

Fear not, for behold!

by REBECCA JACKS
photography by JULIA WILSON

Each year, our AVPC Children's Ministry Team seeks to provide a family Advent devotional to support our members in family worship throughout the Advent season. The majority of these have been written by me or other members, using various approaches. This year, God continually brought me back to our 2013 AVPC Advent Devotional, *Fear Not, for Behold!*, written by member Rebecca Jacks, with photography by one of our (then) youth, Julia Wilson.

I cannot recycle this devotional without an explanation of why.

At our Altadena Valley women's retreats, we have a history of inviting various women from our body to share their stories, because we long to be a place where we are known and know one another. One of my most memorable ones is an evening when Rebecca Jacks shared her story of wrestling with God in struggle through fear and trust. It would be shortly later that Rebecca would be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She crafted this devotional only three months before she met Jesus face to face. Her physical presence was an anchor loss – for her husband, children, parents – and our covenant family. She was the embodiment of a Titus 2 woman, committed to living out the hope of Jesus to the next generation of Altadena women. She would be the first to say, “Don't look at me, look at my Savior.” Rebecca was one of many Altadena spiritual mothers who lived and continue to live out the hope of the Gospel for me – women who model for me that Gospel freedom does not equal perfection. *Gospel freedom is telling the truth about yourself, so that you can receive and rest in the miracle of Christ's work on our behalf.* Not a week goes by that I don't recognize the sacred gift I have to share these truths with her grandchildren, as well as all your children.

These last two years at Altadena Valley have been ones of endless transition, yet through all the changes, laments, and joyful moments, God continues to weave His tapestry of redemption, just as He has done for the many generations previous. The reality that our covenant children are reaping the benefits of the saints before us...that is the glory of Christ. I am forever grateful.

Julia Wilson has gone on to know Christ and make Him known. His work in and through her life is beautiful.

One day, my (and your) physical presence will no longer be here at Altadena, but by God's grace, may the fingerprints of our glorious inheritance in Jesus be imprinted for many generations to come.

For Christ's Crown and Covenant,
Catie Lumpkin
Director of Children's Ministries
Altadena Valley Presbyterian Church

INTRODUCTION & TEACHING TIPS

This Advent guide is designed to help you and your family enjoy the mystery of the Christ child and to look forward to a daily time of celebration. There are 25 devotionals, one for each day of December leading up to and including Christmas Day. Each devotional includes a verse, a brief explanation, a prayer, and an activity for children. Following this is a section for teenagers and adults that is more challenging. Scriptures are from the New American Standard Version unless otherwise noted.



I've also included several website links and Web-based activities (indicated by this icon), so keep your laptop, tablet, or smartphone handy.

The activity sections include related games, Christmas hymns, easy-to-make crafts, gift ideas, and some of my personal family traditions. Have fun with it – if you're using this guide with family members, try to make the devotional time the highlight of their day. Surprise them with candy or small gifts. Remember, you are competing with iPhones, video games, school parties, the malls, and endless toy commercials on TV.

Finally, relax and pray. If the devotional time is a train wreck, there is always tomorrow or bedtime or anytime during the day to communicate the truths of the Gospel through the Christmas story. Try not to force-feed the Gospel. Also, don't forget to pray for God's protection over your devotional time. Satan is always more active when we are intentional about preaching the Gospel to ourselves and to our children.

Let's Begin!



Watch this 4-minute video of the Christmas story as told by the children of St. Paul's Church, Auckland, New Zealand. It is both excellent and engaging!

youtube.com/watch?v=kWq60oyrHVQ

December 1

THE PROPHECY

Isaiah 9:2

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land,
the light will shine on them.

Isaiah was a prophet who spoke of the coming of the Lord. What is a prophet? A prophet is an inspired teacher or proclaimer of the Word of God. Isaiah prophesied during a very dark time in Israel's history. The people had forgotten God and did not obey him and had been ravaged by the Syrians and the Assyrians. Isaiah spoke of the people seeing a great light. What happens when you shine a light on a dark path? You begin to see clearly. You can see the next step. You can find your way. That is what Jesus does. He shows us the way to God.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for prophets like Isaiah who listened to you and obeyed. Help us to want the light of your presence and to come to you to confess the wrong things we have done. Thank you for sending Jesus who takes away our sins and makes us right with you.

Children's Activity

For older children, play hide-and-seek in the dark with a flashlight. The person who is "it" uses the flashlight to spot other players hiding. For younger children, sit in a darkened room and shine a flashlight on an object and let children name it. Or make shadow puppets on the wall and let everyone guess what the images are.

Teens & Adults

"Popcorn read"* Isaiah 9:1-7. How do verses 3-7 apply to verse 2? Did you know that the words of Isaiah continued to be read in the synagogue during Jesus' time, nearly 800 years after the prophet died? Jesus probably heard more about what Isaiah had to say than any other prophet. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his ministry by reading a passage from the prophet Isaiah and applying the message to his own ministry. Read Luke 4:16-21. What was it like for Jesus to be handed the book of Isaiah, to read from it, and say, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"? What was it like for the people in the synagogue?

There are more than 300 prophecies surrounding the birth and death of Christ. Here are just a few:

- He would be born in Bethlehem and be from the tribe of Judah. Note the double prophecy of the place, Bethlehem, and the tribe, Judah (Micah 5:2, Genesis 49:10). See Matthew 2:1.
- Christ would enter Jerusalem on a colt with the reception of multitudes rejoicing (Zechariah 9:9). See Luke 19:35-38.
- The actual time of Christ's advent and execution (Daniel 9:26-27). See Matthew 2:2 and John 12:23.

