

Images of Advent

Family Devotional



By Jonathan & Stacy Shradar

For the next 25 days, take some time each day to think about and anticipate the long-awaited Messiah, the King that came as a baby.

The Images of Advent Family Devotional invites you to work through the day's scripture and reading as a family, decorating and adding the ornaments to your tree as you go.

Cut out your ornament, punch a hole in the top and add sting. Then use colors, glitter, stickers or whatever you'd like to make your ornament into a reminder of the joy and excitement we experience during advent. On day 25 decorate your last ornament showing what Christmas means to you.



December 1

John 1:1-3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

Can you imagine nothing? Try to erase from your memory all the things you see every day. All the buildings, the mountains, the water, the people, even the stars. Nothing. Just emptiness. No substance, no noise, just blankness. This was the beginning. Except there was the most important something there. God was there. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In perfect community, a trinity of creative power and brilliance. And God had a plan.

He is a maker, so he made. All things were made through Jesus, the creative voice, the Word. After lots of making, we exist. Our mountains stand tall, our oceans sink deep and we breathe the very air that didn't exist before Jesus said "let there be." This is huge! It is vitally important. If it didn't happen there would still be nothing, except God. And it is really good. Because God wanted to know you, he made all things, so that one day you would give him credit and glory.

At Christmastime we recognize all that God has done and this Word, Jesus, would come among us to make the bad things right again. The baby in a manger was the voice that made it all. Remember the bigness of God and how even this little baby being born echos his power. The voice that cries at birth would one day declare you forgiven and a Child of God. That is why he made everything, so that one day he could live among it all and find those in need of help and give them salvation. The Word has come.

How quiet would nothing be? Let's spend one minute in quiet. Try to be silent and imagine what it was like before Jesus created all things.

Why would Jesus create all that he made? Why would he come into his creation?



December 2

John 1:4-5

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The dark can be scary. The unknown hidden behind shadows and the invisible shield of blackness. But light is different. It shines into the shadows and reveals what is there. It makes the unknown known and beats away the dark. When Jesus came into the world he was just like light.

You see, the world had become spiritually dark. We still had sunshine and lamps to light things up but, because Adam and Eve sinned in the garden by disobeying God, everything had become clouded by darkness. Nothing was perfect like it was supposed to be. But we were made for light, so the One who created all things shines into the dark world and becomes its light. The baby in a manger will grow up to show us the light of obedience to God and he will become a beacon of hope to the world as he is lifted up onto a cross. Even the darkness of a grave could not hold him back as he rose from the dead giving life to those who believe.

Now every time you see Christmas lights you can remember that Jesus is the light. His grace shines into the darkest of places and there is no darkness that can ever switch him off.

Go ahead and turn off the lights. In the dark, talk about the types of things that might scare us about the dark. Turn on the lights! How does light change the way we see the room and take away the scary things?

How does Jesus defeat the dark? What will his victory mean for you?



December 3

John 1:6-10

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

If you have ever watched the news on TV you have likely seen a news anchor. They are the people that tell you the news of the day. But they are not the ones who made the news. They didn't wreck the cars or save the people. They just tell you about it. John the Baptizer did the same thing. He was a faithful Jew who knew that God's people were sinning and needed to repent so he told everyone about it. And, when he called on them to repent, he told them of the promised Messiah that was coming to baptize people in the Holy Spirit. Of course John was telling the news about Jesus, getting people ready for him so they could believe.

Today people are still bearing witness - telling the news about Jesus. In fact, you probably heard about him from someone else. The fun thing is that now we all get to become witnesses of Jesus. We get to tell other people about his life, death and resurrection and how the forgiveness of sins is found only in him. That is really what Christmas is for. It is about telling and reminding the world of good news about Jesus. He is the greatest gift we could give anyone because he is the greatest gift we've been given.

Who told you about Jesus? Where can you go to find out more about him?

Who can you give the good news of Jesus to? Will you make a plan to tell them?

December 4

John 1:11-13



He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Have you ever had to wait to be picked to play on a team at recess? When everyone lines up and two “captains” chose teams. It can be nerve-wracking. Waiting to be chosen, to make the team and have a squad to call your own. That feeling is not unlike what Jesus experienced when he came into the world. God had long ago chosen a specific group of people to bless and reveal himself through. But over the many generations since then, the people began to disobey and reject God. Finally, when the promised Messiah - this forever King - arrived, the ones who “belonged to God” turned away from him and hated him.

