



**LIGHT
OUR
WAY
TO
PEACE**

A PRAYER GUIDE FOR ADVENT



DEAR FRIENDS,

This is absolutely my favorite time of the year! Although fairly apathetic in younger years, something clicked a few years ago and I became the one who wants to hang Christmas lights, be the first one on the block with a Christmas tree, and make sure to do all the traditions. I think one of the reasons we like the Advent/Christmas season is because it's an excuse to practice what our hearts want all the time: Intentional, over-the-top, and obvious love for each other.

God's love for us in sending Christ was an intentional, over-the-top, obvious kind of love. It was a generous display. During the season of Advent, we have an opportunity to not only decorate the outside, but adorn the inside with remembrance of God's love displayed in the coming of Jesus Christ.

The following prayer guide was designed to help you immerse your heart in the coming of Christ. We do that by remembering, reliving, and rejoicing. The guide follows these practices and is divided as follows:

DECEMBER 1-17: *Remembering the Promise (Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah)*

DECEMBER 18-31: *Reliving the Story (The nativity story from Luke 1-2)*

JANUARY 1-6: *Rejoicing in the Presence (Psalms and Wisdom Literature for a new year)*

Additionally, each Sunday has a short guide for worshipping together as families, couples, or individuals.

This is our first project using a writing team. It was a lot of fun to hear different voices and see different gifts that God has given this church. I've introduced them below. Thank you team for all your hard work to serve us!

I hope you have a meaningful Advent, a merry Christmas, and a happy New Year!

Pastor Gray

MEET THE WRITING TEAM

Gray Ewing: Project Director, December 2

Bekah Ewing: Content Editor, December 11, December 20, December 30

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Jon Fuller: December 5, December 14, December 24, January 2

Kate Fuller: December 6, December 16, December 25, January 3

Lauren Kutsko: December 7, December 17, December 26 January 4

DECEMBER 1

SUNDAY

Worship for Families, Couples, or Individuals

SING

A cappella, with an instrument, or with a youtube video. Grab anyone around and sing together!

O COME, O COME EMMANUEL

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL AND RANSOM
CAPTIVE ISRAEL
THAT MOURNS IN LONELY EXILE HERE; UNTIL THE
SON OF GOD APPEAR
REJOICE! REJOICE! EMMANUEL
SHALL COME TO THEE, O ISRAEL.

O COME, THOU ROD OF JESSE, FREE; THINE OWN
FROM SATAN'S TYRANNY
FROM DEPTHS OF HELL THY PEOPLE SAVE; AND GIVE
THEM VICTORY O'ER THE GRAVE
REJOICE! REJOICE! EMMANUEL
SHALL COME TO THEE, O ISRAEL.

O COME, THOU DAY-SPRING, COME AND CHEER
OUR SPIRITS BY THINE ADVENT HERE
DISPERSE THE GLOOMY CLOUDS OF NIGHT AND
DEATH'S DARK SHADOWS PUT TO FLIGHT.
REJOICE! REJOICE! EMMANUEL
SHALL COME TO THEE, O ISRAEL.

O COME, THOU KEY OF DAVID, COME, AND OPEN
WIDE OUR HEAVENLY HOME;
MAKE SAFE THE WAY THAT LEADS ON HIGH; AND
CLOSE THE PATH TO MISERY.
REJOICE! REJOICE! EMMANUEL
SHALL COME TO THEE, O ISRAEL.

DISCUSS

Questions are simple enough for kids, but feel free to modify for adults or yourself.

1. What is this song about?
2. When have you felt the most lonely or gloomy?
3. How does Jesus comfort us?

PLAY

The sabbath is a perfect time to be together and enjoy the season. If you can't today, choose another day for this activity

Build a Fire! Serve Hot Cocoa and Candy Canes

DECEMBER 2

THE PATIENCE OF THE PROPHETS

7 BE PATIENT, THEREFORE, BROTHERS, UNTIL THE
COMING OF THE LORD. SEE HOW THE FARMER
WAITS FOR THE PRECIOUS FRUIT OF THE EARTH,
BEING PATIENT ABOUT IT, UNTIL IT RECEIVES THE
EARLY AND THE LATE RAINS.

8 YOU ALSO, BE PATIENT. ESTABLISH YOUR HEARTS,
FOR THE COMING OF THE LORD IS AT HAND.

9 DO NOT GRUMBLE AGAINST ONE ANOTHER,
BROTHERS, SO THAT YOU MAY NOT BE JUDGED;
BEHOLD, THE JUDGE IS STANDING AT THE DOOR.
10 AS AN EXAMPLE OF SUFFERING AND PATIENCE,
BROTHERS, TAKE THE PROPHETS WHO SPOKE IN THE
NAME OF THE LORD..

