mystery of your birth that, in humility and joy, we may rejoice in the promise you fulfilled. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Read the second article of the Apostles' Creed and explanation from the Small Catechism.

God is Called Upon to Save Us

Isaiah 64:1-9

Isaiah passionately calls out to God, **“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you.”** While we might want God to come down and make the earth tremble in fear of his judgment, that is a very serious thing to ask. On account of how we have misused God’s name, we should be considered his enemies who quake before him. When we continue to sin, he has every right to be angry with us. Because of our unrighteous and filthy actions, we should be removed from his presence like a shriveled leaf that the wind blows away. How foolish it would be to join Isaiah in asking God to come down.

So, how could Isaiah call on the Lord to come. **‘How can we be saved?’** Isaiah calls on the one who is not only a just God, but a gracious Father... the God who helps his people and does not remember their sins forever. That’s the God whom Isaiah calls to come. We do too. And he did. He came down and the mountains did not tremble. Hardly anyone noticed but some shepherds out in a field. He came down wrapped in flesh and swaddling clothes, and was placed in a manger. He came not to judge us and give us what we deserve. He came to suffer what we deserved in our place. He came to forgive sins which would not be remembered forever.

Jesus became guilty for all of our sins, including the filthy acts that we deem righteous. Jesus’ clothes were torn. He experienced the anger of man and the wrath of God. Yet in Jesus’ death God paid for sin, sin that was blown away like shriveled leaves in the wind. He was punished as God’s enemy so that we would be forgiven.

So yes, with Isaiah, we can passionately call out to God. This Advent season we call to the God who came down in the flesh—our Lord Jesus – Jesus answers that prayer by coming to us in Word and Sacrament to deliver forgiveness for our sins. And when he returns again on the clouds to judge the living and the dead, we can lift up our heads with joy. In Jesus, we are not guilty. We are saved from our sins.

PRAYER:

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, Savior and judge of the world, rend the heavens and come down with your comforting message of forgiveness. Allow us to live lives confident of your salvation and fear from the fear of a guilty conscience. Strengthen us by your Holy Spirit to give you glory in all our days of waiting for your return. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Isaiah wrote, **“For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down and the mountains trembled before you.”** Make a list of the awesome things that God did for Israel before Isaiah’s time and a list of the awesome things he has done for you in your time.

Tuesday—November 29th

The Lord Comes with Righteousness to Save

Isaiah 11:5

Judges and juries can only judge based on what they see and hear. It's all they have. They listen to the facts and look at the evidence presented in order to render a correct verdict. As part of the facts and evidence they may see pictures of people, videos of the events, and may even visit the crime scene. All the evidence is taken into account. The judge and jury also consider the believability of the witnesses and testimonies. After all the evidence and facts are presented, they announce a verdict. By that point the defendant has no say in the matter. The defendant is either declared guilty or not guilty.

When we hear that the Lord comes with righteousness, we might get worried. The Lord Jesus far exceeds any judge or jury in knowing exact facts. He knows every single sin we've ever committed. He doesn't need to hear from witnesses. There's no need for Jesus to see pictures of the scenes of our sins. We committed them and he knows it. His righteousness allows him to know with perfect clarity that we aren't holy as he demands us to be. Our unrighteousness, imperfection, and sinfulness are completely opposite of his righteousness. The verdict is absolute. We're guilty.

However, it's great news to hear that the Lord comes with righteousness to save. The single shoot coming up from the stump of Jesse doesn't judge by what he sees or hears. Instead, he takes his righteousness, which is his alone, and credits it and he credits his righteous decisions to the account of poor sinners on earth. Jesus is on the side of those suffering from sins. Your sinful weakness is addressed by his justice. Absolute justice is carried out by the one on whom Spirit of the Lord rests. The one who is righteous comes to save sinners in need of righteousness. Jesus comforts you with forgiveness. Jesus comes to give his righteousness so that you are declared righteous. And in this, the Lord saves you.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus thank you for coming with righteousness to save me. You were perfect and deserved the verdict of not guilty. But you came to take my place. By your life you assume my guilty verdict so I might be declared righteous and not guilty. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Think through the courtroom characters. If the courtroom were God's courtroom, who would be each of the positions? Why is that comforting?

Wednesday—November 30th

The Lord Takes Away the Punishment of His People

Zephaniah 3:14-18

Kids seem to know when punishment is coming their way. They have a keen sense for it. That's usually because they've just done something their parents told them they shouldn't be doing. Maybe they played catch with the ball in the house and broke something. Maybe they ran on the pool deck, fell, and hurt themselves. When kids do something wrong they know eventually they'll be punished.

We have the same feeling when we do things against the Lord, our God. Our sense of punishment might have changed as we have gotten older, but we don't lose the sense of when punishment is coming our way. We were supposed to honor our government officials but instead we tore down their reputation. We weren't supposed to lie but we told the boss lies anyway. God wants us doing certain things which we don't do. And God demands that we not do certain things which we do. For every sinful action against the Lord, we're like kids waiting for parents to return from work. We're waiting for the punishment. It's coming, we just know it.

Zephaniah had been quoting the Lord. Suddenly, the prophet broke in and shared news so wonderful that he just had to get it out. The people needed to stop and consider what was true for them. The Lord had taken away their punishment. They deserved the punishment. God took it away. Now, you stop and consider this wonderful news! The Lord has taken away your punishment. You deserved it; and in love for you the Lord removed it. The threat is no longer there. Not only do you have forgiveness of your sins, but the Lord is with you and takes delight in you. Having removed the punishment for our sins, the Lord, the Lord looks at you with rejoicing. He sees the one he loves, and the one he has saved.

How can God take your punishment like this? Sin and guilt must be removed. The Christ child whose coming we await is the payment for our sins and guilt. In Jesus, all the consequences for all your sins are gone. God is present among you and with you. You can be happy because God is happy. The Lord has taken punishment away from his people.

PRAYER:

Lord God, you promised that sin and guilt would be taken away. Now, because of Jesus, I see the benefit of his saving work in my life. You removed my punishment. I live with you and you love me. I can smile today, knowing my punishment is all gone. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

List some punishments you have received. Why did you deserve them? Compare these consequences at home or work to punishment God could give but has taken away in Jesus.

Thursday—December 1st

The King Comes to Save

Zechariah 9:9-12

No one traveled quite like a king. Chariots, armed guards, and horses all accompanied the king when he traveled. The king would even ride on the horse to signal to everyone his power and importance. But not the king to whom Zechariah pointed. When the people looked forward to this king's arrival, they should do it looking for a king on a donkey. They would be looking for a humble king.

Humility rarely impresses. The power position, parades of followers on social media, glamour, fame. These impress us. However, humility doesn't necessarily mean a lack of power. It just means that power isn't on display. Humility doesn't mean a lack of care for oneself. It means considering others more important. Humility doesn't flaunt success or status. Humility willingly takes the lower position. Because of this, humility isn't always attractive to us. Shamefully, the humble and weak are often ignored by us.

Humility would be the sign that the promised King had arrived. The people were to rejoice when they saw the humble coming king. He would come to observe human history, not from above, but by actually getting into it. He would come fully righteous, perfect before God. He wouldn't wait for people to come to him. He would restore his people to a right relationship with their God.

On Palm Sunday, the king came into Jerusalem. Zechariah is talking about that event. But his words can just as well apply to the arrival of the king to this world. Jesus entered human history. Jesus came perfect and righteous. He didn't wait for you to come to him. In love Jesus came to you. He restored you to God. When Jesus arrived in Bethlehem he already was the kind, humble yet victorious King. He was weak, yet completely strong. Jesus arrived bringing peace between you and God, peace because Jesus, the king, came to save.

PRAYER:

King Jesus, prepare our hearts to once again receive you as king even as you come as a little baby. Give us faith to trust that, although you looked humble, weak, and dependent on others, you were in fact the victorious king. We praise you for your humility and the peace that comes because of you. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Consider the peace you have with God. Make a list of friends and family members who don't know that peace like you do. What could you do to share with them how that peace makes you feel?

Friday—December 2nd

The Light Comes

Isaiah 9:1-2

It is the season of darkness in the northern hemisphere, with the sun absent for the majority of each day. Throughout history this ominous seasonal darkness has evoked fear. The pre-Christian inhabitants of North America believed that the fleeing sunlight was their sun-god fleeing from them. How difficult it must have been to wait and not lose hope, wondering whether their distant, fleeing god would return to bring light, life, and warmth.

Darkness and night still have the power to evoke fear. Darkness still represents evil, chaos, loneliness, despair, and death. We fear what we cannot see and what we do not want to see. We fear heartbreaking news we never saw coming and never desired.

The prophet Isaiah was called to give some breaking news—heartbreaking news—to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. Isaiah shared the dark reality of their near future. The land that God had promised to his chosen ones would be attacked and possessed. The chosen nation would no longer be an autonomous nation. God's chosen people would be scattered. They were left to **"look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom... thrust into utter darkness"** (Isaiah 8:22).

Yet, Isaiah also called on the people of Jerusalem and Judah to look past that fearful gloomy future, past centuries and generations to come, and past their familiar land. He called on them to look with sure hope to the north in Galilee where a great light would one day dawn. In Galilee, the Savior would come to shine through the evil, chaos, loneliness, despair, and death of this dark world.

Centuries later, that great light came to conquer darkness. We do not have an absent, distant, or fleeing God. We have the Son who entered this dark world to bring light, life, and warmth to all of our dark days and seasons. When we do see gloom and distress, we do not lose hope. The light of Jesus points our eyes to the skies as we wait for him to come again and bring us to our bright future in heaven.