There were, however, some who believed. There were some who heard of Jesus, believed in him and received him as their King. And because they received him, he made them Children of God. He gave them eternal life and hope in him. He gave them a team to call their own and it happened not by their decision, but by God’s. This is a glorious gift, that Jesus would choose us to be his own!

As we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate the fact that Jesus has picked you for his team. He was excited to pick you and make you a Child of God. Not because you have special skills or a good family but because he loves you. So we remember and receive him again, believing all the more in his grace and victory over death for us. We receive once more his love for us.

How do you think Jesus felt when he wasn't picked by “his own people?” Why would he still live, die, and be resurrected for them or for any of us?

What does it mean to you to be a Child of God? Find a piece of paper and design a jersey for “team Jesus.”



December 5

Isaiah 9:6-7

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Long ago the people that knew about God struggled to have hope. Things were not going well, mostly because they trusted in things other than God. They stopped listening to God's direction and his word. But he remained faithful. He continued to make promises and said a day was coming when the gloom would be lifted and real hope would live. It was the promise of a baby. A child to be born would be the Savior of the world, the King of all things.

Wonderful Counselor, he would know how to fix everything that went wrong. Mighty God, he would have the authority to fix things. Everlasting Father, he would be the One who had cared for them all along. Prince of Peace, he would finally bring peace to the world and, eventually, the world will know nothing else. This is Jesus! The long-awaited anointed One. And he was not coming because the people finally got things right. He was coming because he wanted to. He wanted to save, comfort, and give hope to those that believe in him.

Since he came, we can live under his reign. We can trust in him and spreading his hope to everyone that struggles under the gloom of sin and self. For to us, and to the world, a child has been born.

What is the longest amount of time you have waited for something special? What was it?

As we wait for Jesus to return, what gives us hope along the way?



December 6

Jeremiah 33:14-18

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’

“For thus says the Lord: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever.”

When trees start out they are not that impressive. What may be a huge, towering tree today was once just a little seed. Not much to look at but full of potential. If the seed is put in soil and given water, it will grow and become something to look at!

This is a lot like the promise God gave to his people that he would bless every nation through the seed of Abraham. The promise was put into the “soil” of expectation and, over generations, it put out roots in believing hearts and then sprung up as a branch of righteousness that we know is Jesus. He is our righteousness - our goodness, both King and priest, having offered himself as a sacrifice for us once for all. What good news this is!

God kept his word. Jesus has come to save, to forgive and to give us a family to call our own. And his work goes on. If you believe in him you will dwell securely with him forever. This is what we celebrate as the gift that keeps on giving!

Grab a crayon and some paper and draw a line that goes on forever. (It's hard to do isn't it!) Remember that Jesus' love for you and his grace to you goes on long beyond what you can imagine.

What is so good about God's promise being kept?

December 7

Luke 1:26-28



In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

When a king enters into new territory they usually don't do it quietly. In fact, they want the most attention they can get. They want all the pomp and prestige possible. But when Jesus comes the plan is something quite different. Into the simplest of environments, among the most unlikely people, he comes. Even into the womb of a mother that would least expect it.

Mary is an unlikely place for the King's arrival to get underway. She was only engaged to be married to Joseph. A pregnancy now would be inconceivable. But she was favored by God and would be used for the good of all people.

Jesus has always preferred the simple, unlikely and least expected. Not only in how his story unfolds but also in who he calls his own. Christmas is a reminder that we don't have to be flashy or have it all together. We are the unlikely people Jesus chooses to save. His grace is always unexpected. Rejoice that, just like Mary, in Christ we are the favored ones and the Lord is with us!

Can you remember a time when you expected one thing and got something different but better?

Why do you think Jesus saves the simple, unlikely and unexpected?



December 8

Luke 1: 29-33

But [Mary] was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Did your parents ever tell you what your first word was? Usually it is something like "mama" or "dada." These words are always memorable because they are a big deal. Something has been spoken when only noises came before. It is a breakthrough moment in our development.