* "Popcorn read" is a read-aloud method whereby one person begins reading and then calls on someone else to begin reading where he/she left off. For example, if I began reading a passage, after a few sentences I would say "Popcorn Rachel" and she would start reading the next few sentences. Rachel would then say "Popcorn Sarah" and it would be Sarah's turn to read. This keeps the group engaged and gives the reader some control over how much they want to read aloud.

December 2

THE ANGEL GABRIEL

Luke 1:26-27

Now in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph; and the virgin's name was Mary.

Parent Tip: As you lead this devotional time, use the KWLA (Know, Want, Learn, Apply) method to determine what your children know about angels. What do your children *know*, what do they *want* to know, what did they *learn*, and how will they *apply* what they learned?

Do angels really exist? What do they look like? What do they do? An angel may have many roles but is traditionally thought of as a messenger from God. Gabriel was *sent by God himself*. Also, an angel is never depicted in Scripture as a chubby little infant with wings, but rather as a mighty warrior, sent by God to reveal his holy will.

The angel Gabriel is mentioned in other places in the Bible, including Daniel 8:15-26 and Luke 1:11-38. In Daniel, Gabriel gives an explanation of Daniel's visions. In Luke, he appears to Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, and tells him that John will be the forerunner of the Messiah.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for sending the angel Gabriel to Mary. Thank you for sending angels to tell us your will and guide us in the things we should do to follow you.

Children's Activity

Dress up as angels. Make halos out of chenille stems; use white pillowcases as robes. Make wings out of poster board and glitter, or just pretend. Then act out Luke 1:26-27 and sing like the angels do (Isaiah 6:3)!

Teens & Adults

Angels play different roles. An angel's heavenly role is worship! Have each person choose a role listed below, use the verses to research the role, and then explain it to the group. Then ask which one is their favorite. Allow each person to describe what they think an angel looks like.

Revealing and guiding – Angels serve as messengers to communicate God's will to men. They helped reveal the law to Moses (Acts 7:52-53), gave instruction to Joseph about the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1-2), and spoke of Jesus' resurrection to the women at the tomb (Luke 24:1-8).

Providing – God has used angels to provide for physical needs such as food for Hagar (Genesis 21:17-20), Elijah (I Kings 19:6), and Christ after his temptation (Matthew 4:11).

Protecting – Angels keep God’s people out of physical danger, as in the case of Daniel in the lions’ den and his three friends in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3 and 6).

Delivering – Angels get God’s people out of danger once they’re in it. Angels released the apostles from prison in Acts 5 and rescued Peter in Acts 12.

Strengthening and encouraging – Angels strengthened Jesus after his temptation (Matthew 4:11), encouraged the apostles to keep preaching after releasing them from prison (Acts 5:19-20), and told Paul that everyone on his ship would survive the impending shipwreck (Acts 27:23-25).

Caring for believers at the moment of death – In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, we read that angels carried the spirit of Lazarus to “Abraham’s bosom” when he died (Luke 16:22).

December 3

THE FAVORED ONE

Luke 1:28

And coming in, he said to her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

What does it mean to be favored? Have you ever been the favorite? It is more likely that you have been the rejected one, the last one chosen for the team or the person sitting alone at the lunch table. God’s favor is even sweeter than being “the favorite.” As a matter of fact, the Bible condemns seeking the favor of men (Galatians 1:10). How disappointing for such an approval seeker as myself! God’s favor is life giving. It is the kind of favor that calms our fears, gives us value, saves us from death, and sets us free. He rejoices over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17, NIV)! He shows us favor by being with us, by making a way for us to experience his presence. That is what Jesus’ birth did for us.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for choosing us. Thank you for showing us favor and being present with us every day.

Children’s Activity

Make sugar cookies. (I highly recommend Pillsbury slice ’n bake.) Let children decorate their cookies and then invite someone to choose a favorite. You might even post pictures of their creations on Instagram or Facebook and let people vote for their favorite cookie. Contrast how different God’s favor is from earthly favor. The pursuit of earthly favor is full of fear – fear of not being liked, of not being chosen, of being alone. But God’s favor is all about grace. It is undeserved and overflowing, a perfect love that casts out fear.

Teens & Adults

Think about Mary. The angel Gabriel (not just any angel but one of the biggies!) appears and says, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” How would you react? Mary was “greatly troubled” at first (v. 29) but then was able to receive this profound message from God. What does it mean to be favored? Did Mary earn it somehow? It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that she was a model believer, obedient and faithful, and that is why God chose her. But it is clear from this passage that she was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus because *God acted on her behalf*, not because of her great faith or obedience.

Spend a few minutes brainstorming about what it means to be favored by God. Write out everyone's ideas. Look at the verses below, or use a concordance to look up verses about God's favor, and discuss.

- You have granted me life and lovingkindness; and your care has preserved my spirit. Job 10:12
- For it is you who blesses the righteous man, O Lord. You surround him with favor, as with a shield. Psalm 5:12
- For his anger is but for a moment, his favor is for a lifetime; weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning. Psalm 30:5
- The Lord make his face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance on you, and give you peace. Numbers 6:25-26
- Who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion, who satisfies your years with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle. Psalm 103:4-5
- “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope.” Jeremiah 29:11
- Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that his divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence. II Peter 1:2-3

December 4

DO NOT BE AFRAID

Luke 1:30

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.”