JAMES 5:7-10

If there is one emotion that characterizes the advent season it is anticipation—children anticipating gifts, grown-ups anticipating days off, food, and family time. All of us wondering if we will feel something special or if we will feel sad or if we will feel nothing at all. Anticipation is a kind of active waiting. There are ways to wait with joy and hope, and there are ways to wait in frustration or the expectation of disappointment. Anyone who has waited for a loved one to exit an airplane, and waited at a supermarket checkout lane has experienced both.

The kind of anticipation we are being invited into during this advent season is both realistic and joy-filled. We are given two biblical examples of patient people: Farmers and Prophets. Both of them could conceive of a future that was more abundant than the present. And both were also plagued by hard work and hardship. In the end, though, their hope rested on the future that was worth the wait. No matter what we are experiencing right now, this time of year is about believing again that because of Jesus, what we are waiting for is worth it. The day of the Lord is at hand. Is your heart established in hope?

*Gracious Father,
We know that a thousand years to You, is as a day.
Your patience is perfect and perpetual.
You are not slow, as we think of slow
But rather you wait for us to repent
and turn to you.
Make the fruit of your patient Spirit to grow in us, we
pray.
Amen*

DECEMBER 3

EVERYTHING MADE GLAD

1 THE WILDERNESS AND THE DRY LAND SHALL BE
GLAD;
THE DESERT SHALL REJOICE AND BLOSSOM LIKE THE
CROCUS;
2 IT SHALL BLOSSOM ABUNDANTLY
AND REJOICE WITH JOY AND SINGING.
THE GLORY OF LEBANON SHALL BE GIVEN TO IT,
THE MAJESTY OF CARMEL AND SHARON.
THEY SHALL SEE THE GLORY OF THE LORD,
THE MAJESTY OF OUR GOD.
3 STRENGTHEN THE WEAK HANDS,
AND MAKE FIRM THE FEEBLE KNEES.
4 SAY TO THOSE WHO HAVE AN ANXIOUS HEART,
"BE STRONG; FEAR NOT!
BEHOLD, YOUR GOD
WILL COME WITH VENGEANCE,
WITH THE RECOMPENSE OF GOD.
HE WILL COME AND SAVE YOU."
5 THEN THE EYES OF THE BLIND SHALL BE OPENED,
AND THE EARS OF THE DEAF UNSTOPPED;
6 THEN SHALL THE LAME MAN LEAP LIKE A DEER,
AND THE TONGUE OF THE MUTE SING FOR JOY.
FOR WATERS BREAK FORTH IN THE WILDERNESS,
AND STREAMS IN THE DESERT;
7 THE BURNING SAND SHALL BECOME A POOL,
AND THE THIRSTY GROUND SPRINGS OF WATER;
IN THE HAUNT OF JACKALS, WHERE THEY LIE DOWN,
THE GRASS SHALL BECOME REEDS AND RUSHES.
ISAIAH 35:1-7

Winter is often characterized as a season of slowing down. Plants go dormant, animals hibernate, and perhaps you too find yourself plodding towards the winter months with less vitality, less energy, and less hope. We watch as the advent season is rebranded through Christmas shopping, holiday parties, and peppermint lattes, pointing our attention towards all we want instead of all we have been given. Some of us may feel winter is the loneliest season as we experience disjointed family celebrations and unfulfilled expectations.

In Advent, we receive an invitation—an invitation to come towards God's presence and experience a taste of His renewal. We are invited into abundant life in the midst of a season of slowness. This is where God creates hopefulness out of our weariness, promising that the mute will sing, the lame will leap, and the eyes of the blind will be opened. Streams will flow in the desert again. The sun will shine, even in the coldest winter.

God does not say how long our seasons of winter may be. But He promises that he will be with us throughout them, and that they will end in gladness (Isaiah 35:1-2). We can ease our anxious hearts with the promise that He will come and save (Isaiah 35:4). How do you see God's renewing power working in your life right now?

*Father God,
Today we acknowledge your closeness
Even in our areas of fear and loneliness.
The darkness can never overcome
Your marvelous light.
Give us eyes to see your acts of renewal
And hearts that wait on your timing with gladness.
Amen*

DECEMBER 4

THE PILGRIM'S WAY

8 AND A HIGHWAY SHALL BE THERE,
AND IT SHALL BE CALLED THE WAY OF HOLINESS;
THE UNCLEAN SHALL NOT PASS OVER IT.
IT SHALL BELONG TO THOSE WHO WALK ON THE
WAY;
EVEN IF THEY ARE FOOLS, THEY SHALL NOT GO
ASTRAY.
9 NO LION SHALL BE THERE,
NOR SHALL ANY RAVENOUS BEAST COME UP ON IT;
THEY SHALL NOT BE FOUND THERE,
BUT THE REDEEMED SHALL WALK THERE.
10 AND THE RANSOMED OF THE LORD SHALL
RETURN
AND COME TO ZION WITH SINGING;
EVERLASTING JOY SHALL BE UPON THEIR HEADS;
THEY SHALL OBTAIN GLADNESS AND JOY,
AND SORROW AND SIGHING SHALL FLEE AWAY.