When the angel spoke to Mary we have another breakthrough moment before us. The name of Jesus is spoken for the first time. The promise is coming and he has a name. Jesus. Great, Son of God, King forever. Hope now has a name. Salvation now has a name. And everyone who calls on his name is saved!

Christmas is a name breaking into the noise of a hurting and broken world. Jesus has come - joy to the world! This is the name that we call on and cling to through all of life. We don't have to be afraid because, in Jesus, we have found favor with God.

Do you know what your name means? If not ask someone to find out.

The name Jesus is a form of Yeshua which means to deliver or rescue. How has Jesus rescued you?



December 9

Luke 1:35-38

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Only God is holy. It sounds like a churchy word, but it means set-apart, unique, special. It describes God's "otherness" and represents the distance between humanity and our creator. We are not holy, not in ourselves. Because of sin, we are unholy and unrighteous. There is no way for humanity to bridge the gap of holiness that separates us from God. It is impossible.

Something profound is happening here in the angel's conversation with Mary. The Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will have a child who is called holy. Jesus, the righteous One, gives his righteousness and holiness to those that believe in him. Where there was once no way, in him there is a way. Nothing is impossible with God.

Christmas is about miracles. The miracle of a birth and the miracle of making you holy in Christ. Because Jesus lived perfectly, died and rose for you, the gap is closed and you can have a relationship with God. You can now be his child.

Try to jump 4 feet high. Were you able to do it? Is it impossible? Now have an adult help you.

How is Jesus able to do the impossible and make you holy?

December 10

Matthew 1:18-21



Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Have you ever been in bed and been awakened by a strange noise or weird shadow on the wall? When that happened did someone come to comfort you? Maybe your Mom or Dad telling you everything was okay and you didn't have to be afraid. That's what the birth of Jesus is like for those that believe in him.

Again, we have in the story of Jesus' birth a visitation by an angel. Just like the encounter with Mary, the angel tells Joseph "do not fear." Joseph was in a position where fear would be expected. The woman he loved was pregnant with the son of God. Still, God's purpose overrides fear. "Don't fear to take Mary as your wife... she will bear a son... he will save his people from their sins".

Don't be afraid to have this baby that will ultimately take away fear for all who believe in him. Because of Jesus, we no longer need to live in fear of what will happen or the unknown. Because he has met the punishment we deserved for sin, we no longer face it ourselves. We can now live fearless in Christ.

Think of a time you were really scared. What made you feel better?

By saving us from sin how does Jesus take away fear?



December 11

Matthew 1:22-24

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus."

Have you ever seen a long line of dominoes stacked in a row that fall in sequence as someone gently nudges the first one? It can be fascinating to watch when there are thousands of dominoes and just as fun to try to replicate on our own. Each one falls in order and the line arrives at a destination it was meant to.

The promises of God are like dominoes in this way. They all line up and fall on purpose where they are supposed to. The arrival of Jesus was one such promise, arguably the most important promise of all. Everything that was happening in this middle eastern village was to fulfill what God said through Isaiah. A son would be born and his name would be Immanuel. God with us.

God was no longer far off somewhere unseen but he was present, in our reality, flesh and blood. This changes everything. Jesus can save us from sin because he takes our place. He faces what we face and stays faithful to God just as God has been faithful to his word, his promise of a Messiah. At Christmas, we realize the faithfulness of God through the manger and are forever changed. The dominoes fell so we would be saved.

Grab some dominoes or blocks and line them up so they will fall in order, then tap the first one over and watch them fall.

If God can make everything take place in order to keep his promise, what can we expect of life in Christ?

Joy

December 12

Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Dogs are amazing creatures. If you have one as a family pet you may agree. But one awesome thing about dogs is the way they greet their humans after they have been away for a long time. As the door opens they let out a cry of excitement and jump or wag their tails with glee. It is as if they are overtaken by uncontrollable joy.

Did you know that this is what we are promised in Christ? Sure we might not jump around and scream but, in his presence - in light of his arrival, we are meant to respond with joy. Elizabeth experiences it. When a pregnant Mary arrives Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and she (and the baby in her womb) jumps for joy. She sees this visit as an honor and great privilege.