How many times does God speak to us in his Word about fear? A lot! God knows how fearful we are. What are you afraid of? What can you do about it? What does the Bible say about it? As I write this, I am journeying through cancer, the inoperable, incurable kind. I have struggled with many emotions – grief, sadness, despair, confusion, anger – but rarely do I have any fear. God’s perfect love casts out fear. Jesus was born so that we could have a relationship with him and never be afraid again. Now that’s a reason to celebrate during this Christmas season.

Parent Tip: This might be a good time to examine your child’s relationship with God. Does he/she have one? If not and your child expresses a desire for that, have them repeat the following prayer after you:

Dear God, I know that I am a sinner. I know that you sent Jesus to be my Savior, and that he died on the cross to take the punishment for my sins. I know that Jesus rose from the dead and is coming back someday. Please forgive me of all of my sins, and come into my life and change me. Please help me to follow you for the rest of my life. Thank you for saving me and taking me to heaven when I die. In

Children’s Activity

Watch the Veggie Tales video *Where’s God When I’m Scared?* or *The League of Incredible Vegetables*. Or snuggle up on the couch with a blanket and talk about how much you enjoy being their parent and protecting them and keeping them safe. Tell a story about a time when you were really scared and God comforted you.

Teens & Adults

Look up these verses on fear. Choose one to memorize and claim it as your own.

Psalm 23:4

Psalm 27:1

Psalm 118:6

Psalm 56:3-4

Isaiah 41:10

Isaiah 41:13

II Timothy 1:7

Deuteronomy 31:6

Romans 8:15

Hebrews 13:5-6

I John 4:18

Close by thanking God for his perfect love.



December 5

THE NAME JESUS

Luke 1:31

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.

You shall call him Jesus! Jesus means Savior. God chose Mary to bear a son and call him Jesus, the Savior of the world. What does he save us from? First and foremost, from eternal damnation – a life lived forever without his presence. But what about here on earth? Here, he saves us from worry, anger, despair, selfishness, sadness, fear, addiction, loneliness – from just about any prison we create for ourselves, God provides a way of deliverance. Think about the many different names for Jesus. Consider how these names help you define who God is and understand the salvation he provides. Here are a few:

Alpha and Omega (Revelation 1:8)

Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6)

Redeemer (Job 19:25)

Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6)

King of Kings (1 Timothy 6:15)

Mighty God (Isaiah 9:6)

Prayer

Dear Jesus, thank you for being born on earth to be our God, our Counselor, our King of Kings. We praise you and thank you for who you are and ask that you help us know you better every day.

Children's Activity

Make paper chain garlands out of red and green construction paper. Cut sheets of paper into 1- x 8- inch strips. Write a name for Jesus on each one. Make a paper chain garland by linking each strip together and stapling or using a glue stick.

Teens & Adults

Here is a more exhaustive list of the names of Jesus. Study them together, then pair up and play "Password." To play, write the names on strips of paper and place into a hat. Your teammate draws a name out of a hat and describes it, and you have to guess the name. To make the game easier, write all the names on a piece of paper and display it to give the guesser multiple choices.

Beloved (Matthew 12:18)

I am (John 8:58)

Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14)

Lamb of God (John 1:29)

Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14)

Eternal Father (Isaiah 9:6)

Good Shepherd (John 10:11)

Rock (Isaiah 26:4)

Christ (Luke 9:20)

December 6

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Luke 1:35

The angel answered and said unto her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason, the Holy Child shall be called the Son of God.”

Prior to the passage above, Mary had asked the angel Gabriel how she was to bear a son, because she was a virgin. Good question! Gabriel answered by telling her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her. The angel also told Mary about her relative Elizabeth, who despite her old age had conceived a son and was now in her sixth month. Gabriel closed by saying, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” (v. 37)

Isn't that what happens when we live by the Spirit and not the flesh? We begin to believe nothing is impossible, absolutely nothing. Throughout Scripture, the Holy Spirit empowers and comforts. But it was not until Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) that the Spirit became available to anyone who believes. Think back to creation. In Genesis 1:2, the Spirit of God moved over the waters. The same Spirit came upon Mary. The angel proclaimed that the Holy Spirit with all its power “will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring will be called the Son of God.” Jesus is therefore holy because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born from no earthly father (so had no original sin), and lived a perfect life. What a beautiful mystery! Now that's the Christmas Spirit!

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for the Holy Spirit. Help me to remember to ask for the Holy Spirit when I need help. Thank you for the power of the Holy Spirit, who assures me that nothing is impossible with God.

Children's Activity

Use an apple to explain the Trinity. Instructions for this object lesson are in the back of this booklet.

Teens & Adults

Watch *A Christmas Carol* (the one with Patrick Stewart is my favorite). How is the spirit of Christmas portrayed in the movie? How does it compare with the real Spirit of Christmas, the Holy Spirit? If you need help, use the following verses:

Matthew 12:18

Luke 24:39

Romans 15:19

I Corinthians 2:13

II Corinthians 13:14

Galatians 5:16

Ephesians 5:18

Ephesians 6:17

December 7

PRAISE HIM

Psalm 66:1-2

Shout joyfully to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious.