ISAIAH 35: 8-10

Here Isaiah's prophecy guarantees Israel's return from exile. Yet all who have entered through the door of Jesus Christ now walk along the "Way of Holiness." Have you considered this marvelous path before you? It is a highway most safe and sure, because it was made for and belongs to the feet of the redeemed. Have you considered this highway's end? We are headed toward the city of Zion, the fulfillment of gladness and joy. In what way are we to enter into such glory? With singing. For God's people cannot help but sing for the everlasting joy that has crowned them.

Nevertheless, it may be that you have journeyed long on the highway and you now come to this Advent season weary. Take heart, for even in weariness, your arrival at Zion is certain. Or maybe you find yourself in a place of deep yearning to see your hope in Christ realized. Take comfort, even such yearnings belong in the believer's song. Even so, let us sing of the everlasting joy that has been set before us, while we endure sorrow and sighing a little longer. Let us praise Emmanuel, who came to earth to secure our path there.

*Lord Jesus,
You came to secure our victory along
the Way of Holiness.
Thank you for this precious gift.
As we celebrate Your arrival upon this earth,
Praising You as God with us.
May we also celebrate our sure arrival
to Your holy city,
Praising You as the true Promise Keeper.
As we engage in the festivities
of this bustling season,
Steady our hearts
that they may rest in Your assurances.
Rejuvenate our spirits
with tastes of Your everlasting joy.
Amen*

DECEMBER 5

THE COMING RIGHTEOUS KINGDOM

1 THERE SHALL COME FORTH A SHOOT FROM THE STUMP OF JESSE, AND A BRANCH FROM HIS ROOTS SHALL BEAR FRUIT.

2 AND THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD SHALL REST UPON HIM, THE SPIRIT OF WISDOM AND UNDERSTANDING,

THE SPIRIT OF COUNSEL AND MIGHT, THE SPIRIT OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE FEAR OF THE LORD.

3 AND HIS DELIGHT SHALL BE IN THE FEAR OF THE LORD. HE SHALL NOT JUDGE BY WHAT HIS EYES SEE,

OR DECIDE DISPUTES BY WHAT HIS EARS HEAR,

4 BUT WITH RIGHTEOUSNESS HE SHALL JUDGE THE POOR, AND DECIDE WITH EQUITY FOR THE MEEK OF THE EARTH;

AND HE SHALL STRIKE THE EARTH WITH THE ROD OF HIS MOUTH, AND WITH THE BREATH OF HIS LIPS HE SHALL KILL THE WICKED.

5 RIGHTEOUSNESS SHALL BE THE BELT OF HIS WAIST, AND FAITHFULNESS THE BELT OF HIS LOINS.

6 THE WOLF SHALL DWELL WITH THE LAMB,

AND THE LEOPARD SHALL LIE DOWN WITH THE YOUNG GOAT,

AND THE CALF AND THE LION AND THE FATTENED CALF TOGETHER;

AND A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM.

7 THE COW AND THE BEAR SHALL GRAZE;

THEIR YOUNG SHALL LIE DOWN TOGETHER;

AND THE LION SHALL EAT STRAW LIKE THE OX.

8 THE NURSING CHILD SHALL PLAY OVER THE HOLE OF THE COBRA, AND THE WEANED CHILD SHALL PUT HIS HAND ON THE ADDER'S DEN.

9 THEY SHALL NOT HURT OR DESTROY

IN ALL MY HOLY MOUNTAIN;

FOR THE EARTH SHALL BE FULL OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE LORD AS THE WATERS COVER THE SEA.

ISAIAH 11:1-9

Some people really know how to give great gifts. Somehow, they seem to figure out exactly what you need, even if you didn't know you needed it. In the time of Isaiah the prophet, the nation of Israel knew their need, but Isaiah told them that God's gift of a savior would be much more wonderful than they could imagine. He reminded them that God had promised that His salvation would come through the line of King David, and that when this Savior came, He would right all wrongs. To a nation trampled by war, God promised peace between mortal enemies. To a people impoverished by the armies of ungodly and unjust rulers, He promised justice and relief. To a leaderless people, He promised a wise, understanding, mighty King. And He gave them exactly what they needed in the person of Jesus.

Today, we look back on how God fulfills His promises to His people, and we rejoice in the gift of Jesus the Messiah. But we also stand with the Israelites and look forward with hope to the future rule of the Prince of Peace, when the lion will lie down with the lamb forever, and when all the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God.