Christmas is more than a hint of this for us. It is an invitation to the same experience - joy at the arrival of Christ. This year, may the Holy Spirit fill us that we too would exclaim praises to Jesus with uncontrollable joy!

Go ahead and act like a dog greeting it's human. Act like you are really excited about something. How is that different than we treat Jesus and should it be?

What is it about Jesus that brings us joy?



December 13

Luke 1:46-56

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

And Mary remained with [Elizabeth] about three months and returned to her home.

Do you have a favorite song? One you know well and can really relate to? Those types of songs are easy to sing because, in a way, they feel like they belong to us. Here we have Mary's song. And even though these are her words, there is something here for us to sing as well because, really, it is a song about what God has done in sending Jesus.

Our spirits can rejoice in God our savior. He who is mighty, has done great things for us. He has extended his mercy toward us. It goes on and it is all ours in Jesus. Because God was faithful to his promise, we can experience his mercy in the forgiveness of sin found only in Jesus. Jesus really has scattered the proud and brought down the mighty. He really does fill those that are spiritually hungry.

This Christmas we can sing this song too because the Lord really has done great things. He has saved us!

Can you write a few lyrics for a song you could sing about Jesus?

How does his mercy give us a reason to sing?

December 14

Luke 1:67-79



And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Christmas is essentially the moment that God, having made such wonderful promises, says to the world, "I'll prove it to you!"

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesied over his son telling of what was to come by blessing the Lord. He recounted God's redeeming work for his people, work that was going to continue in a big way with the arrival of this coming King that was set to save us from our enemies. This King would show mercy and give forgiveness. This King would bring peace.

Salvation, then, is experienced by all who believe in Jesus and we are empowered to live before him without fear. We can prepare the way for others to hear his name and see his grace. This is our purpose between Jesus' arrival at Christmas and his eventual return. Making much of him and telling those in need of a savior of the only true One. The promise of God has been proved and it can now be owned by anyone who believes. Like John, let's invite others to turn from their sins and believe.

If someone really important was coming over to your house, how might you prepare for them?

How can we prepare the way for Jesus' return when he will judge and rule as King forever?



December 15

Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.

And he shall be their peace.

Think of the people that are responsible for you. Think of the ones that make sure you are safe and cared for, your parents or caregivers. They shelter, feed, and guide us so we don't get hurt, hungry or cold. And when they do a good job of it we rarely notice.

Jesus is the promised One from a long time ago. He is coming as a shepherd that is responsible for those he calls his own. He cares for them and makes them safe. And he has done just that. From a birth in Bethlehem to a life of perfection to a cross he bore for us, Jesus was standing tall for our security and salvation.

From the moment he rose from the grave he has continued to care for us, guide us and provide all we need through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In him we are secure. Christmas is the reminder for us to notice the work of the Good Shepherd and find our peace in him.

What type of work would a shepherd do to keep his flock safe?

How does Jesus care for us as the Good Shepherd?

December 16

Luke 2:1-5



In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

When was the last long journey you went on? Did you drive or take a plane? Was the destination worth it? It often takes some investment of time and energy to get to the places we long to be and it is usually worth it.

The birth of Jesus was much the same way. Joseph and Mary had to take a long journey to the place that God determined for them to be when the baby was born. While they are following the decree of Caesar, even his authority is under the decree of God. What we celebrate at Christmas is God's sovereign plan unfolding right on time.

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is our entry into this perfect plan as well. Because he gives us grace and salvation through the work of the cross, we can trust that everything in life will work out for our good. In this same way, Joseph and Mary trusted that being in Judea would put them right where God wanted them to be. Some days it seems like the journey is long and difficult but we are being brought all the way home by this King that was once a baby in Bethlehem.

What do you think it would be like to travel 80 miles on a donkey?

Why can we trust Jesus to care for us through all of life?



December 17

Luke 2:6-7

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Can you remember your birth? Probably not. Most likely it was in a clean, warm and safe place. For most of us it was a hospital room filled with nurses and doctors responsible for making the process a success. Jesus' experience was something dramatically different.

We don't know for sure where the manger was located but here is Jesus, the King of the universe, and his first throne after birth is a feeding trough. Where the cattle would go to eat grain, the Savior of the world slept. The promised Messiah comes and there is no welcoming committee, no comfortable rooms, and no nurses or clean sheets to be found. From that humble entry, Jesus would live to make a place for us to live. He would give of himself so we could find a home with him and he has gone to prepare a place for us with the Father.