One of the first reactions to being filled with the Holy Spirit is praise and worship. Why? Because we are no longer afraid. Look back at Luke 1:30 and 34. Mary was afraid and had questions. But when Gabriel told her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, Mary's next response was complete calmness and trust. That is what the Holy Spirit does – he calms and comforts. Read Psalm 66:1-2 above. It is filled with unbridled emotion, not restrained or subdued. How do we learn to shout joyfully to God and give him the praise he is due? Try this: Think about someone you love here on earth. When you love someone, you often talk about how wonderful they are. Do the same thing with God. Read the rest of Psalm 66 and focus on verses 1-3, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 16.

Prayer

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of his benefits. (Psalm 103:1-2)

Children's Activity

Play some praise music and sing, dance, and shout! Pick a favorite psalm and sing it together. Another idea is to start a "thankfulness journal." Begin by listing things you are thankful for. You might write them on slips of paper or keep a small notebook at the kitchen table. We used to do this during Thanksgiving, but I think it is just as appropriate during Advent. Psalm 66:16 reads, "Come and hear, all who fear God, and I will tell of what he has done for my soul."

Teens & Adults



Examine your prayer life. Does it include praise? My prayer life is often more like a laundry list of requests, and I ironically treat God as if he were Santa Clause – "I've been good, so would you do these things for me and my friends?" Anathema!! Spend some time in prayer that consists of only praising God. This may be awkward at first. I often use the Psalms or praise music to lead me into a time of prayer. Don't have any praise music? Start by downloading Hillsong's "I Will Exalt You" or Matt Redman's "10,000 Reasons". Bow your head. Listen quietly. See what happens. Praise his holy name!



December 8

THE GOVERNMENT

Luke 2:1

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

Caesar Augustus issued a decree that everyone be enrolled in a census. Who was Caesar Augustus? He was one of the most successful Roman emperors. Born in 63 B.C., he reigned for 45 years until his death in A.D. 14. He was the great-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar and used the popularity of his uncle's name to rally the army behind him. Also, he built roads that later would be used to spread Christianity. He was a benevolent dictator but worshipped pagan gods and allowed himself to be worshipped as a god.

Note two things in Luke 2:4-5. First, Joseph's obedience to ungodly rulers, and second, yet another fulfillment of prophecy regarding Jesus' birth. Micah 5:2 reads, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity." Joseph obeyed his government's almost impossible request, and in so doing God was glorified by this fulfillment of prophecy made hundreds of years prior.

Prayer

Thank you for a government to rule over us. Thank you that every government ruler is in your hands and nothing escapes your notice. Even when we don't like what the government says, we do not have to worry because your presence surrounds us. (Read Psalm 139:7-16, which speaks of God's sustaining presence.)

Children's Activity

Prepare a skit for the passage above. Have one child dress up as Caesar – use ivy for a headdress and a sheet for a toga. The rest of your children can be Caesar's citizens, and they have to do what he commands. Take turns with the different roles so that everyone gets a chance to be Caesar.

Teens & Adults

Caesar Augustus brought peace and prosperity to the Roman Empire. Most significantly, he allowed Israel to worship God and stay true to its culture. He changed the way governors were elected, which ended much corruption, and encouraged art, literature, and philosophy. Think about our government leaders today. What should our response be when we disagree with them? What does the Bible say about it? Check it out!

December 9

THE CENSUS

Luke 2:3

And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city.

This enrollment was a census and was the first of its kind to be ordered. A census is a count of the population, and in early Rome it also included a property evaluation. If you were registered, you paid taxes. The census was mandated throughout the Roman Empire, but most citizens just registered wherever they lived. Because Caesar Augustus allowed the Jews to worship God and remain culturally autonomous, they traveled to register in their historical tribal towns. This was the Jewish way.

Today in the U.S., census information is obtained by using a questionnaire covering such topics as place of residence, age, marital status, occupation, citizenship, language, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and education. From the responses, demographers derive data on population distribution, family composition, internal migration, and other facts. So a census is a means of identifying who you are. What would your identity be according to the census? How is it different from your identity in Christ? Read passages from Psalm 139 and Colossians 1:19-22 and 2:13-14 to get started.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for where we live and go to school. Thank you that our identities are in you and not where we live or how much money we have. Thank you for choosing us to serve you.

Children's Activity

Role-play taking a census. Use census-type questions or let children make up their own. Remember to give each child a turn as the census-taker. Finally, ask your children what makes them part of God's family. How does God see each one of them?

Teens & Adults

Choose a few verses from the list below to start a conversation about your identity in Christ. When is it hardest to believe that your real identity is in Christ? For me, it is when I start comparing myself to others.

Ephesians 1:4-5

John 1:12-13

Galatians 4:6-7

II Corinthians 1:21-22

John 15:15

Romans 8:14-15

Philippians 3:20

II Corinthians 5:17-21I

Corinthians 3:16

Romans 6:18I

John 3:1

December 10

THE JOURNEY

Luke 2:4-5

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register with Mary, who was engaged to him and was with child.

For Joseph and Mary, this meant a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem – about 70 miles. It took about three days and they probably arrived in the evening. Of course, we all know there was no place for them to stay, but we will talk about that later! Note the obedience of Joseph and Mary to make such an arduous journey, with Mary nine months pregnant and no apparent plan for where to stay or what to do if she went into labor. Surely they must have questioned whether this was God’s good plan for them and the Christ child she was carrying. Judging by Mary’s response back in Luke 1:38 – “May it be done to me according to your word” – she seems to have been at peace throughout the journey, although physically she must have been very uncomfortable.