Take a moment to praise God for his mighty gifts and to prayerfully envision what God's ultimate peace would look like in your life today.

*Lord, we wait for you, and the blessings you bring:
Wisdom and understanding
Wise counsel and strength
Knowledge and fear of you
Righteousness, faithfulness, and justice
True peace among all people
And a renewed world that knows and worships you,
Come quickly, Lord. Amen.*

DECEMBER 6

THE END OF WAR

1 THE WORD THAT ISAIAH THE SON OF AMOZ SAW
CONCERNING JUDAH AND JERUSALEM.

2 IT SHALL COME TO PASS IN THE LATTER DAYS
THAT THE MOUNTAIN OF THE HOUSE OF THE LORD
SHALL BE ESTABLISHED AS THE HIGHEST OF THE
MOUNTAINS,

AND SHALL BE LIFTED UP ABOVE THE HILLS;
AND ALL THE NATIONS SHALL FLOW TO IT,

3 AND MANY PEOPLES SHALL COME, AND SAY:
“COME, LET US GO UP TO THE MOUNTAIN OF THE
LORD,

TO THE HOUSE OF THE GOD OF JACOB,
THAT HE MAY TEACH US HIS WAYS
AND THAT WE MAY WALK IN HIS PATHS.”

FOR OUT OF ZION SHALL GO FORTH THE LAW,
AND THE WORD OF THE LORD FROM JERUSALEM.

4 HE SHALL JUDGE BETWEEN THE NATIONS,
AND SHALL DECIDE DISPUTES FOR MANY PEOPLES;
AND THEY SHALL BEAT THEIR SWORDS INTO
PLOWSHARES,

AND THEIR SPEARS INTO PRUNING HOOKS;
NATION SHALL NOT LIFT UP SWORD AGAINST
NATION,

NEITHER SHALL THEY LEARN WAR ANYMORE.

5 O HOUSE OF JACOB,
COME, LET US WALK
IN THE LIGHT OF THE LORD.

ISAIAH 2:1-5

Shalom. Peace. We long for the end of conflict, whether spats between our toddlers on the playground or seemingly endless threats of annihilation on the world stage.

Wars and rumors of war have abounded from the beginning, in the Garden. Brother against brother. One image bearer against another.

We long for the end of war. And here in Isaiah, the promise of peace is presented. Not just absence of conflict, but hordes of people, nations, streaming toward God on His holy mountain. People who purpose to know and obey God. And this longing results in physical action. Swords? No. No more swords. Plowshares. Garden tools. A world in which we cultivate and do not destroy. We are not there yet. But Jesus Christ ushers in this Kingdom, and gives us a foretaste. Peace. Shalom. Restoration. Therefore we have hope.

*Oh, Father, we are tired, weary of conflict
Personal, professional, and political.
Instead of cultivating peace,
We often cut and destroy.
Help us, Lord Jesus to be like you.
Begin with our hearts; transform them.
Repurpose our words; conform them.
Reverse our actions; reform them,
So that we may be a light to the world
And show your peace in our everyday lives.
We long for the end of war;
Let peace reign in us.*

DECEMBER 7

LIGHT OUR WAY TO PEACE

2 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.

3 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.

4 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.

5 AND HE SHALL BE THEIR PEACE.

MICAH 5:2-5A

We try our best to craft peace and security. However, our efforts at times can feel hollow, frantic, exhausted, and desperate to arrive at the moment of peace always just missing it. Seemingly, we are just out of reach of the security we work so hard to achieve. Our rational mind may say, "Perhaps if I just did one more thing, peace would arrive for me and my house." Despite our beautiful and creative efforts, we simply cannot create peace for ourselves. We cannot earn our way to the security of God's peace; all that is required is to accept God's presence-- His gift to us.

It can feel extremely counter-intuitive to stop crafting our own peace. Many of us believe we aren't worthy of security unless we earn it on our own. How do we actually dwell in His freely available security and peace? Those of us who have heard these Advent Scriptures year after year may have trouble fully appreciating God's startling logic. Micah calls us to see God's faithfulness in surprising ways, to look where we might not expect, perhaps in the humble places of our heart. Can we exhale and release our cares to the One who knows, sees and cares for us? Be still my child and dwell securely for He shall be your peace. He has come for you.

*Prince of Peace,
Your presence is the peace we deeply want to know.
Your goodness and mercy follow us
in the midst of our wanderings.
Lead us away from our striving.
Light our way back to Your peace.
Patiently wait for us to remember who we are--
Your deeply loved children with whom you long to dwell
in peace.
Amen*

DECEMBER 8

SUNDAY

Worship for Families, Couples, or Individuals

SING

A cappella, with an instrument, or with a youtube video. Grab anyone around and sing together!