Christmas can be for us a regular opportunity to give Jesus a place to stay. As we believe in him and give him our lives, he finds a home in us just as we find a home in him. Like a baby wrapped tight in swaddling cloths, we are kept in his grace warmed against the chill of night.

What are the things you think you would need to welcome a newborn baby into the world?

What do you think it means to give Jesus a place to stay in your life?

December 18

Luke 2:8-14



And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Have you ever been minding your own business when someone rushes into the room with an announcement they think you can't miss? Or watching your favorite television show and reporters interrupts with "breaking news?" If the news is bad it can spoil an otherwise good day but if it is good, or even great news, we don't mind the interruption.

Here were the shepherds watching their flocks, doing the lonely work late at night. And into the silence comes an angel of light with the best breaking news possible. Good news of great joy, news for all people! The Christ, the anointed One, the Messiah has been born. The Savior had come. Joining in the news was a choir of angels singing of the glory of God and inviting peace.

This is not only good news at Christmas but year round. It's the gospel (or good news) of Jesus. He came taking on flesh and lived obediently before God even to the point of death in our place. He rose from the dead allowing us to rise from spiritual death. We can be saved, forgiven, and given a new life and identity in him. Believing in him, we have peace that can only be found in Jesus. This truly is good news! May we too sing "Glory to God in the Highest!"

Can you draw or describe what the angel choir would have looked like singing before the shepherds?

Why is the birth of Jesus such good news?

December 19

Luke 2:15-20



When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

There was once a president that made the phrase "trust but verify" famous. He meant that, when negotiating with other countries, we should trust what they say but make sure they were telling the truth. It isn't just sound advice for international matters, but also for most of life. If someone tells you something fantastic, it doesn't hurt to verify, prove or check on what they have said.

The shepherds, still in awe from hearing the good news of great joy from an angel choir, decide to trust what they had heard but also verify it by going to see for themselves. They didn't want to just settle for the news of Jesus' arrival, they wanted to go see for themselves. So they set off seeking Jesus. When the shepherds found him, they retold what they heard from the angels and left praising God for all they had seen and heard.

This is the invitation for us at Christmas. As we hear the good news of Jesus' birth may we pursue him, find him in his Word and the community of believers, and go about life glorifying God, praising him for the gift we have in Jesus. That salvation is ours. That eternity is secure because of Jesus. Let's continue to seek Jesus and praise God for who he is.

What do you think you would see if you were in the room when Jesus was lying in a manger?

How can we seek Jesus now and what does it mean for us to praise him?



December 20

Matthew 2:1-8

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

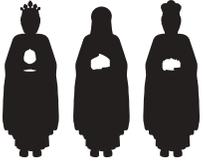
When was the last time you played "king of the hill?" The game where you stand on top of a hill and push others away as they try to bring you down so they can be king. We love to be king and would rather not be pulled down and lose our "throne."

This was Herod's experience and all of Jerusalem's as they heard news of the new King born in Bethlehem. They were used to their way of life and being in charge. The problem was that they had turned away from God along the way. When Jesus is born they know that things are about to change. There is a new King in town.

Herod would eventually try unsuccessfully to kill Jesus. But Jesus still reigns. This is often the way of the things in our lives that attempt to be more important than Jesus. They try their best to stay on the throne, on top of the hill. But Jesus is meant to be King over all things and he will conquer the hill. As Christmas nears, let's give him his rightful place as King in our lives and worship him alone.

Make a list of the things in your life that try to be "king" instead of Jesus.

How can we surrender these things to the true King?



December 21

Matthew 2:9-12

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Have you started to think about your Christmas morning strategy? Have you planned to get up early with the family to read the Christmas story and open presents together? If you remember last year you might feel a little bit of the excitement you had then and will have in just a few days. Happiness is bubbling up and you can't contain it.