Focus today on the journey. What must it have been like to travel day and night, nine months pregnant, to fulfill a mandate from an ungodly ruler who only wanted you registered so he could tax you? What kind of journey does God have you on as a family? Are you resisting his will or resting in his authority?

Prayer

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the obedience of Joseph and Mary. Help us to have the same attitude as Mary, submitting to your will no matter what.

Children’s Activity

Pretend you are going on a trip, not in a car or bus or train but on foot the whole way. Have the children pack a suitcase. What will you bring? What did Mary and Joseph pack for their journey to Bethlehem?

Teens & Adults

What does faith look like for you right now? What kind of journey are you on? Do you believe that God has a journey planned for you? See Jeremiah 29:11. Does it seem like everyone else is going somewhere *except* you? Begin writing your life story, starting with a timeline of major events. Focus on God’s faithfulness through each major/minor event in your life.

December 11

NO ROOM AT THE INN

Luke 2:7

And she gave birth to her first born son; and she wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Mary and Joseph have finally arrived in Bethlehem, and it is time for the Christ child to be born. Bethlehem would have been very crowded because of the census, and because they most likely arrived in the evening there was no place to stay. In those times, there weren't really such things as the hotels like we have today. You typically would have stayed with extended family. Most houses were shared with the animals that the family kept. People slept on an upper level and the animals lived on the ground floor. Mary and Joseph were actually in this lower level with the animals, not above them, because there was no other place to go.

Mary wrapped Jesus in swaddling clothes, as was the custom, and laid him in a manger. A manger is a trough, or long open box, for horses or cattle to eat from. Swaddling clothes are strips of cloths wrapped around newborn infants to make them feel snug and secure. Why did God choose such a lowly place for the Messiah's birth? Where would you have chosen for Jesus to be born? That God selected such a location certainly speaks of Christ's humility. No power, might, or pretense are seen in the manger.

Prayer

Thank you for sending baby Jesus to be born in a manger. Thank you for Mary and Joseph being his parents. Thank you for providing a place for him to be born. Help me to be happy with whatever you provide.

Children's Activity

Sing "Away in a Manger" together.

Teens & Adults

If you had been Joseph, what would you have done? How about Mary? Would you have kept looking for a suitable place for Jesus to be born? Verse 6 reads that "the days were completed for her to give birth," which means they had to stop looking because Jesus' birth was imminent. Are you like me? Do you keep persevering, trying to fix a situation when God is telling you to stop right where you are and be happy with his provision?

December 12

THE SHEPHERDS

Luke 2:8

In the same region, there were some shepherds staying out in the field and keeping watch over their flock by night.

What was it like to be a shepherd? Was it a fun job? Being a shepherd was considered a lowly occupation and a hard job, one often given to the youngest son or a slave for that reason. The Bible mentions shepherds and shepherding more than 200 times. Shepherds led sheep to pasture and water (Psalm 23:1-2) and protected them from wild animals (I Samuel 17:34-35). Shepherds guarded their flocks at night whether in the open (Luke 2:8) or in sheepfolds (Zephaniah 2:6) where they counted the sheep as they entered (Jeremiah 33:13). They took care of the sheep and even carried weak lambs in their arms (Isaiah 40:11).

Are you starting to get a feel for the metaphors? God takes care of us, his sheep, providing everything we need no matter our situation, whether exposed in the open or safe in the sheepfold. He carries us in his arms when we are too weak to walk. What a beautiful picture of his love. It is no wonder the angel appeared to the shepherds first to tell them of the birth of baby Jesus.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for being my Shepherd. I promise to walk with you always.

Children's Activity

Role-play being a shepherd and the sheep. Have fun!

Teens & Adults

Is God leading you to be a shepherd? He may be calling you to shepherd an entire congregation or just one person. What would it look like to shepherd someone?



December 13

THE ANGELS

Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,
“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.”

The Bible has a lot to say about angels (see December 2). In Luke 2:10-11, an angel fulfilled his primary role, to deliver a message. The angel told the shepherds that he had good news, for all people – that a child had been born who was Christ the Lord. Then in verse 13, we read of a multitude of angels that suddenly appeared and burst into song! You have to believe they filled the night sky! No wonder the first angel told the shepherds, “Do not be afraid!” When we praise God with our whole hearts, when we are so near to his presence, we can be tempted to fear. We are like Lucy riding on the back of Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. We may not feel safe at first, but then we experience his peace in a deeper, more profound way than ever before, and we know he is our only safe passage in this life. He is the only way to peace.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for the angels who showed us how to praise you. Thank you for giving us peace.

Children’s Activity

Sing a psalm of praise or the “Doxology”:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
Praise him all creatures here below,
Praise him above ye heavenly host,
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Teens & Adults

Did you know that Joseph was warned by an angel to escape Herod’s wrath and settle in Egypt? He moved his family to Nazareth only after Herod died (Matthew 2:13-23). Go back and review the different earthly roles of angels (see December 2). What do you remember? Has your attitude regarding angels changed since beginning these Advent readings? Have you been more aware of angels at work here on earth since December 2?

December 14

THE SHEPHERDS WANT ANSWERS

Luke 2:15

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another,
“Let us go straight to Bethlehem then and see this thing that has happened
which the Lord has made known to us.”