PRAYER:

Lord God, may the light of your Son shine on all my days and in all my ways. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Light a candle to celebrate Jesus as your ultimate light to brighten all your dark days and seasons.

Saturday—December 3rd

Reflect

Matthew 4:12-16

The Welsh poet W.H. Davies posed the question, “What is life if full of care, we have not time to stand and stare?” How often the significant escapes our notice because we are too preoccupied with the insignificant! That could be the case with even the great Light of whom Isaiah prophesied. The significant is the Light of the world entering this world darkened by sin and death. But how quickly even that can be overshadowed by the insignificant.

It was no different while the Light of the world was walking in this world. In Galilee, many first saw the Light of our Savior, including the first disciples. But not everyone stopped to stand and stare at the Light of the world then or there either. Rather than noticing the wonderment of a great Light, they noticed that he was a seemingly insignificant local carpenter's son from Nazareth, a brother, a relative, a fellow Galilean. Sadly, for many, the wonderment was missed.

Maybe it's not surprising that the wonder of light is missed. The same happens with light which is easily deconstructed into properties of intensity, wavelength, particles, and speed. A rainbow is less marvelous when it is explained by water particles and light refraction. The light of fireflies at night loses its mystique and romanticism when seen as a simple chemical reaction. And our experiences from living in this darkened world can leave us disappointed and disenchanted with Jesus. His dawning light can be so rarely seen in our lives shadowed by sin and death.

Maybe it is time to stand and stare this Advent season. These scientific explanations of light cannot begin to reduce the miracle of light. So it is also with our Savior Jesus. The light of our Savior can be ignored and overlooked, but cannot be reduced to mere explanation. Stop to stand and stare at this Light - the Word made flesh. Stand and stare at the author, the bringer, and the source of light, even if he seems to just be the son of a carpenter from Nazareth. Take time to stand and stare at what your God has done for you. For you he perfectly lived, innocently died, and gloriously rose so that, when you start to feel disappointed and disenchanted in this dark world, you can always see his great light. Isaiah's prophecy is not just fulfilled in Jesus' work and words in Galilee, but also in you who see your Savior in his Word. Do not pass over the significance of that miracle. Reflect on it. Reflect it to others.

PRAYER:

Jesus, help me never to lose the wonderment of what you have done for me. Be my light in this dark world. Use my life to point others to your light so that they too may see. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Personally invite someone walking in the darkness of unbelief to your congregation's Christmas services.



SECOND WEEK OF
Advent

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Sunday—December 4th

Comfort

Isaiah 40:1-2

"I don't like this anymore than you do." How many parents have said this to their children through their bedroom door, as their child furiously sits in bed? Has any child ever really believed those words? As a child it is easy to believe that your parents get some strange satisfaction from disciplining their child. It is assumed that they enjoy sending their children to their rooms or taking away the Xbox. But then those children grow up. They too become parents and stand on the other side of the bedroom door and realize something – it's true. Disciplining your children is often as hard on the parents as it is on the children, but still they do it. They have to. Otherwise, their kids would never see the truth about their actions.

Israel had done some terrible things. They had ignored the way God called them to live as the people of Israel. They had abandoned the true God for false gods. They too had to see the evil they had done or they would be lost forever. So God allowed them to go into captivity. He allowed them to be defeated by an enemy and be carried away from their homes. He too didn't like seeing them suffer, but desperately wanted them to see the danger of their actions.

God can't hold it in forever. Like a parent who can't wait for his child's punishment to be over so they can go out and play basketball together on the driveway again, God bursts forth with one word – Comfort. He can't tell them it's not a big deal. It is. Their homeland would be completely destroyed. He can't tell them it will all be better in the morning. Their captivity would last 70 years! But he could tell Israel that **"her hard service has been completed"**. It would end. He could tell Israel that **"her sin has been paid for"**. All that Israel had done would be paid for in Jesus' death and resurrection.

And these are words that God speaks to you today. No matter what you've done or who you've hurt or how much the consequences of your actions hurt you. Your hard service will be completed – it will end. Your sin has been paid for – it is forgiven in Jesus. And one day in heaven, you will receive from the Lord twice as much good as the bad you've done. Why? Because he loves you more than any parent ever could.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, we know that you love us even more than our own parents. In spite of our sin, you have forgiven us in Jesus. Whether we are struggling because of our own actions or just because we live in a sinful world, help us to remember that you forgive us. And that the good we have in Jesus outweighs all the bad we face in life. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Think of a time you got into trouble. Ask your parents how they felt about it? Remind each other of your forgiveness.

Monday—December 5th

God and His Blessings

Genesis 22:15-18

Do you remember your first day of school? Not just this year, but the first day you ever went to school? You were probably a little nervous. It is scary to leave behind your parents and go to a new place with a new teacher. Your parents were probably nervous too. Because it is hard to take someone you love and hand them over to someone else.

But can you imagine being in Abraham's shoes? Isaac was not only his son, but he was the only son he had with his wife Sarah in 100 years of living! He was the child of the promise through whom the promised Savior would be born. And then God comes to Abraham and tells him to give Him Isaac. Not by dropping him off at a school, but by sacrificing him on an altar. Can you imagine?

Abraham walked up that mountain with Isaac, made an altar, tied him up, and drew his knife to sacrifice him when God stopped it. He didn't want Abraham to kill Isaac. He just wanted Abraham to remember who God was. God knew that Isaac could very easily have become an idol for Abraham – something he loved more than God.

We do that with God's blessings all the time. God blesses us with a good job, a nice house, a great family and we begin to love those things more than the God who gave them. God didn't want Abraham to be tempted to do the same with Isaac. So God made him choose. He made him choose between his son and his God. In doing so, Abraham remembered the difference between God and his blessings.

God didn't do that for His own sake. He did that for Abraham, Isaac, and us. We are the ones blessed through Abraham. Jesus would eventually be born through the family tree of Abraham and Isaac. He would save the world from sin. And he would do it by doing for us what he asked of Abraham. God would trade the life of His only Son for you. Only nobody would stop him. Jesus would go to the cross, suffer, and die, so that you would be forgiven and live with God in heaven forever. God traded the life of his only son for you and he won't leave your side. Remember the difference between God and the blessings he gives.

PRAYER:

Loving Father, you traded the life of Jesus so that we could be your children. Forgive me for the times that I care more about the things you've given me than I care about you. Through your Word, remind us of the love you showed us in Jesus. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

List your three favorite things. How can they become idols?

Tuesday—December 6th

Forgive and Forget

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Forgive and forget. A noble goal, but that's not always the way it works in our world. A young woman who in a moment of anger betrayed her friend's secret to the whole class might wish that her friend would forgive and forget. A young man who stands in the courtroom because of one terrible decision might wish that the judge would *forgive and forget*. The problem is, it isn't likely to happen. One of the hardest facts about earthly living is that when people know our sins, they may never forget them. However, the worst consequence for our sin is not earthly punishment from earthly people. Instead, it is eternal punishment from an almighty God, who should rightfully send us to hell for each and every sin we have done.

As the Israelites sat in exile in Babylon, they had plenty of time to reflect on their sins. If only they hadn't worshipped idols again and again. If only they hadn't completely ignored God's Word spoken through his prophets. But they had done those things – and there was no way that a perfect God was going to forget about it. They deserved to lose not only their place in the Promised Land, but also their place in eternal life.

But instead of that, God sent the prophet Jeremiah to speak beautiful words of comfort to the Israelites, to you, to me, and to every person in the world who feels guilty for sin. Through Jeremiah God said, **"I will forgive their wickedness, and will remember their sins no more."** Because God sent Jesus to take the sins of the world upon himself and die for them on the cross, God considers the sins of his children to be really and truly gone. So far gone, it's as if he doesn't even remember what they were!

Let this be your comfort as you look back at a life which, like mine, is far too full of sins, regrets, and failures. Even if there are earthly consequences for your sins, even if there are people who will never forget what you've done, in God's sight your sins have already been paid for and are blotted from his memory. Each morning when you wake up and each evening when you go to bed you are now righteous in Christ Jesus.

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for your faithful love which forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more. Help us to live each day in the peace of your forgiveness, and show the same forgiveness to others in our lives. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Have each person in the family write down a sin they've done on a scrap of paper, fold it up, and put it into the bowl. Then light them on fire and let them burn completely to ashes. Because of Jesus, this is how God views our sins – they are so completely obliterated that he doesn't even see or remember them anymore.

Wednesday—December 7th

The Word of our God Will Stand Forever

Isaiah 40:6-10

As fall goes on, the natural world undergoes noticeable changes. Temperatures drop, days shorten, and the green leaves of summer become yellow, orange, and red. Then they turn brown, fall off the trees, and die. Same goes for the grass, flowers, and bushes. The ground becomes full of dead leaves and branches, which in many parts of the world are then covered with snow.

As life goes on, the human body also undergoes noticeable changes. Hair thins, wrinkles spread, eyes grow dim, and backs begin to stoop. Finally, inevitably, the last season of life draws to a close and we die. Our bodies are placed into a coffin or urn, or scattered into the wind. As God told Adam, “**dust you are, and to dust you shall return.**”

The grass withers, the flowers fade, and because of our sin, so do our bodies. And yet the Word of the Lord stands forever. In that Word, we are taught that death is not the way it should be. Death is not God’s plan for his people. And so the Word of the Lord, written down in the Bible, details God’s plan from all eternity to save us from death. The Word of the Lord tells us about Jesus, whose perfect life and innocent death have changed everything. In him we have forgiveness of all our sins, an earthly life free from guilt, and a resurrection to eternal life in heaven.