The wise men experienced the same thing only they rejoiced when the star guided them to the Savior of the world. They sought Jesus and "rejoiced exceedingly with great joy". They jumped for joy as they enter the house where the child, the Christ, was with his mother. They continued their worship by giving Jesus gifts, prizes, their treasure. Like a reverse Christmas for them. Instead of getting, they were giving. Of course, Jesus is the ultimate gift of Christmas as he would give his life for those that believe in him. Far better than any treasure we could imagine, wrapped in the flesh and blood of the servant King. The sign of the star will be replaced by the cross as a reminder of all Jesus has done for us.

As you prepare to give and receive gifts on Christmas, remember the ultimate gift you have in Jesus. Celebrate it. Worship him.

Why is opening presents on Christmas so exciting? How can we bring some of that kind of excitement into our worship of Jesus?



December 22

John 1:14-16

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

If you have ever been to the ocean you have experienced something meant to make you think of the grace of Jesus. The waves coming to shore, one after another. It is unstoppable and powerful, ongoing and you can't hold it back. This is the image John's Gospel gives in light of the arrival of Jesus.

The Word, the creative power of God, became flesh and lived among humanity. His presence and glory were witnessed by many and were made known through the Scriptures. It was from him, Jesus, that we have received wave upon wave of grace.

Grace is getting something you don't deserve. We could never earn forgiveness and salvation. We could never earn Jesus. But he gives himself to us and his grace rolls on like the waves of the ocean. His grace keeps washing up on the shore of our lives where we have sinned, missed the direction of God, and where we have felt lonely or ashamed. This grace takes care of it all. From the fullness of Jesus, we have received it. Let us celebrate this gift!

If you were to have a Santa-style list of your good and bad deeds do you think you would have more good or bad? What if you couldn't get any gifts if your list had only one bad deed on it?

Jesus doesn't work like Santa, we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God but he still gives us grace to believe, to be forgiven and free in him.

Because his grace is a gift, why should we want to live well in response to it?



December 23

John 3:16-21

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Remember a few weeks ago when we turned out the lights and then turned them back on? How long did it take for the light to overcome the darkness? The light always wins. Of course, the light we are talking about is Christ and He is still the only way of salvation. Once the baby in a manger now forever King.

He was sent because God loved us. Whoever believes in him has eternal life. Those that believe in him are not condemned. But there is still a battle between light and darkness. People still choose the darkness over the light of forgiveness.

We have made the advent journey this far so chances are we believe in the name of Jesus. We have experienced the gift that is hope and salvation and now we live to present that gift to others so they can turn from the darkness to light. Just as the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us. What an adventure life will be seeking Jesus and introducing others to him! Let's be bearers of good news, that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son".

What is your most prized possession? What would it mean for you to give it away?

How can we "wrap" the gift of Jesus for our friends and family? How can we make him known?

Jesus

December 24

Philippians 2:5-11

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

What do you want to be when you grow up? A fireman? A doctor? A teacher? An engineer? The possibilities are endless but chances are you didn't say "servant." We don't want to sacrifice ourselves for others, we don't want to spend our days serving. But under the reign of the Servant King, that is exactly what we can look forward to because Jesus has served us.

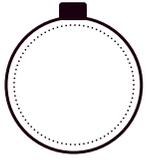
Jesus came from heaven and took on flesh. He emptied himself and became a servant. He humbled himself for others and even died on the cross. As the servant, Jesus is given the name above all others and he is forever exalted (lifted high) by God. Whether we knew it or not this has always been what humanity longed for. Someone to be our substitute and make a way for us to be in a relationship with our Creator. Someone to serve us by calling us his own and claiming us through an act of humility.

It is from this gift of Jesus that we now look forward. From the humility and exaltation of Christ to the coming day when, as believers, we will rejoice at his return as the servant King reigning for eternity. With Christmas so close that great and final day can seem so far away, but just as we are expectant for tomorrow's joy we can wait with anticipation for the next advent.

Jesus is our joy. He is our hope and salvation. He is our everything... He is the point of Christmas. Let's bow our knees and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

What did Jesus give up to be a servant?

How does Jesus' sacrifice encourage our own lives of serving?



December 25

Luke 2:1-21

Today is the long awaited day! Today we celebrate our King entering the world.

Take some time to read the story in Luke 2. Talk about why we celebrate and what Jesus' birth means for us.

Then decorate your last ornament showing what Christmas means to you.