COME THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS

COME, THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS
BORN TO SET THY PEOPLE FREE;
FROM OUR FEARS AND SINS RELEASE US,
LET US FIND OUR REST IN THEE.
ISRAEL'S STRENGTH AND CONSOLATION,
HOPE OF ALL THE EARTH THOU ART;
DEAR DESIRE OF EVERY NATION,
JOY OF EVERY LONGING HEART.

BORN THY PEOPLE TO DELIVER,
BORN A CHILD AND YET A KING,
BORN TO REIGN IN US FOREVER,
NOW THY GRACIOUS KINGDOM BRING.
BY THINE OWN ETERNAL SPIRIT
RULE IN ALL OUR HEARTS ALONE;
BY THINE ALL SUFFICIENT MERIT,
RAISE US TO THY GLORIOUS THRONE

DISCUSS

Questions are simple enough for kids, but feel free to modify for adults or yourself.

1. What is this song about?
2. What is something that you are having trouble waiting for?
3. What does it mean to find our rest in God?

PLAY

The sabbath is a perfect time to be together and enjoy the season. If you can't today, choose another day for this activity

Bake and decorate Christmas cookies (Give some to your neighbors!)

DECEMBER 9

HE WILL EXULT OVER YOU WITH LOUD SINGING

14 SING ALOUD, O DAUGHTER OF ZION;
SHOUT, O ISRAEL!
REJOICE AND EXULT WITH ALL YOUR HEART,
O DAUGHTER OF JERUSALEM!
15 THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY THE JUDGMENTS
AGAINST YOU;
HE HAS CLEARED AWAY YOUR ENEMIES.
THE KING OF ISRAEL, THE LORD, IS IN YOUR MIDST;
YOU SHALL NEVER AGAIN FEAR EVIL.
16 ON THAT DAY IT SHALL BE SAID TO JERUSALEM:
“FEAR NOT, O ZION;
LET NOT YOUR HANDS GROW WEAK.
17 THE LORD YOUR GOD IS IN YOUR MIDST,
A MIGHTY ONE WHO WILL SAVE;
HE WILL REJOICE OVER YOU WITH GLADNESS;
HE WILL QUIET YOU BY HIS LOVE;
HE WILL EXULT OVER YOU WITH LOUD SINGING.
ZEPHANIAH 3:14-17

At the Christmas season, we witness people express joyful celebration and effervescent gladness. As a trove of YouTube videos attest, it's hard to beat the level of shouting, jumping, and untamed elation that some children experience upon opening Christmas presents. Yet experience tells us that happiness over a material gift will wear off, or worse, turn to immediate disappointment when a toy breaks or fails to perform as previously imagined. Zephaniah foretold a day when God's people will be given the greatest gift of all time—all their enemies will be cleared away, and so will God's judgment! Better still, this gift is permanent, evil is defeated and the victorious King returns to dwell with them forever! Nothing remains that can separate God and His people; thus both the Giver and receivers of this profound gift rejoice wholeheartedly with a joy that is everlasting. When we see someone giddily delighting in a gift this season, let it thrill our hearts that the King of Kings exults over us, His beloved children, with loud singing and triumphant gladness.

*God of all joy,
We praise You
that through the death and resurrection of Your Son
you made a way for us to dwell with You again.
Quiet our fears in the presence of Your love.
May our hearts ever rejoice
in the might of your redeeming power,
and may Your praise ring out loudly
among all the peoples of the earth. Amen.*

DECEMBER 10

A FUTURE HOUSE OF GLORY

3 'WHO IS LEFT AMONG YOU WHO SAW THIS HOUSE IN ITS FORMER GLORY? HOW DO YOU SEE IT NOW? IS IT NOT AS NOTHING IN YOUR EYES?

4 YET NOW BE STRONG, O ZERUBBABEL, DECLARES THE LORD. BE STRONG, O JOSHUA, SON OF JEHOZADAK, THE HIGH PRIEST. BE STRONG, ALL YOU PEOPLE OF THE LAND, DECLARES THE LORD. WORK, FOR I AM WITH YOU, DECLARES THE LORD OF HOSTS,

5 ACCORDING TO THE COVENANT THAT I MADE WITH YOU WHEN YOU CAME OUT OF EGYPT. MY SPIRIT REMAINS IN YOUR MIDST. FEAR NOT.

6 FOR THUS SAYS THE LORD OF HOSTS: YET ONCE MORE, IN A LITTLE WHILE, I WILL SHAKE THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND THE DRY LAND.

7 AND I WILL SHAKE ALL NATIONS, SO THAT THE TREASURES OF ALL NATIONS SHALL COME IN, AND I WILL FILL THIS HOUSE WITH GLORY, SAYS THE LORD OF HOSTS.