Fall comes every year. You can’t stop it. You can’t stop death either. And yet, because of Jesus, death doesn’t scare us anymore. The Word of the Lord has given us a solution for fear, an answer for death, and a reason for sure and certain hope. By the grace of God, just like the Word of the Lord, we too will “stand forever.”

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, our lives on this earth are just fleeting, tiny moments on the scale of eternity. And yet by giving your life in our place you given us the eternal gift of heaven. Help us to use our earthly lives to thankfully serve you. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Have each person pick one random item in the room. Then, discuss the “lifespan” of that item. Where did it come from/where was it made? How quickly will it break/wear out/be replaced? What happens to it then? (For example, you might track a kitchen plate from the factory, to the store, to your house, and then once it breaks, to the garbage can and the dump.) Eventually everything wears out and is destroyed. But in contrast, the Word of the Lord - and because of Jesus, our bodies - will stand forever!

Thursday—December 8th

The Lord our Righteousness

Jeremiah 23:5-6

I watched a documentary some time ago about the topography of Afghanistan. I thought Afghanistan was mountains and desert, but the documentary showed me valleys, rivers, plains, and exquisite natural beauty. It showed me a nation that looked a lot like our homeland. Sadly, though, Afghanistan is a war-torn nation. That beautiful land is razed, destroyed, and littered with mines. The point of the documentary is that *if* Afghanistan could have peace and order – their natural beauty would be showcased and they would become a tourist spot! Would you visit Afghanistan for your next family vacation?

The documentary was produced around 2014 when, for the first time in Afghanistan's history, power was transferred between two democratically elected men. There was promise of a new leader ushering in new prosperity for a war-torn land. There was hope that the new leader would rule wisely, bring safety, and restore prosperity. You should have heard how the documentary described the hope they had for their coming ruler!

Read again Jeremiah 23:5-6 and listen how the Prophet Jeremiah describes our coming King. Oh, the hope Christians have in our new King! We also live in a war-torn land filled with sin, strife, disease, and death. The glitz and glamor of this season cannot hide the spiritual hurt and sadness present in the hearts and lives of so many.

But our King comes! He is **the LORD Our Righteousness!** He comes not to bring earthly prosperity, safety, and rule, but righteousness that is ours by faith. He brings safety in His arms by faith and salvation for eternity by faith. This Advent season, we wait for our coming Lord who brings us His righteousness. What comfort!

Whether you live in Afghanistan or America, our rulers do not meet our hopes. But our Savior does. God the Father raised up this Righteous Branch, this Savior-King, who brings safety and security through the righteousness He provides.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing us comfort through your Word. Lead us to praise you for the gifts of righteousness, safety, and security you bring us each and every day. In your name we pray.

ACTIVITY:

Taking a spare sheet of paper, have the participant(s) draw what they imagine Afghanistan to look like on one half of the paper. On the other half, draw the safety/security we have by faith. Compare.

Do Not Fear! Your God Will Come

Isaiah 35:1-4

Two little boys like to dress up as superheroes in their home. Their mother has made capes and little masks that the boys can wear. The boys pretend that with their cape and mask they have super speed, super strength, and super smarts. They invent enemies that are stealing their toys or hiding in their room, and with the flowing cape, they rush in to save the day.

Those same boys cry out to their parents in the middle of the night, because the battery on their nightlights has burned out and their room is now completely dark. Now they are afraid – their capes are hanging up on their door, but they are afraid to get out of bed. “The monsters will get us,” they cry. How different the boys are during the day! They have no fear. At night, they are afraid to get out of their beds.

We too know fear. What are you afraid of? Getting everything ready before Christmas? Getting your schoolwork done on time? Getting through the season without a loved one? If only we had super smarts and strength to plow through our fears. But, I do not have a cape hanging on my door, and you probably don't either. Regardless of the masks we try to wear, there are things that frighten us, in the day and in the night.

Listen to the Prophet Isaiah speak concerning our fears: **Say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”**

God answers our fears with his promises. You God will come... he will save you. Our God will come to save us from this world of sin and death and sadness, and take us to his Heavenly Home. Our faith trusts in the promises of God, and what a promise he gives us here!

Our God will not leave us alone to handle our fears. Our God will not ignore us. Our God will come to strengthen our feeble hands, weak knees, and worried hearts with the promise of God's love in Christ our Savior.

PRAYER:

Holy Spirit, bring your comfort into our homes and lives through Your Word of promise. Remind us of God's strength and support during our fearful moment. Help us to look for the coming of our Savior. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Ask them what kind of superhero they would like to dress up as. Mention each superheroes kryptonite or weakness. Describe the security we have knowing that Jesus is on our side, and has no weaknesses!

Saturday—December 10th

New Heavens and a New Earth

Isaiah 65:17-19

Ask any parent, “Did I cry a lot when I was a baby?” It’s surprising how, as parents, you can forget so many things about your children’s life. But one moment that is seared in a parents’ memory is the day or night their child could not stop crying. In that moment of complete helplessness, they send urgent prayers that God would bring comfort to the screaming child. The screaming continues and the father who has “had enough” of two hours of crying, asks mom to hold the child. The child who is literally exhausted from crying still makes little yelps because she doesn’t feel good.

We enter the world with cries, and often, we leave this world with cries. Crying, sadness, and pain are part of the human experience! You know that well. Yet, Isaiah describes a place without any cries, ever. **I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.**

Heaven is a place without tears. There is literally nothing to be sad about: there is no sickness or hurt, because sin has been removed. There is no heartache or pain, because we live with God who cares for us perfectly. There are no funerals or deaths, because those “**former things**” have passed away, Isaiah says.

Can you imagine an experience where you’ll never need to cry again? It is hard to imagine... but one day, soon, it will be our reality. God will gather us from this vale of tears and take us to His new Jerusalem, the Golden City in Heaven, where we will enjoy delight and rejoicing for all of our days.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, we look forward to the day you will rescue us from this evil world and bring us to our Heavenly Home. Preserve us in faith through your Word and Spirit that we hold firmly to your promises. Comfort us with the picture of a Heavenly Jerusalem when we suffer tears in this life.

ACTIVITY:

Have the family gather around the piano (or just YouTube the melody if you don’t have a piano or can’t play it) and sing Jerusalem the Golden ([Christian Worship #214](#) or [Christian Worship Supplement #728](#)). As you sing each verse, pause to comment on the truths of each verse. Have each person pick their favorite verse.

Take a spare sheet of paper and following the singing of the hymn, instruct each person to draw heaven according to their favorite verse. Share their drawings with the group.



THIRD WEEK OF
Advent

Hear our prayers, Lord Jesus Christ, and come with the good news of your mighty deliverance. Drive the darkness from our hearts and fill us with your light; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

A Branch of David's Family

Micah 5:2-4

The Lord was always doing things with the small, the insignificant, the unqualified. Every time he did so, he showed his power, his grace, and his love.

Sarah's womb was useless; Moses couldn't speak good; David was the least of the brothers from an average family, from a nondescript town – yet the Lord used them all to accomplish his will and advance his plan of salvation. In doing so, he brought comfort to his people. His use of the small, insignificant, and unqualified brought glory to His name and strength to His promise.

God says: "Little Bethlehem, you had a moment in the sun when Israel's great king was anointed within you, but the day is coming when David's greater Son will be born within your gates. As is fitting, he will come in meekness, but his power will far surpass that of the son of Jesse. He will rule for all believers and the foundations of his authority extend from eternity to eternity. Like David, he will be a shepherd king, full of tender love and concern for each member of his flock and also full of great power to guard and protect. With him you will live in safety and security. He will defeat your true enemies of sin and death and settle you in a peace of body and soul that will last forever."

Through the prophet Micah God made a promise to Little Bethlehem and to all the small, insignificant, unqualified sinners whom he would lead to cry out, "Lord, Save us!" in repentant faith.

God kept his promise to Bethlehem (as he kept his promise to you and your family) when he sent his Son to be born for you and to you. That Son is the shepherd king who laid down his life to rescue you from the threatening danger of your sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. Rejoice, for in Jesus God keeps his promises.

PRAYER:

Lord God, all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works come from you. Give to us, your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey your commandments. Defend us also from the fear of our enemies that we may live in peace and quietness, through the merits of Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Try to remember other small, insignificant, unqualified people or things that God has used to accomplish great things for us. Give thanks for them and recognize that he also uses us fragile clay jars to hold and share the good news of Jesus.

Prepare the Way!

Isaiah 40:3-5

Living in Atlanta, I pay attention to the news, particularly traffic reports. Traffic is awful here, especially when there are events downtown. When the US President paid a visit, the radio announcer warned, “Stay away from downtown!” because the secret service had blocked roads so the President’s ride from the airport was unobstructed.

A long, long time ago, kings would send messengers to tell the people, “Prepare the way for the king!” People would then grab shovels and buckets to level rough patches in the road.

Isaiah the prophet predicted something similar. **“A messenger will come to tell you the king is coming!”** God kept that promise and, 700 years later, sent John the Baptist, “the **voice in the desert.**” John preached, “Repair the roads!” - but he wasn’t talking about potholes. He wanted them to repair their hearts to receive Jesus as their Savior King.

Did you know that Isaiah was also predicting your pastor, parents, and everyone else who shares the Word of God with you? God sends them to say to you, **“Prepare the way! The king is coming!”** I need to hear this message as I prepare for Jesus’ arrival - not just in Bethlehem, but also as King on the Last Day. The King is coming to take us to his kingdom in heaven!