In verse 12, the angel told the shepherds to look for a sign: “You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” Did the shepherds know who Mary and Joseph were? Of course not. Did Mary know what the angel had said to the shepherds? No. But the shepherds found baby Jesus just as the angels had said. Don’t miss this! Can you imagine? Mary gives birth, wraps Jesus in swaddling clothes, lays him in the manger, and the angels tell the shepherds about it! No cell phones needed! Does God still communicate with us today? He does. It may be in a different way, but it is just as real and even more authentic because as believers we have the Holy Spirit within us, leading, guiding, comforting, and protecting us.

Prayer

Thank you for telling the shepherds about baby Jesus and how to find him. Thank you for your Holy Spirit who talks to us every day and shows us the way.

Children’s Activity

Play the whisper game. The first person whispers a sentence to the second person. The second person whispers what he heard to a third person and so on. The last person says the sentence out loud. Is it what the first person said? Probably not. How hard is it for us to listen to God?

Teens & Adults

Play a similar game to the one described above. In this game, everyone leaves the room and is invited back in one at a time. The first person reads a story and repeats it to the second person. The second person repeats the story to the third person with no help from anyone. Continue until everyone has a turn. How well did you communicate? How well did you listen?

December 15

THE SHEPHERDS PRAISE GOD

Luke 2:20

The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen,
just as had been told them.

Did you ever wonder why God chose shepherds to be the first to hear about baby Jesus? Why didn't the angels appear instead at a central gathering place – the market or the temple? I think it is because of the lowly status of the shepherds who, by definition, were humble people. A shepherd of people – a pastor – should also have this quality. Have you ever met an arrogant pastor trying to preach the Gospel? It is impossible. I brought a friend to our church recently, and as we left she commented on the humility of our pastor. “That is exactly what I am looking for in a pastor,” she said. That is what the world is looking for too, isn't it? Why is it so hard for us to glorify and praise God for all we have heard and seen? I think it might be because we lack the humility of a shepherd. You can't praise God and glorify God if you are focused on yourself, your needs, or your Christmas list.

Prayer

Dear God, we praise you for everything we see around us, for everything we hear, for your goodness and protection and providing everything we need every day.

Children's Activity

Step out on your deck or back porch and listen. What do you hear? What do you see? Spend some time with your family praising God today for what you see and hear.

Teens & Adults

As teenagers and adults, you see and hear A LOT! Take a day to unplug. Turn off the TV, the Wi-Fi, the cell phone, the texting. Don't even check Facebook or Instagram, and try to listen for God. Replace the silence with something that will help you focus on seeing and hearing God. Listen to a sermon, listen to Christian music, read God's Word or a devotional, or begin a Christian biography. What do you see? What do you hear? Glorify and praise God for it just as the shepherds did so long ago!



December 16

THE MAGI

Matthew 2:1

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.

The magi are often referred to as the three kings or the three wise men. They most likely were learned scholars who studied the stars. (Do not confuse this role with modern-day astrologers.) They were definitely men from the east (Arabia), which means they were probably from Babylon (Iraq) or Persia (Iran). They were also very rich as evidenced by the value of the gifts they brought and may have had quite an entourage. Some commentators believe there were as many as 14 magi with dozens of servants traveling with them.

What is important about this passage? Perhaps it is the fact that God is announcing Jesus' birth to the Gentiles. He first announced Jesus' birth to the Jewish shepherds in the fields and now to the Gentiles. John 10:10b reads, "I came that they [that means everyone] may have life and have it abundantly." Praise God! Read John 3:16, emphasizing "whoever."

Prayer

Thank you for the wise men. Thank you that they followed the star into Jerusalem and wanted to worship you even though they were not Jewish. Thank you for making salvation available to all of us who believe.

Children's Activity

Role-play the passage above. Make crowns out of card stock or construction paper. Crowns can be found at most dollar stores. (Does Burger King still have paper crowns??!!) Let your children pretend to be magi. Have fun!

Teens & Adults

How does the fact that the magi arrived in Jerusalem to look for baby Jesus affect us today? Why is it important?



December 17

THE STAR

Matthew 2:2

Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.

What do we know about the star? Was it a nova, a supernova, a comet? What we do know is that it was placed in the sky by God to guide the magi, who studied the stars, to baby Jesus. The magi saw a star that was so extraordinary they decided to follow it. Why did God choose to use a star to communicate with the wise men? Perhaps it was to speak to the magi in a way they could understand. God spoke to the Jewish shepherds through an angel and now speaks to the Gentile philosophers, or magi, through a star. God speaks to us in ways we can understand too. We have but to listen.

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for the star that you put in the sky for the magi. Thank you for all the stars in the sky to remind us of how powerful you are. We love you, Lord!

Children's Activity

Make stars out of yellow construction paper (and glitter if you are so inclined! I understand play dough is a great glitter picker upper). Hide them around the house. Let the children find them and get prizes.

Teens & Adults

Do you sometimes feel that no one speaks your language? That you are constantly misunderstood? By your parents? A girlfriend, boyfriend, or spouse? God speaks your language and he gave us his Word to communicate with us. Read it today and ask God to speak to you. He never fails.