8 THE SILVER IS MINE, AND THE GOLD IS MINE, DECLARES THE LORD OF HOSTS.

9 THE LATTER GLORY OF THIS HOUSE SHALL BE GREATER THAN THE FORMER, SAYS THE LORD OF HOSTS. AND IN THIS PLACE I WILL GIVE PEACE, DECLARES THE LORD OF HOSTS.'"

HAGGAI 2:3-9

Solomon's lavish temple had been destroyed, and Haggai was now undertaking the rebuild that Ezra had started. In Ezra's day, politics caused the rebuilding to stop; this time the builders themselves stopped. This replacement temple was such an underwhelming imitation of the original, it made those who had witnessed its former glory weep. When spiritual complacency and latent depression stopped them in their tracks, God's word was, "take courage and work." He calls them to work even if there's no indication the labor is worthwhile or significant, because God is in their midst like He was among the Israelites in the Exodus. Though it seems hopeless to the workers, God reveals that He has a greater plan. He promises to shake up the nations and use their treasures to fill this seemingly pathetic tabernacle, so that it will exceed even the splendor of Solomon's temple. Haggai's vision anticipates the temple's transformation into a true dwelling place of peace. Much as in Haggai's day, it is common for any of us who do the work of the Lord without seeing fruition to doubt the validity of our labor and our longings. In what ways do we doubt that our own life's work for Christ is meaningful or worthwhile? What reassurances from God's Word do we cling to as an encouragement for ourselves and others?

*Almighty and Most Merciful Father,
Grant that we who read Haggai's prophetic vision
And place our wholehearted trust
in Your redemption,
Will be encouraged to do the work
You've called us to,
With assurance that we will see the future glory
of Your dwelling place in the new Jerusalem,
through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord,
who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit—
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

DECEMBER 11

COMFORT, COMFORT MY PEOPLE

1 *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

2 *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her*

that her warfare is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

*that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

3 *A voice cries:*

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our
God.*

4 *Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

5 *And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

ISAIAH 40:1-5

There are countless ways we see our insufficiency and it can be so discouraging. The problem we can't solve, the promotion we can't get, the marriage conflict we can't resolve, the endless duties of parenting. When we first see our insufficiency we may work harder. But when it becomes obvious that no matter what we do, it will not be enough, we are likely to give up. But it's at that very bleak moment when God our Father draws nearer. What seems to us to be a hopeless situation is actually a beautiful invitation to receive the comfort of God.

First he reminds us who we are, His people. Our identity is not in our efforts, but in our connection to Him.

Instead of continuing in our pointless struggle to handle things ourselves, we can receive from the Lord's hand. We are free to rest and find comfort in what God does on our behalf. His tenderness in spite of our undeservingness clears the way in our hearts. The picture in Isaiah is that of a King on a warpath or triumphal entry, whose way has been cleared of all obstacles. When our hearts receive the gift of God's comfort, we will be moved to make room for King Jesus in our hearts, affections, schedules, conversations, priorities.

Lord, we long for a tender word of comfort.

Forgive us for looking in all the wrong places for it.

Open our ears to your tender voice

*Increase our hope in the unchanged promises of a
faithful God.*

*Remove those things which take up your space in our
hearts and affections. Reveal your glory to us,
and through us.*

DECEMBER 12

THE WORD OF GOD STANDS FOREVER

6 A VOICE SAYS, "CRY!"
AND I SAID, "WHAT SHALL I CRY?"
ALL FLESH IS GRASS,
AND ALL ITS BEAUTY IS LIKE THE FLOWER OF THE
FIELD.
7 THE GRASS WITHERS, THE FLOWER FADES
WHEN THE BREATH OF THE LORD BLOWS ON IT;
SURELY THE PEOPLE ARE GRASS.
8 THE GRASS WITHERS, THE FLOWER FADES,
BUT THE WORD OF OUR GOD WILL STAND FOREVER.
ISAIAH 40: 6-8

As you reflect back on this year, you may identify many surprising moments. Some of these may have been joyous surprises—your family grew, you got married, or achieved a long-awaited milestone. But perhaps some of these surprises are much more bitter—you lost a job, a loved one passed, or a treasured friendship deteriorated.

Sometimes beautiful things fade, like the wildflowers in this passage, without our agreement or understanding. But God's promise is that in the midst of this transient world, His Word will be our constant. We can place our hope, even in the midst of great suffering, in the One who understands our yearnings and brings light into the deepest darkness. This year held many surprises. And the next will, too. Each chapter of our lives may feel like a new roller coaster, but we can look ahead full of joy and gladness because we already know how this story ends. Where have you seen God's presence over the last year?