I need to hear this message because my heart often makes the road to welcome Jesus impassable. My sinful attitudes build mountains when I think, “I don’t really need to sit down with God’s Word today. I have so much to do. There’s the party to plan, the house to decorate (I want to win the subdivision Christmas contest this year!), the gifts to purchase and wrap, the project at work to finish before the end of the month. Besides, I’ve heard the Word before.”

Only Jesus can bulldoze those mountains away... and he does. When we hear the call to repent (from Isaiah, John, pastor, teacher, parent) then we will turn from those sinful attitudes toward the cradle and cross and empty tomb. We will turn to water and word, to bread and wine, body and blood, and know we will hear and receive God’s promise, “Your sins are forgiven.” There we see our Savior King, whose sacrifice plows down the mountains of your sin, whose blood fills in the potholes of your guilt and whose perfect life levels the roads of your hearts. He prepares your hearts to receive him as your king.

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus, as I prepare for you to arrive as my King, remove all of the obstacles that distract me from my focus on you. Bless the messengers you send with faithfulness. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Find a map of your town/city. Locate the nearest airport and map the easiest route (without using Google) for someone important to travel from the airport to your home.

Tuesday—December 13th

A Letter for You...

Luke 1:5-25

It seems all I have been doing for the past few months is writing letters. But ever since I lost my voice it is the only way that I can communicate with others. It's an incredibly frustrating thing for a priest like me to have to communicate this way. But regrettably, I have no one to blame but myself.

I (of all people) should have known better. My wife, Elizabeth and I have been faithful members of the church for many, many years. Over those years I have learned about the many marvelous things God has done for His people; how He parted the Red Sea when He delivered His people from Egypt, how He caused manna to fall from heaven as He provided for His people in the wilderness, and how He led His people in victory over the Canaanites when they entered the promised land.

I had learned about the many marvelous things God had done for His people. Yet – and I am ashamed to admit it - I did not believe He could do such marvelous things *for me*. I now know that I should have believed Gabriel. Despite my being an old man and my wife being well along in years, I should have trusted God's promise to give me a son - that He could do such a marvelous thing for me. I should have trusted that what God says is what God will do.

Dear reader, I pray you learn from my mistake. When God makes you a promise, no matter how marvelous that promise may seem to be (be it a promise to deliver you from slavery, provide in your time of need, or bring you into a promised land) I pray you trust God's promise. For He who has done such a marvelous thing for me, can do such marvelous things for thee.

Soon my wife will give birth to the baby God promised. I trust that he will go before the Lord in the spirit of Elijah and make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Soon, I will hold the fulfillment of God's promise and, if I have anything to say about it, his name will be John.

-Zechariah

PRAYER:

Dear heavenly Father, Just as you fulfilled your promise of a son to Zechariah so you have fulfilled your promise of a savior to us. Forgive us when we doubt the marvelous promises you make to us. Help us to see through the pages of scripture all the promises you have made and fulfilled. Help us to learn from them that what you say is what you will do. Fill us with trust as we prepare to celebrate your fulfilled promise of a Savior. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Write a letter to a friend, neighbor, or family member inviting them to join you at your church for Christmas this year as you celebrate God's fulfilled promise.

Wednesday—December 14th

Nothing Is Impossible for God

Luke 1:26-38

It is impossible to lick your elbow. Go ahead and try. While you are attempting (and failing) at that, try to tickle yourself. Did you laugh? While you are attempting (and failing) at that too, try to keep your eyes open the next time you sneeze. It's not going to happen.

Here's one more human impossibility. It is impossible for a woman to conceive and give birth to a child without a man being involved. So when the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would conceive and give birth to God's son, she asked a very logical question. **"How will this be?"** Gabriel answered that God would make it possible because **"nothing is impossible with God."**

It really doesn't matter if you can lick your elbow, tickle yourself, or keep your eyes open when you sneeze. That has no impact on your life. On the other hand, it absolutely matters that that we haven't lived as the holy and sinless people that God expects us to be, but still God did the impossible for us. He sent his own son born of a virgin and born under the law to live the perfect life that we haven't. He sent his son to die in our place so that we would be declared forgiven.

There is incredible comfort in this. You can always trust God's Word and promises no matter how impossible they sound. It sounded impossible that a virgin would conceive and give birth to God's own son. But then it happened! It sounds impossible that we could live in peace in a world full of sin and sorrow. But Jesus makes it happen! It sounds impossible that one day God will wipe every tear from our eyes and that there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. But Jesus will make it happen! Do you know how we know?

Nothing is impossible with God.

PRAYER:

Dearest Jesus, fill my heart with the comfort of your sure and certain promises. You were born, you lived, and you died for me that I might live and die in your forgiveness and peace eternally. Strengthen me in that certainty. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Read through (or recite!) the Apostles' Creed together. Focus especially on what we confess about Jesus and his work. It sounds impossible, but it is most certainly true!

Thursday—December 15th

Mary's Song and Ours

Luke 1:46-55

Some have estimated that 100 billion people have lived on this earth over the course of time. If half of those people were women, Mary had a claim which none of the other 50 billion women could make. She had a claim that not even queens and the most important women in history could make. Mary was chosen to be the mother of God's Son.

Curiosity might lead us to wonder, "Why did God pick her? What was so special about Mary?" If you listen carefully to Mary's own words, she is quick to point out that she there wasn't anything special about her. When she considers herself, she recognizes that she is a humble servant.

If you keep on listening to Mary, though, she does recognize that there is something special about her. She struggles to put her emotions into words when she says, "**My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.**" Did you catch it? The special thing about Mary was her God. She rejoiced in her Savior.

This is the first time that name "Savior" appears in the New Testament. Mary recognized that the child in her womb had importance for her personally and not just for her, but for all sinners. Her child was the Savior who would save the people from their sins. Her Savior was the reason she rejoiced and that all people would call her blessed.

Our Savior is the reason we rejoice and the reason we are called blessed too. He has purchased us with the price of his own precious blood. He has made us his chosen and blessed people through the waters of holy baptism. So when you hear Mary's song, sing with her. It's your song too!

PRAYER:

Lord God, my soul glorifies you and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior. You have been mindful of the humble state of your servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed. Continue to fill my heart with the joy of the great things you have done for me. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Go back through "Mary's song" and make a list of all the things she says about God or calls God. (Example – "**holy is his name**"). Which one on the list is your favorite?

Friday—December 16th

He Fulfilled His Promise to be with us

Matthew 1:18-24

A big part of marriage is companionship. Boy meets girl, girl meets boy, they like what they see. From there they learn about each other. If they're a match, eventually they get married – meaning they commit to being companions.

Joseph wanted that with Mary. You can imagine his disappointment, then, when **“before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.”** Of course, Joseph didn't know this was the work of God – he assumed she had been with another man, and so **“because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”**

Then God stepped in. He explained to Joseph what was going on. **“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”** Matthew tells us that **“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us.').”**

Joseph wanted to be with Mary, but he got more than he expected. Not only would he be with Mary, but God the Son, Jesus, would be with him. That was an incredible gift.

This is a gift you have received as well. When Jesus came to this world, he fulfilled his promise to be with us. He came not as our conqueror, but as our deliverer. He **“did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** (Matthew 20:28) He came to win our forgiveness on the cross and restore our relationship with God. Yes, when Jesus came to earth, fully man and fully God, he fulfilled his promise to be with us.

Yet, unlike marriages, this isn't “until death do us part.” Death cannot separate us from Jesus! Through faith in Jesus, he will be with us forever, and we will be with him forever.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, my sins separated me from you. I deserved to be apart from you forever in hell. Yet because of your great love for me, you came to earth as one of us. You lived the perfect life for my sake and bore my sins on the cross. Now, you promise to be with me forever, and someday take me to be with you forever in heaven. Thank you, Jesus! Amen.

ACTIVITY:

For the next week, try to establish a new habit. Whenever you feel stress, anger, loneliness, sadness, or fear, turn to Jesus in prayer and ask him, “Lord, fulfill your promise to be with me and give me peace in this time of trouble. Amen.”

Saturday—December 17th

He Fulfilled His Wise Promises

Isaiah 28:29

The Internet knows everything. (At least that's the way it seems.) Whatever you're project—cars, crafts, computers, cuisine—it's on the internet. You can find step-by-step plans for anything.

Well, almost. One thing you won't find on the internet is a sure-fire step-by-step plan to get rid of the guilt of your sins. You won't find a sure-fire, step-by-step plan to live the perfect life that God demands. Sure, you'll find plans that claim to get rid of guilt, or claim to help you live a morally perfect life. But those promises won't be fulfilled. Anyone who follows those plans will remain guilty and imperfect before God, liable for the eternal punishment of hell. (Turns out the Internet does not know quite enough.)

Our God really does know everything. He is all-knowing. He is all-wise. What's more, our all-knowing, all-wise God planned your rescue from guilt and punishment before the world ever began. Since only God could plan this and fulfill such wise promises, only he can reveal this plan to you and to me. Isaiah wrote about how God teaches us of his wise plan: **“All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, whose plan is wonderful, whose wisdom is magnificent.”** Later, believers wrote a song praising God for his wisdom in saving us. **“O Wisdom, you came forth from the mouth of the Most High and, reaching from beginning to end, you ordered all things mightily and sweetly. Come, and teach us the way of prudence.”**

So what is the way of prudence? Jesus once answered that question: **“to believe in the one he has sent”** (John 6:29), namely, to believe in Jesus himself. That's because Jesus alone could live perfectly, bear the punishment for sin, and conquer death. Only our all-wise God could dream up this plan and fulfill his promises. As we head into the final week before Christmas, believe that your Lord Jesus came in human flesh to fulfill his promises. He fulfilled his promises to save you from sin, death, and the devil, and he will return to fulfill his wise promise to bring you safely to your heavenly home.