December 18

KING HEROD

Matthew 2:3

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

When the magi arrived in Jerusalem, they asked Herod, “Where is he who has been born, king of the Jews?” Herod called the chief priests and scribes together, and they told him of the prophecy in Micah 5:2: “And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah, for out of you shall come forth a Ruler, who will shepherd my people Israel.” Of course Herod was troubled. The birth of a new king was a threat to his kingdom. And he routinely executed anyone who might take away his power. So Herod ordered that every male child under the age of two be murdered. But why was “all of Jerusalem troubled with him”?

It is strange that the magi went alone to pay homage to the newborn king. No one from the temple or city – either out of curiosity or courtesy – accompanied them. Why not? And why did they give information to Herod, a murderous king? The Bible mentions only the visits of the shepherds and the magi. What a privilege for these two groups, the Jewish shepherds and the Gentile magi.


Prayer

Thank you for baby Jesus. Thank you for protecting him from evil King Herod and all the other people who wanted to hurt him. We love you, Jesus.

Children’s Activity

Have your child dictate a story to you. It can be about today’s devotion or a modern-day birth. You may want to take this opportunity to tell your child about the events surrounding his birth. Who came to visit?

Teens & Adults

 Discuss why the Jewish leaders did not visit Jesus. Perhaps they preferred to submit to a godless king rather than pay homage to a baby who might oppose their present state of power. Sin is like that. It gives us the illusion of power and control, but it really enslaves. Consider the slavery of sin and how Jesus sets us free. What does it mean to be a slave to sin? Read Galatians 5:1-6. Go to merriam-webster.com to define the words freedom, yoke, slavery, circumcision, grace, righteousness, justified, law, and faith. Now reread the Galatians passage. Does it make more sense?

December 19

THE STAR LEADS THE MAGI

Matthew 2:9

...and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the child was.

The magi had traveled a great distance to find the Christ child, at least 500 miles. It would have taken many months to make the journey. How did they know where to go? They followed the star they had had seen at its rising! Think about the resolve of the magi. They had to travel a long time, following the star that they saw in the east until they reached Bethlehem, a small and insignificant town. The magi were more than curious; they were determined to see him who is called king of the Jews. (Matthew 2:2)

Prayer

Thank you for the magi and their determination to follow you. Help us to follow you today, no matter what it takes.

Children's Activity

Play the "Follow Me" game. One child is the leader. Everyone must follow wherever the leader goes until he stops. Take turns being the leader. Once the game is over, sing "We Three Kings."

Teens & Adults

What are your priorities? How strong is your resolve? What would you have done if you had been one of the wise men? Do you find it hard to persevere? Do you have goals? Are you able to follow through on what you have started? Ask for God's help in these areas today. Matthew 7:7 (NLT) reads, "Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. *Keep on seeking, and you will find.* Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you."

Note: Weakness is never a bad thing! It is only when we try to fix our weaknesses ourselves instead of running to the foot of the cross that we get into trouble!

December 20

THE MAGI WORSHIP BABY JESUS

Matthew 2:11

After coming into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother,
and they fell to the ground and worshipped him.

Picture the wise men arriving in Jerusalem and asking door to door, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” (Matthew 2:2). As was mentioned before, Herod heard about the inquiries and summoned the magi. When they were questioned by Herod, they had a ready answer: “We have come to worship him.” Isn’t that always the case when someone finds the Christ, the Holy One? There is nothing to do but worship him! The magi gave no such homage to King Herod, only to baby Jesus; they worshipped him. What a glorious day!

Now picture the wise men worshipping baby Jesus, with Mary and Joseph close by. Do you see the baby rejoicing? Do you hear the applause of heaven? This little one, fully God and fully man, was worshipped by the magi who were face down in awe of the newborn king. Let’s worship him today.

Prayer

We worship you, Jesus. We love you. We honor you. We praise you.

Children’s Activity

Sing “Joy to the World” (with gusto!).

Teens & Adults

Write your own song of praise. Worship the Lord today!

December 21

THE MAGI OFFER GIFTS

Matthew 2:11

Then, opening their treasures, they presented to him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Here are some traditional thoughts regarding the gifts of the magi:

- Gold was associated with kings, and given to Jesus as homage to the King of Kings.
- Frankincense was sometimes used in worship and therefore appropriate for Jesus.
- Myrrh was a perfume used in preparing a body for burial and foreshadowed Jesus' suffering and death.

Most probably these were gifts that were common to the area the magi were from, Arabia. The gifts were quite extravagant though and an indication of great wealth, and they showed honor to the baby Jesus and honor to Mary and Joseph. Does anything about the Christmas season trouble you? Is it the parties? The family get-togethers? The gift-giving? For most people (adults, anyway), it is the overwhelming list of Christmas gifts to buy. Commit your list to God and see what he leads you to do in this area.

Prayer

Thank you for the gifts the magi brought to Jesus. Thank you for the gift of your son. We love you, Jesus.

Children's Activity

Try these gift-giving ideas with your children. Draw names of family members and have each child make a gift for the name he has drawn. If your children are very young, drawing a picture is a good idea, or perhaps they can agree to share a favorite toy. In our family, we created coupons for each other. As our children got older, they made mix CDs, pajamas (yes, Robert made pajamas for his sister one year!), and sometimes performed a skit. Also, on Christmas Day instead of stacking all your gifts to open that are for you, stack them up according to the giver. Each child takes a turn being the giver. Your family may enjoy no structure at all. That is fine too! We did have a 24-hour rule for Christmas though. The children had 24 hours to enjoy their new toys without being forced to share. After that, the negotiations were endless.