*Holy One,
Your plan is so much greater than our plan.
Thank you for your wisdom and guidance
over each new day.
Open our eyes to your continued presence.
We trust in your steadfastness and deep love.
Amen*

DECEMBER 13

OUR GOOD SHEPHERD

9 GO ON UP TO A HIGH MOUNTAIN,
O ZION, HERALD OF GOOD NEWS;
LIFT UP YOUR VOICE WITH STRENGTH,
O JERUSALEM, HERALD OF GOOD NEWS;
LIFT IT UP, FEAR NOT;
SAY TO THE CITIES OF JUDAH,
"BEHOLD YOUR GOD!"
10 BEHOLD, THE LORD GOD COMES WITH MIGHT,
AND HIS ARM RULES FOR HIM;
BEHOLD, HIS REWARD IS WITH HIM,
AND HIS RECOMPENSE BEFORE HIM.
11 HE WILL TEND HIS FLOCK LIKE A SHEPHERD;
HE WILL GATHER THE LAMBS IN HIS ARMS;
HE WILL CARRY THEM IN HIS BOSOM,
AND GENTLY LEAD THOSE THAT ARE WITH YOUNG.
ISAIAH 40: 9-11

The imagery of the shepherd is notably scattered throughout all of Scripture. Moses encountered God in the burning bush while tending his father-in-law's flock. King David, once a shepherd boy, became the Lord's perfect instrument for writing the twenty-third psalm. In the gospel of Luke a group of shepherds receive the first glorious announcement of Christ's birth. And though the picture of a shepherd may feel disconnected from our day to day lives, this passage from Isaiah is full of incredible comfort.

Sheep are of the most needy and vulnerable kind of livestock--requiring meticulous care. A good herdsman will, quite literally, lay down his life for his flock. He intentionally cares for them despite their stubbornness and propensity to incur misfortune. Jesus does not merely identify Himself as a shepherd, but as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). What comfort! He unreservedly tends to our needs with good and loving diligence. It also means that we need not fear in moments of defeat, for He knows our frailty and still He comes close to gather and guide us. The birth of Jesus is the supreme object lesson of God drawing near to His people. And so the question is not whether we can trust Jesus as the Good Shepherd. But rather, can we humbly admit we are as needy as sheep?

*Lord Jesus,
You are our Good Shepherd.
Under Your care, we lack no good thing.
Keep us mindful that we are like sheep,
Utterly dependent on You.
Keep us from stubbornly seeking our own way.
Bring us into restful surrender, as we trust You
To safely guide us through the hills
and valleys of life.
Amen*

DECEMBER 14

GOD'S PRESENCE IS REFINING

1 "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER, AND HE WILL PREPARE THE WAY BEFORE ME. AND THE LORD WHOM YOU SEEK WILL SUDDENLY COME TO HIS TEMPLE; AND THE MESSENGER OF THE COVENANT IN WHOM YOU DELIGHT, BEHOLD, HE IS COMING, SAYS THE LORD OF HOSTS.

2 BUT WHO CAN ENDURE THE DAY OF HIS COMING, AND WHO CAN STAND WHEN HE APPEARS? FOR HE IS LIKE A REFINER'S FIRE AND LIKE FULLERS' SOAP.

3 HE WILL SIT AS A REFINER AND PURIFIER OF SILVER, AND HE WILL PURIFY THE SONS OF LEVI AND REFINER THEM LIKE GOLD AND SILVER, AND THEY WILL BRING OFFERINGS IN RIGHTEOUSNESS TO THE LORD.

4 THEN THE OFFERING OF JUDAH AND JERUSALEM WILL BE PLEASING TO THE LORD AS IN THE DAYS OF OLD AND AS IN FORMER YEARS.

MALACHI 3:1-4

Have you ever wanted something, but when it finally arrived, found it was far beyond what you expected and more than you could handle? Imagine that you always wanted to go skydiving, but when at last you got your wish and found yourself at the open door of the plane, you were too terrified to jump. For centuries, the nation of Israel prayed for the deliverance that could come only from God's promised Messiah. They had been praying for God to show up in their lives. In this passage, the prophet Malachi reminds Israel of the terrifying reality of what they were asking.

God is holy. He is holy in every way that we are not. He is more holy than we can even imagine. He is so holy that it penetrates everything around Him, destroying all vestiges of evil. Sin and evil cannot bear his presence. If we come before God with sin on our lips and in our hearts, even if we come to worship Him, His holiness would destroy us. We do not have access to God's presence without the covering of Christ's perfect holiness on our behalf.

Only Jesus makes our worship acceptable to God. Only Jesus allows us to be in the presence of Almighty God. This season, we anticipate the coming of our only Hope- our Way to the One Holy God.