PRAYER:

Dearest Jesus, all wisdom and goodness comes from you. You fulfilled your wise promises to save me. You alone, through your powerful Word, are able to make me wise for salvation. Lead me to always believe in you and trust in your wise and wonderful plan to save me from my sins through your death on the cross. In your holy name I pray. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Spend some time by yourself or with your family and read through Luke's account of Jesus' birth. You'll find it in Luke 1:26-56 and Luke 2:1-21. Which parts of this account strike you as showing God's wisdom? Why? Write down or discuss your answers.



FOURTH WEEK OF

Advent

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the burden of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Sunday—December 18th

O Come, Lord

Isaiah 33:22

Are you frustrated by the government? How do you feel when public servants betray the public's trust? Have you ever hoped for a leader who cannot stand corruption of any kind? Wouldn't it be nice to have a leader who will always punish evil? Look no further than God.

He gave his people his law. God made his expectations clear. The 10 Commandments show you how God expects you to treat him and everyone else. God can't turn a blind eye when his law is corrupted. You can't pretend you are free from corrupting God's law. God sees evidence of your sin in your words. God sees evidence of your sin in what you have done and left undone. God sees sin in your thoughts.

The LORD is your lawgiver and he is your judge. You have broken God's laws and deserve punishment. Where can you turn for help? Where can you find salvation? Look no further than the King of kings and Lord of lords. Your king shunned corruption and personal gain because he wanted to free the guilty more than anything else. Your king is not hidden in some far away palace. He is Emmanuel, which means God with us. He is with you today and he will be by your side forever.

Your King's greatest victory looked like his greatest defeat. He took up his cross to take away your punishment, because he loves you more than he loves himself. He gave up his life to give you a future in your heavenly home. Jesus promises to make everything right. He will even wipe the tears from your eyes.

Your judge comes to declare you not guilty in the sight of God. Rejoice!

PRAYER:

*Oh, Come, Oh Come, Oh Lord of might, Who to thy tribes from Sinai's height,
In ancient times did give the law, In cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel, Shall come to you, O Israel.*

ACTIVITY:

As a family, privately have a short order of Confession and Absolution, confessing your sins to Christ, confident that he has graciously forgiven you. You can find such an order, which also allows for the confession of specific sins, in Christian Worship, page 154.

O Come, Root of Jesse

Isaiah 11:10

If you have ever tried to get rid of a bamboo tree, you know it is hard work. You can remove every shoot and sapling, but that bamboo will return as long as it has its roots. Once the roots are in place, bamboo will grow and spread. The roots make bamboo difficult to contain.

God planted a promise in the Garden of Eden. God created humankind to be the crown of his creation, but they soon spoiled the fruit of his labor. Sin was passed down from generation to generation. From your own experiences you know sin has been a constant part of your life. Yet, God doesn't want people to suffer what their sins deserve, so he promised Adam and Eve a Savior from their offspring. That Savior would crush Satan's power and conquer sin's curse.

As new generations were born, God gave more details about his deeply rooted promise. The Savior would be a descendant of Jesse, the father of David. David's family tree is important; the Savior is attached to it. During the reign of David, his family tree looked healthy and strong. If you fast forward 500 years, it was a stump. The kingdom of Judah had been destroyed and no king in the line of David could be found.

But David's family tree had deep roots. God's promise never died. This promise's roots are far more persistent than bamboo's. Around 1,000 years after David, David's Lord was born to Mary. God kept his promise to send a Savior.

Jesus' work was successful. He suffered your punishment and pardoned your sin. He rose from the dead and promises you paradise. He sends his Holy Spirit in God's Word and grafts new people into his family tree. The roots run deep. His family tree towers over every other dynasty. Best of all, Jesus' family tree includes you. Through faith, he grafted you to be a part of God's family, and a part of his glorious victory.

PRAYER:

*O, come, O Root of Jesse, free Your own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell your people save, And bring them vict'ry o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to you, O Israel! Amen;*

ACTIVITY:

Jesus has roots. So do you. For your activity: 1) Trace your family tree and note your country of origin. 2) Discover how your ancestry has been grafted into God's family. What prominent missionaries first brought Christianity to your culture? Try to find the opportunities and challenges those missionaries faced. 3) Pray that God would help equip you to assist efforts to connect the next generation to Jesus' family tree. Look for opportunities to serve in your family and church.

Tuesday—December 20th

O Come, O Key of David

Isaiah 22:22

In the days of King David, one of the closest advisors to the king was in charge of the key to king's treasury. With that key fastened to the stately sash on his shoulder he could hand out the wealth of the kingdom. As each new king ascended the throne in Israel, a new treasurer was given the key. You can imagine how some of those treasurers were wise and sensible with the king's treasures; while others might have used the key for self-serving purposes.

None of us deserves to go near God's treasury of forgiveness and eternal life. We know how we have mishandled the treasures God has given us. We know our own self-serving ways with the good gifts God gives us. The door to God's treasury is like the twenty-ton door to the United States Treasury at Fort Knox. We must admit - we are too weak to open the door to God's treasures in heaven, let alone go near his treasures.

Isaiah prophesied that the key to God's treasury would come to the perfect treasurer, **"What he would open, no one could shut and what he shuts no one can open."** Jesus is God's perfect treasurer. By coming to this earth, living a humble and perfect life, then dying on the cross and rising from the dead he opened God's treasury. He paid for our sins of mishandling God's treasures and now he is alive he says, "Look, the treasures of forgiveness and eternal life are yours." He says, "No matter how hard the devil and your conscience try to convince you that the door is shut because of this sin or that sin, know that the door is open."

Jesus leaves us with the comfort in the last book of the Bible that he holds the **"key of David"** (Revelation 3:7). God fulfills his promises. His Son has opened the door to the treasures of heaven. They are yours.

PRAYER:

Lord, let this be my refrain today as I get ready to celebrate Jesus' birth, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel and open wide our heavenly home."

ACTIVITY:

Sing "Jesus Loves Me This I Know." Emphasize in Verse 1, "I am weak but he is strong." Emphasize in Verse 2 "heaven's gates to open wide... Let this little child come in..." Talk about when these might be appropriate words to for a child or an adult to think about.

Wednesday—December 21st

O Come, O Morning Star

Malachi 4:2

What joy there will be for those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin, death, and eternal darkness in hell. Their joy will be like that of young calves in the spring. In cold climates, young cattle will often be cooped up in barns all winter in order to protect them from the bitter cold. When they get released from their stalls in the spring, they run and kick and dance all over the place. Their joy cannot be contained.

That joy will be ours when the Son of Righteousness, God's Son, returns on the great day we call Judgement Day. Just as the sun rises and pierces the darkness with light and brings warmth and life, so it will be when Jesus returns to this world. He will get rid of the darkness and bring healing and help to his people.

Even now that joy is ours. But we say, "How do I experience that joy today? Darkness looms around me. Enemies of the faith surround me. Temptations nag at me. The darkness of death seems everywhere." Even amidst the gloom there is a glow. Even now, amidst the darkness, we can see his rays of hope. Do you see the sun of righteousness and his rays of hope? His word of salvation tells us of his first coming, it pierces the darkness and announces that our guilt is gone. He heals us of our sin. In the dark days of loneliness, the promises of his presence still shine brightly. In days of doubt, he warms us with the assurance that our souls are safe and secure forever.

The light that God promised has come into this world. He is coming again. His name is Jesus. He brings unending healing and joy.

PRAYER:

Lord, without your light, we grope in darkness. Thank you for directing our eyes to the rays of hope you give us in Jesus, your Son, our righteousness. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Sing together the 3rd verse of [Hark! The Herald Angels Sing](#):

Hail, the heav'nly Prince of Peace! Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, Ris'n with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, Born that we no more may die,
Born to raise us from the earth, Born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"

O Come, King of Nations

Isaiah 9:6

Every year growing up my parents would buy one of those Advent calendars that had chocolates inside of it. At the end of each day, one of us kids would open the appropriate door and savor the chocolate inside (even if it tasted a little bit like cardboard). That calendar was important to us because it meant Christmas was coming soon. With each calendar door ripped open, with each chocolate digested, the anticipation would grow. We wanted Christmas to come.

In Isaiah 9:6, God speaks to his children and tells them, CHRISTmas is coming. God promises a child would be born, a Son would be given. You can call him **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace**. For thousands of years, God's children had been eagerly anticipating the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior. Here in Isaiah God tells them, he's coming. Can you imagine the anticipation of God's people? They wanted the Christ to come.

But what's the motivation behind this anticipation? For my siblings and I, as I'm sure you can guess, the reason we were so excited for Christmas to come was we wanted presents. Many in Israel longed for the coming of the Messiah because they wanted him to restore their government to earthly supremacy. But that wasn't God's plan for the Christ. That wasn't God's plan for Christmas. Christmas is not about earthly presents. Christmas is not about an earthly kingdom. Christ came for a much more magnificent purpose. He came to be the King of Israel. He came to be the King of Nations. He came to be our Savior King.

As you gaze upon the Christ-child this Christmas, remember why he came. He came because he loves you. He loves you and gave up a throne in heaven for a crib in a manger so that he could put your sins upon his shoulders, make his way to a cross, make his way out of a tomb, and give you the sure hope and anticipation of an eternity in his Kingdom of Heaven. That is the exciting message of Christmas. For that gift we rightly pray, Come, O Lord!