Teens & Adults

Do you know that you are a gift? You are a gift from God to your parents, your brother and sisters, your friends, even to strangers. Do you know that God rejoices over you with singing? (Zephaniah 3:17) He loves you more than you can imagine. Meditate on this amazing truth!



December 22

WORSHIP THE LORD

Psalm 100:1-2 (NLT)

Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth! Worship the Lord with gladness.
Come before him singing with joy.

As Christmas Day approaches, take some time to worship. This may be a challenge with only three days remaining (and for grown-ups, a to-do list to check off). But, oh, the anticipation! Our verse today reads, “Worship the Lord with gladness.” What would that look like for you and your family? Do you sometimes find it hard to worship? Why is that? Perhaps it is because you are focused on yourself or your problems. Some of you may be experiencing such difficult circumstances, overwhelming debt, sickness or grief that worship seems impossible.

In I Samuel 30, we read that David wept until he could weep no more, and then God strengthened him. *God strengthened him*. It is often tempting to try to fix ourselves by avoiding or denying our circumstances. Sometimes we blame others or even God. The only answer is to turn to Jesus. As we focus on the incredible gift of the baby Jesus, worship will follow. Not the mopey, going-through-the-motions kind of worship, but the “shout with joy to the Lord” kind of worship. He is able!

Repent of going your own way and pray for the reality of his presence and the joy of his birth to invade your mind, body, and soul. Worship will follow. It always does!

Prayer

Thank you for showing us how to worship you. Help us to worship you every day even when we don't feel like it!

Children's Activity

Sing “Joy to the World”!

Teens & Adults

Sing, sing, sing!!

December 23

THE LORD IS GOOD

Psalm 100:4-5

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good; his lovingkindness is everlasting and his faithfulness to all generations.

Do you doubt God's goodness? We all have. It is hard to give thanks when the brokenness of this earthly life is so real. Perhaps you are like me, suffering with an incurable illness. Perhaps you are just disappointed with the way your life is turning out. Perhaps you are in terrible crisis or living in fear of the future, feeling nothing but despair. The most dangerous place we can be as believers is in a place without hope. Remember the hope of heaven, the hope in God's goodness, the hope that God's promises are true. Without hope, we are doomed to despair and are fertile ground for Satan's attacks.

What is the antidote for hopelessness? A grateful heart. Look back on God's faithfulness, his goodness. Look for the little things every day that God provides. Start a thankfulness journal. (I was prompted to do this after reading *One Thousand Gifts*.) Before you do anything, *pray*. Pray for God to change your heart. Recruit prayer warriors to support you and pray with you for a grateful heart. You simply cannot muster up a happy, grateful heart on your own.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for being so good to us. Thank you for your goodness. Thank you for loving us and taking care of us.

Children's Activity

On slips of paper, have children write down (or dictate it to you) something they are thankful for. You could also make this a drawing activity.

Teens & Adults

Same as children's activity above. Put all the slips of paper in a bowl. Read them one at a time and try to guess who wrote what.

December 24

PRINCE OF PEACE

Isaiah 9:6

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on his shoulders; and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

Which of these phrases speaks to you? The fact that Jesus was born a child and given to us (still overwhelms me!), or that he was given sovereignty, rule, and authority? How about Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, or Prince of Peace?

Let's talk about God as a counselor. Do you ever notice how you start to relax as soon as you ask God what he thinks? He is not just an adviser (a synonym for counselor) but a wonderful one. Synonyms for wonderful are "astonishing," "admirable," "excellent," or – my favorite – "extremely fine." He is our counselor, our mighty God, our eternal father. He is our peace.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, that we will celebrate your birthday tomorrow. Thank you for bringing peace to our world and being our counselor and father. We love you.

Children's Activity

Sing "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" or let children role-play the different aspects of God's character. For example, "Hello, I am King Jesus and I am a wonderful counselor. What questions can I answer for you today?!" If your children are younger, you can role-play with them.

Teens & Adults

Using today's verse, write a letter to God about the descriptive phrase that means the most to you. Be honest. Do you believe he is the prince of peace, a wonderful counselor? Do you lack peace in your life? Is God not a father to you but a harsh, demanding ruler? Express your thoughts to him (he already knows them) and ask him for a change of heart. Perhaps you have nothing but gratefulness for all his many attributes. Write to him about it – in first person. Go for it!

December 25

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Isaiah 7:14 (NLT)

Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means “God is with us”).

Let the celebrations begin (or continue)! Sing your favorite Christmas hymns. Worship the Lord with gladness and praise his holy name!



TRINITY OBJECT LESSON

For use with devotional on December 6

Materials

Apple

Knife

Plate

Object Lesson

There is one God but he has three parts:

- God the Father, who created the world
- God the Son (Jesus), who came to earth to save us from our sins by dying in our place
- God the Holy Spirit, who comforts and guides us

Together, they are called the Trinity. To better understand how three parts can be one, let's look at an apple. An apple has three parts:

- The skin, which protects the apple (*slice the apple in half*)
- The inside, which is good to eat (*slice the apple, leaving the core intact*)
- The core, which is not good to eat but has seeds so that more apples can be produced

Is the skin by itself an apple? Is the tasty part inside an apple? What about the seeds? No – no single part alone can be an apple. But put them together, and you have an apple! In a similar way, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are one.

Source: sharonministries.org.za/index.htm

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