PRAYER:

King of nations, as we anticipate the joy of Christmas, keep our eyes fixed on you and the reason you came to this earth. May we never forget you came to be our Savior King. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Watch the movie: "The Nativity Story."

O Come, Immanuel

Isaiah 7:14

One of the most enjoyable parts of Christmas is the time you get to spend with your family. Whether it's Clark Griswold hosting a Christmas for the ages, or Buddy the Elf traveling to New York to find his dad, the time you get to spend with family makes Christmas that much more special. But what if you don't have any family? Or what if you are separated from your family on Christmas? Christmas can be an especially sad time for those who feel alone.

In Isaiah 59 we read, your sins have separated you from God. Think about that. Our sins, our failures to put God first in this busy Christmas season, our refusal to forgive family grudges, all of our sins have separated us from God. It is sad to be without or away from family on Christmas, but even more depressing is to think of being isolated from God for all eternity. That's what we deserve for our sins. We deserve eternal separation from God.

But what does God say in his Word? **"Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."** In his grace, God refuses to allow our sins to separate us. Instead, he sends his own Son, born of a virgin, to be "Immanuel", a.k.a. God with us.

The greatest truth of Christmas is that God became one of us. Real flesh, real bones, a real human being. Yet at the same time, this child is really God himself. That's the miracle of Christmas. Jesus, true God, became one of us, to bear our sins, and remove that which separated us from God. This Christmas, you are not alone. You will never be alone. Rather, Immanuel, God is with you.

PRAYER:

Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lowly exile here, until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel! (CW 23, vs. 1)

ACTIVITY:

Sing: O, Come, O, Come, Emmanuel (CW 23)

Saturday—December 24th

The Grace of God Comes to Earth

Titus 2:11

Can you imagine a Christmas where your whole family got along? No fighting over presents, no arguing over which Christmas movie to watch, but everyone is relaxed, everyone is getting along. Many people long for that kind of peaceful Christmas. Just one day where the whole family is together, and everyone is genuinely happy. Well, snap back to reality. Your family may be the exception, but even the nicest, kindest families can still have disagreements. They can still have turmoil.

The reason why that's true is because of this thing called sin. Sin is a relationship killer. Sin causes dad to be selfish. Sin causes mom to lose her temper. Sin causes brother and sister to fight. Sin kills relationships. But even worse than an earthly relationship killer, sin is a spiritual relationship killer. From the moment that sin first appeared in this world, sin has been killing our relationship with God.

However, God would not stand idly by and watch sin kill his world. On an evening in a little town of Bethlehem, God himself became one of us to restore our once broken relationship with him. This love, this act of God, this message of Christmas, you can sum it up with one word: grace.

Grace is God setting aside his divine power in order to wear diapers. Grace is God telling an army of angels to stand down, so that an angry sinful mob can put to death their Maker. Grace is God looking you in the eyes and saying, all this I did for you. You look to Christmas, you look to Calvary, you look to the tomb, and there is one word that sums it up: grace, God's undeserved love for you.

On Christmas, the grace of God bodily appeared to offer salvation to all people. Rejoice! Your Savior has been born! Rejoice! This grace is yours! Rejoice! You get to share this message with all!

PRAYER:

God of Grace, we praise you for your underserved love. May your grace be with us and our family this Christmas. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

As a family, go to church and thank God for his grace.



FIRST WEEK OF
Christmas

Almighty God, grant that the birth of your one and only
Son in the flesh may set us free from our old bondage
under the yoke of sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who
lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,
now and forever. Amen.

Sunday—December 25th

Christ is Born!

Luke 2:1-7

Imagine what it would have been like if our leader made a declaration like Caesar's? Travel would be a nightmare as millions would try to get to their hometowns to register. Plane tickets would be sold out, highways would be packed and business owners would have to close shops until they returned from registering.

We can imagine the impact would be similar when Mary and Joseph received the decree from Caesar to go register in their home town. Families would have to travel on foot or by animal. Business owners would have to close up shop until they returned, and families would have to rush to find space to stay before all the rooms were taken by other visitors. Even if it was inconvenient, even if it was bad timing, citizens had to go because this was Caesar Augustus, leader of the Roman empire, commanding it. So Mary and Joseph, who were expecting a baby really soon, would have to go too. Their journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was at least a three day journey.

Caesar's decree had a big impact on so many people, but it still seems small in compared to the decrees made by God.

When God created the world he decreed, "**It is very good.**" It was perfect, but when Adam and Eve fell into sin they separated themselves from God. Their actions ruined what God had made perfect. In an act that would save his creation God would make a decree that impacted the entire world. He decreed that a Savior would come to free them from sin and death. Again God decreed to his people that the Savior would be an offspring of a man named Jesse, his mother a virgin and he would be born in a small town called Bethlehem.

Inconvenient as it was, that is why Mary and Joseph were traveling to Bethlehem. God used Caesar's decree to fulfill his own decree. God would move around nations so our Savior would come just as he decreed it! He would rule the world so you might have life in the Jesus, born in Bethlehem, born for our sins.

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, you direct all things for the good of your children. Graciously direct our eyes to your Son, our Savior, as the source of our hope and salvation. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Write down some of Jesus' decrees on small strips of paper (e.g. Lk 6:23a, Lk 12:8, Lk 12:28, Lk 13:30, Lk 15:7 Lk 11:13). If you have time before, place strips in a manger, wrap it and put it under the tree. Open that present first having each family member reading 1 or 2 passages. You can ask why this makes Jesus so important to us.

God Made Flesh

John 1:1-5,14

Opening presents on Christmas has been a tradition in my family since before I was born. After church we would come home and each take turns tearing the wrapping paper off of gifts we found under the Christmas tree. With each gift we opened we tried our best to show our thankfulness for every gift (good or bad). The day after Christmas was telling though. You could which tell which gifts we liked the most by the ones that got the most attention the days after Christmas. Occasionally there would be a gift that initially didn't look so interesting, but once I started using it and paying attention to it I would discover it was more exciting than I thought! The more I spent time playing and using those gifts the better I would understand the full potential of them.

In John 1 we learn of a gift we can only begin understand. It's the gift we received on Christmas- Jesus. Don't overlook that gift too quickly! There is more to it than the eye can see. As we examine this gift we begin to see just how amazing and how great it is for us! John says the Word (Jesus) was from the beginning! This child who was lying in a manger was around before the creation of the world! The tender baby in Mary's arms we discover was God! Jesus wasn't just another baby, he was the ruler and creator of the universe! Without him nothing would be made! We wouldn't exist! And in that little baby was more than just physical life. In him was eternal life. As God he would give that eternal life to us! The gift of Jesus was the gift that saved us from death.

This is a passage of Scripture we can read over and over again. In doing so we discover just how amazing it is that the child born of Mary is our almighty God and Redeemer. That's a gift with everlasting benefits.

PRAYER:

Almighty Father, in your wisdom you sent your Son to become like us to redeem us from death. Draw our eyes to your manger that we may see your glory and your love. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Each family member pick one present and discuss everything it can do. Now talk about Jesus (have a manger/baby Jesus handy) and everything that he has done for us. Emphasize the contrast between earthly presents that last only a while and Jesus' gifts which last forever.

Or: Construct a "Names of Jesus" chain decoration. A reminder of who Jesus is. Found here <http://www.hsprintables.com/files/NOJAdventChain.pdf>

Tuesday—December 27th

The Good News of the Angels

Luke 2:8-12

We like to receive good news. Parents like to hear their child is succeeding not struggling in school. The patient smiles to hear the cancer has gone into remission not progression. The employee likes to hear about a promotion not a demotion. We like good news.

What do you think would have been good news for the shepherds to hear that first Christmas night? The price for wool was increasing not decreasing? The wolves that were a threat to their flocks while they were in the fields were running away not prowling near? God knew what these poor, powerless, unimportant, and unconnected men needed to hear. God came to them with the greatest news ever given - **Today...a Savior has been born for you.** We have a God who doesn't want to punish us or simply put up with us. We have a God who pursues us and purifies us. Like those shepherds, we may be worse than we ever thought, but God is better than we ever imagined. Listen to the words of the angels: **"do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today...a Savior has been for you."**

Don't miss those little words that heaven and earth cannot contain. For all people...born for you. God's love knows no exceptions. So if you've been focused more on Healthcare than how Christmas shows your heavenly Father's care, there is good news for you. If you've been more attentive to family responsibilities than spiritual growth opportunities, there is good news for you. If you've been more consumed by the commercialism and consumerism of Christmas than enthused by the Christ who comes at Christmas, there is good news for you. If you're struggling with addiction or surprised by your sins, there is good news for you. A Savior has been born for you.

Not a teacher to tell you what to do. Not an example to show you what to do. Not a coach to inspire you in what you do. A Savior from what you've done. A rescuer from what you've said. A forgiver for who you've been. All that really matters in life is what you put between the letter "s" and the letter "n". Sometimes we think of ourselves, and put "I" there and we "s-i-n". But God looked down, backspaced your vowel and typed an "o". S-o-n. God's Son, born for you. That is Good News!

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus fill my heart with constant joy and everlasting peace for the Good News you've given to me. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Make a list of good news you have received. Identify why it was "good" and what difference it made on you. Then say a prayer of thanks for the ways in which this good news has shaped your life for the better.

Wednesday—December 28th

Gloria!

Luke 2:10-14

When a baby is born presents are given. Onesies and outfits too many to count. Blankets and bottles because there are never enough. Trinkets and toys because babies are enamored by things that gleam and glow and make noise. But what present is presented to baby Jesus? What's the present presented to this newborn baby? Let the sight undoubtedly cemented in the shepherd's minds provide a hint. Imagine hundreds or thousands or millions of angels. Picture the darkness of the night sky shattered by the brightness and brilliance of these holy beings. Envision hearing their voices singing in joyful jubilation like ours did on Christmas night. They were praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, to men.

As the angels presented their praise as they light up the night sky over the Judean countryside, they remind us why glory to God is so deserved. He is God in the highest; God Most high. Heaven itself, even the highest heavens, cannot contain him. He lives in unapproachable light.

And now we find him in a manger? Light and darkness have nothing in common. But here he is, bridging the gap. The God of heaven and earth enters our bleak and helpless darkness. He makes himself nothing. He becomes servant to shepherds.

The angels get it. You and I can spend the rest of our lives blissfully astonished that the God of heaven, who does whatever pleases him, is pleased to come to us, to die for us, to save us. It's no wonder they sing Glory to God in the highest.

The angels offered Jesus was praise. And the angels serve as our examples to render the Lord the same. What birthday gift, then, should we bring our newborn Savior? How about praise?

Whoever you are, whatever you do: praise Jesus! Praise him for choosing you from eternity to get to know him! Praise him for creating this world for you! Praise him for adopting you as a child of his family by faith in him. Praise him that in Christ, the babe of Bethlehem, you have his holiness, his forgiveness, his inheritance! Praise Jesus that for unending ages you will join Jesus in the joy of heavenly glory!

Praise him loudly today in song! Praise him loudly tomorrow in prayer! Praise him every day, every hour, every moment-- with all of your heart! Praise the newborn, your Savior! **Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, to men.**

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus may I always praise you for coming to be my Savior. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

The family or individual sings **Angels We Have Heard on High.**

The Shepherds Visit and Rejoice!

Luke 2:15-20

What a night those shepherds had! The angel's announcement. The angelic choir. The sprint to the stable. The wonder and the worship. The baby in his strips-of-cloth for a blanket lying there in the manger. Then what? A slow stride back to the fields of Bethlehem? A silent walk as they returned to their work? Anything but, right? **When [the shepherds] had seen the child, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.**

Without any formal training the shepherds were talking and telling, communicating and conveying, preaching and proclaiming. The shepherds didn't just stand there and ask all sorts of questions of Mary and Joseph. They didn't bicker and balk at the innkeeper who had no room in the inn for a pregnant woman. They didn't decide to hurry off back to the sheep.

Instead, as the angels had broken the silence of their night, those shepherds broke the silence of other people's night. Those simple, uneducated shepherds became the first missionaries. They didn't need years of study. They didn't need to know every prophecy and fulfillment of Scripture. They simply shared what they knew - **A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.** God came to save us, rescue us, from what we deserve because of our sin.

Maybe you have a friend or relative who thinks, "Why bother with this stuff about God? I've been hit hard, still trying to recover from the Hurricane. My husband is sick. My income is slashed. Conflicts are going to carry over into the New Year. I'm left dazed by the drastic and unforeseen turns that life has taken."

You have a message to share. Spread the Word concerning what has been told you about this child. It's a message of a Savior given through whom sins are forgiven, heaven is open and peace is given. It is a message that goes with you into a New Year, return to work, or walk back into the classroom. It's a message for you to share as you reenter those situations and settings where you run smack dab into anxiousness or anger, exhaustion or emptiness, lingering sickness or upcoming surgery, guilt or grief, frustration or finances. Take the message with you and watch how the Savior born for you walks through all of it with you.

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus, like the shepherds, help me to use every opportunity you give me to share you with others. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

The shepherds told everyone the good news about Jesus. Go around the table and tell one piece of good news about Jesus.

Friday—December 30th

The Lord Comes to Save Us!

Hebrews 2:14-18

It is stunning. Just stunning. Jesus didn't become an angel. He could've, but he didn't. He could've died for the devil and the rest of his minions. He could've, but he didn't. Inexplicable grace put his heart and his interest somewhere else. It is us he helps. It is us he lived among. It is us he came close to – so close as to take up our skin and to wear our sin.

He had to be human if he would help us. For centuries God's people knew deep down that the goats and the calves and even the bulls wouldn't and couldn't finally help them. In fact, wasn't that the whole deal? Year and after year they had to come back with those sacrifices because they were not complete or total or satisfying. Goat for human doesn't actually compute. No, it had to be a real and equal kind of eye for eye and tooth for tooth exchange. That alone would adequately deal with sin in a satisfying, complete, and total way.

So *he* came. With eyes. With teeth. With real humanity. *He* came. He came as the ultimate human to be a good enough and a complete enough and a satisfying enough sacrifice to make atonement for the sins of the people. And he was just that. Good enough, I mean. Jesus was so good that he had God declaring his love for him from heaven. **"This is my Son, whom I love."** "Wow, he's so good," God was saying.

He was that good. He was so good that his death meant the end of death. He was so complete that his sacrifice made death give up the ghost. He was so satisfying with his atonement that death was no longer hungry for us. Death's belly has been permanently filled to the brim with Christ.

Can you sense the freedom in that? The way it makes your soul dance just a little bit? The way it makes you live a little more like you mean it? The way it makes you joy at his power? This is the power of the Lord's coming for you. It's freedom.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, thank you. Thank you for your humanity. Thank you for your trading yourself for us. You made death give up the ghost and freed us from fearing it. Thank you. Make our souls and our lives dance for you today and forever. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Discuss a trade you've made in your family. What made it a fair trade? What did Jesus give in a trade to have you eternally? What made it fair?

Saturday—December 31st

The Lord Came Because of a Father's Heart

Galatians 4:4-7

I remember when I became a father. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was quite the day. All in one hour I went from thinking I was never going to be a father to being one. True story. My daughter was dropped into my life in the space of an hour. We weren't going to renew our foster care license in a couple of weeks in our attempt to adopt so truly I was never going to be a father until I was one.

I still remember walking into the hospital. I still remember walking into the room. I still remember holding her in my arms. And I still remember what it was like to experience the heart of a father for the first time. I remember the fierceness, the fire, the protection that was leaping inside me. And I remember how at the same time I experienced fierceness I also experienced an otherworldly tenderness toward her that I never knew I could have.

It makes me think of your Father. Your *Father*. How he must've watched with the ultimate Father's heart as his Son was born. What pride beamed from his heart to know His Son was born so others would be too.

I can only imagine his fierceness and his tenderness to make that moment happen. How he must've looked at us with a heart so tender that he'd send his Son in the first place. How he must've looked at us all with a heart so protective that he'd swaddle us in his Son's perfect life under the law. How our Father must've longed and joyed at seeing his plan take shape in Jesus as he watched it happen in real time.

I imagine that heart and when I do my heart leaps. Even as it does I know the Spirit is showing me my Father's heart for me. That heart gives me confidence today and forever. He's my Father. My heart knows it. Now yours does too.

PRAYER:

For all of time, you have had a Father's heart toward us. At just the right time, you showed it. Now we know it. Give us hearts that no longer fear, but rest in your protective love as your children. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Think of a time when you felt most loved by your father here on earth. Describe that moment.



SECOND WEEK OF
Christmas

Almighty God, in mercy you sent your one and only Son to take upon himself our human nature. By his gracious coming deliver us from the corruption of our sin and transform us into the likeness of his glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Sunday—January 1st

The Lord Comes to Graciously Save You!

Romans 8:31-32

The strategy for picking sides for football games during middle school recess was simple: Whoever got Derek would win. Derek was a great athlete. He was also bigger and faster than everyone else in our school. So if we were fortunate enough to pick first and get Derek on our team, we wouldn't have to worry who the opposition was or what they did... we had Derek!

As you enter into a new year, there's a good chance you're going to face opposition, whether it's a new opponent or an old rival. The opponents like to wear a variety of uniforms. They'll show up in a stack of unpaid bills, a fear of failure, a marriage that's on the edge, a family that doesn't get along, a friend who's more like an enemy, or even a life-threatening disease. These opponents are tough and they hit you at your weak points. They hit you hard without warning and before you know it, you feel like you're down 21 points without hope of a comeback. So what's your strategy? As you begin a new year, what's your plan of attack?

Well, let's put it this way, if victory were up to us and *our* plan, we wouldn't stand a chance. Just think back to 2016 and all the plans we made. How often did those plans go up in smoke because of a new, unexpected hurdle? The truth is, we would be awful "team captains" because our grip on this life is extremely weak!

So instead of approaching this new year from the perspective of the "team captain" who strategizes what and who we need on our side in order to succeed, let's put ourselves among the players being picked. And who is picking our team? Why, the greatest of them all, God himself. God has chosen us to be his own. Paul says in today's lesson, "**If God is for us, who can be against us?**" Our almighty God will never be overpowered by anything or anyone. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can stand against him. We can enter into this new year with complete confidence that no matter what opponents we face, **God is for us!**

We don't need a strategy or a significant amount of luck to get God on our "team." *He* chose us; *He* didn't spare his own son, but graciously sent him to save us! And he will also graciously give us all the things we need in 2017.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending me Jesus to save me from my greatest opponent in this life, my sins. Give me confidence in your faithfulness as I enter a new year of your grace. In Jesus name. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Have each family member share an "opponent" he/she will face in this coming year and how the assurance that "**God is for us**" helps him/her in the fight.

Monday—January 2nd

In Kindness and Love...

Isaiah 63:7-9

Did you know that our monthly calendar was created by the ancient Romans? Each month was given a meaningful name because of where it landed in the year. For example, the Romans named the first month January, from the Latin word Janua, meaning door or window from which a person may look both ways, in and out—forward or back. With a new year, we naturally look back over where we have been and look ahead to where we are going.

Obviously, none of us can look back at the past year and say there weren't difficult times. Difficulties are a part of life. This was certainly the case for the Israelites in Isaiah's day. Life was anything but glorious, joyful, or triumphant. Sin still dogged their lives. Although the Assyrian army may have retreated during Isaiah's day, eventually a new threat would arise. Though the physical blessings weren't always so obvious, the spiritual blessings were still there. God preserved his people. This was the focus of Isaiah's prayer. He said, **"I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us."**

No matter how we struggled in the past year, we can't overlook the persistent spiritual blessings of our God. We don't have to look very far back in the year to be reminded of God's undeserved love and kindness. In fact, think back to last week when we celebrated Jesus, born to live the holy life we couldn't, punished for the sins we deserved, and rose again to give us life. But our spiritual blessings for 2016 aren't confined to Christmas. For the last 52 Sundays God fed us with his Word when we gathered for worship and Sunday school. We followed Jesus from the cross to the empty tomb where we shouted **"He is risen!"** We have felt the presence of the Lord who came to be our Savior throughout the year.

Remembering our Lord's steadfast love and kindness in the past helps build our trust in the Lord looking forward. The same Lord who came to be our Savior will sustain, deliver, and bless us in the coming year.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for reminding me of the spiritual blessings that you continue to shower upon my life. Keep me always close to you, that no matter what trouble should assail me in 2017, I will remember your steadfast love and kindness that will remain with me all the days of my life. In Jesus name. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Have each person write down a list of 3 spiritual blessings the Lord has given you in the past year. Then list how those blessings will be a continual reminder of God's love and kindness going forward. Share these with each other.

Tuesday—January 3rd

The Biggest Miracle

Isaiah 60:1-6

What do you consider to be the most amazing part miracle in the Epiphany account? What part is most amazing? Is it that men would travel across scorching deserts and high mountains just because they saw a star in the sky? Maybe that the star existed at all...a star that was even able to point out the exact house? For me, the most amazing part of this story is that God said he was going to save these wise men many years before it happened.

“Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” This is an amazing prophecy! It tells us that those wise men worshipping Jesus was no accident. It wasn't lucky coincidence; it was planned by God. Think about what God did to save these Magi. God intervened in history by allowing one nation to conquer another. Then he intervened in nature with the appearance of the star. God intervened, not to save the world, but to save a few Magi.

Think about how much God cares. He has done the same for you. When we think of what God has done to save us we think of Christmas – Jesus was born...or Lent – Jesus suffered and died...or Easter – Jesus rose again. But none of those events mean anything unless people know about it and believe it. To save these Magi he needed to do more than be born, die and rise...he needed to intervene in their personal lives; and he did so in a spectacular way. He's done the same for you.

How? Maybe it was the family you were born into. When you were born, you had a seven out of eight chance of being born into a family where you would be worshipping someone other than Jesus or nothing at all. That isn't by accident. God intervened in history for you. Maybe a teacher, a friend, a neighbor told you about your Savior. God created a star to guide you to your Savior. That's God intervening in your life just for you. Before the foundation of the world, he looked through time and space. He knew you, he loved you, and decided to save you.

He didn't save you because you are such a bright light of goodness. Our thoughts, our attitudes are often dark. That darkness makes us do things that hurt ourselves and hurt others. God had mercy and said, “Let me send a source of Light into the world.” Jesus comes piercing this dark world as this bright and beautiful light...a life laid down as a sacrifice. Jesus did that for the world...and for you. Epiphany's biggest miracle is that the Lord came for YOU!

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, thank you for the myriad of things you have done so that I know you and believe in you as my Savior. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Can you name some other ways (other than those named in this devotion) that God has worked/intervened personally in your life?

Wednesday—January 4th

A Mystery Solved

Ephesians 3:2-12

Who is your favorite detective of all time? The Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew? Possibly Sherlock Holmes, who solves mysteries by logical reasoning? He believes in science of deduction: the principle that any problem can be solved if the necessary information is given. Mysteries can be fun and entertaining, except when it comes to things in the Bible. I don't want a mystery there. You don't either, do you? Here is a mystery... **In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.** Don't these words sound seem hard to understand? The "mystery of Christ" hasn't been made know to men in other generations?

What is this mystery of Christ which Paul knows and the Ephesians don't know? **"This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus."** The mystery is solved! The gospel is for all people! This wise men story probably doesn't surprise you with its mystery any more since you know it so well. But, it was a mystery of the Old Testament how Gentiles fit into God's plan, even though little clues were left along the way. Think of the story of Ruth. Ruth wasn't a Jew; she was a Gentile. And yet that little book of the Bible reveals part of the mystery because Ruth becomes a part of the line of the Savior. It's a story of God's grace to all...that also Ruth's Gentile flesh and blood is a part of God's plan. Jesus did not just come in Jewish flesh and blood, but human flesh and blood to save all of us from sin.

It's all a gift of God's grace alone, isn't it? It's grace alone that has nothing to do with race or nationality, gender or age, status or rank. All have sinned; and this Savior is for all sinners. What he did in his perfect life he did for all who are imperfect. What he did in his death he did for all who were guilty of sin. What he did when he rose he did for all who were under death's curse. In Jesus, Paul says we all have rights and privileges before God as his sons: **"In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."** You don't need to earn some special right to stand before him. That's as true for the poor Jewish shepherds who knelt before Jesus our Lord as it was true for the rich Gentile Magi who later came to worship him. For each of you, it's the mystery you treasure so much: the mystery of God's grace!

PRAYER:

Gracious Lord, thank you for making us and all believers members together of one body and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus. In this the Promise's name we pray. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

What are some other "mysteries" that Jesus has helped you understand? Think of some things the Bible teaches you that you couldn't learn anywhere else.

Too Light

Isaiah 49:6

[The Lord] says: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

When we are unloading the car after going grocery shopping I often give my two-year-old something to carry inside. Usually it is just a small thing out of one of the bags, a can of soup or some frozen vegetables. It is an easy job for her but it allows her to help. However, for my older children, I ask a little more. They are given a full bag and often multiple full bags to carry inside the house. I think they would be insulted if I told them that I only trusted them to carry a small thing and certainly it would be a waste of their talents and strength to assign them a task “too light.”

God said it was too light and too small that the promised Savior to be born would only be for the tribes of Jacob and the people of Israel. He would send Jesus to be a light for all nations so that his salvation could reach the ends of the earth.

There have been some great men in history who have been able to help single nations. A few people who have helped empires. But there has been only one man who could be the Savior of every nation.

It is only Jesus who was strong enough to take on the weight of the world’s sins. It is only Jesus who was perfect enough to live a holy life for every single person in the world. It is only Jesus who could be one with God the Father and win salvation for the entire world.

This is how great your Jesus is. He is not just your Savior. He is not just my Savior. He is not just a Savior for this people or for that people. No, that would all be too light. Jesus is the Savior for the world.

PRAYER:

Father, you have brought your good news to the ends of the earth. We thank you for being our Savior and the world’s Savior. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Take some time to learn about a new country. Go on Google maps or look at a globe and discover a country that you don’t know much about. Then spend a few moments reading about that country and the people who live there. Finally, say a prayer for the people there that God would continue to share his Gospel there.

Friday—January 6th

Where Are They From?

Matthew 2:1-12

There has been a show on TV for the past few years called “Who Do You Think You Are?” The show features new celebrities each week who digs through their ancestry to try and discover the history of their family and where they came from. The hope is that by learning where they came from, they may learn more about themselves.

Who do you think the wise men are? Scholars and historians love to debate and suggest theories. Some suggest that they are Persians. Some suggest that they are Babylonians. Some suggest that they are Indians. Still others point to different nationalities and some say it may have been men from many different nations. The only thing Scripture says for sure is that these men are from the East.

However, I think we can learn much about who these wise men are from finding out who they are not. They are not locals. They traveled from a long way to see this child. They are not part of God’s chosen nation, the Jews. They are foreigners are strangers who were given the grace to seek this new king.

All that I don’t know about them teaches me that Jesus came for all people. Jesus came for people born in Ohio and Florida. He came for people born in Burma and Malawi. He came for people who are rich and who are poor. He came for those who are wise and those who are foolish. In short, Jesus came for all people and that means you and me too.

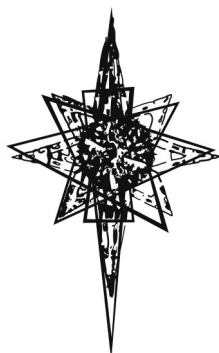
Who do you think you are? Just like the wise men, you are someone Jesus came to save.

PRAYER:

Father in heaven, wise men from the east came to worship you from afar because you are their Savior too. May we also always worship you as our Savior. Amen.

ACTIVITY:

Today is the final day of Christmas. (Tomorrow begins Epiphany.) Before you pack up all of your decorations and eat the final Christmas cookie, write down for yourself on a small piece of paper one truth you heard this Christmas season that you found especially valuable. Tape this piece of paper somewhere you will see it everyday throughout the next year. (Bathroom mirror, dash of your car, refrigerator door.) Keep it there until the next Advent to remind yourself how the Lord came at Christmas to be your Savior.



THE

Epiphany



Put together by the South Atlantic District Adult Discipleship Team