*Refine us, Lord. We are impure.
Our hearts and minds are sinful.
Make us clean and new.
Make us worthy through Your Son,
so we can worship in Your temple.
We long to see Your face and live in your presence.
Amen.*

DECEMBER 15

SUNDAY

Worship for Families, Couples, or Individuals

SING

A cappella, with an instrument, or with a youtube video. Grab anyone around and sing together!

HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING

Hark the herald angels sing "Glory to the newborn King!

Peace on earth and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled"

Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies

With the angelic host proclaim: "Christ is born in Bethlehem"

Hark! The herald angels sing "Glory to the newborn King!"

Christ by highest heav'n adored; Christ the everlasting Lord!

Late in time behold Him come; offspring of a Virgin's womb

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity

Pleased as man with man to dwell: Jesus, our Emmanuel

Hark! The herald angels sing "Glory to the newborn King!"

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Son of Righteousness!

Light and life to all He brings; ris'n with healing in His wings

Mild He lays His glory by; born that man no more may die.

Born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth

Hark! The herald angels sing "Glory to the newborn King!"

DISCUSS

Questions are simple enough for kids, but feel free to modify for adults or yourself.

1. What is this song about?
2. What does it mean that "God and sinners" are now "reconciled"?
3. Why does the song say that Jesus was born "that man no more may die"?

PLAY

The sabbath is a perfect time to be together and enjoy the season. If you can't today, choose another day for this activity

Christmas Movie Night!

DECEMBER 16

THE GOVERNMENT OF GOD

6 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.
7 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.

ISAIAH 9:6-7

We've all heard the expression. "He looks as if he has the weight of the World on his shoulders." What do you picture? Someone whose countenance is downcast, whose weary shoulders are slumped? This figure of speech conveys hopelessness, absurdity even. No one person can carry the whole world. The weight bows them down and eventually breaks them.

What about you-- are you slouching right now, burdened with cares? This passage brings good news. Straighten your shoulders and realize you were not meant to bear the burdens of this world. Jesus bears the government on His shoulders. All things and people in which we put our trust, including ourselves, cannot ultimately bear up under the weight of our sins and expectations. The same is true for our systems of rule. They may do good. They may even glorify God. But ultimately, they will not hold the world. Only Jesus holds the whole world in His hands, on His shoulders. Rest in this knowledge.

*Lord Jesus, Your strength is endless
And we forget that You have everything
this World needs. Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of peace
Remind us to cast our cares on You.
Help us when we fail.
Comfort us when our leaders fail.
Remind us we were not built to carry
The weight of the world. You alone reign.
Teach us to relax our own tense shoulders
And remember whose shoulders hold us
and the world.
Amen*

DECEMBER 17

IMMANUEL'S INDWELLING

14 THEREFORE THE LORD HIMSELF WILL GIVE YOU
A SIGN. BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE
AND BEAR A SON, AND SHALL CALL HIS NAME
IMMANUEL.

ISAIAH 7:14

The Angel Gabriel meets Mary to tell her the news that she will conceive and bear a son and her response is, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Could it be that the story of Mary is not unlike our own? Have we not been given the same opportunity to accept the Divine to dwell within us? Perhaps not with the frightening appearance of the Angel Gabriel, but by the Holy Spirit himself. Mary models to us the first story of accepting Jesus into ourselves and living with the drastic changes His presence brings to our stories. We learn as Mary did, that God with us does not mean our pain and sorrow will disappear or that our daily labors will cease. In fact, at times our labors only intensify as we see the deep need and cost of redeeming love in our world. We are no longer our own, but servants of the Lord. Perhaps this season we can begin to identify with the story of Mary differently and see how, when Immanuel indwells us, redeeming love is now our only theme.

*Immanuel,
You are with us in our pain and our mess.
You have redeemed our humanity.
You do not look away from our weakness, but
You move closer to comfort us
with mercy and kindness.
Redeeming love is Your theme, teach us how to walk with
You in humble service
towards that costly grace.
Amen*

DECEMBER 18

PREPARATION FOR HIS COMING

13 BUT THE ANGEL SAID TO HIM, "DO NOT BE AFRAID, ZECHARIAH, FOR YOUR PRAYER HAS BEEN HEARD, AND YOUR WIFE ELIZABETH WILL BEAR YOU A SON, AND YOU SHALL CALL HIS NAME JOHN.

14 AND YOU WILL HAVE JOY AND GLADNESS, AND MANY WILL REJOICE AT HIS BIRTH,

15 FOR HE WILL BE GREAT BEFORE THE LORD. AND HE MUST NOT DRINK WINE OR STRONG DRINK, AND HE WILL BE FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT, EVEN FROM HIS MOTHER'S WOMB.

16 AND HE WILL TURN MANY OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL TO THE LORD THEIR GOD,

17 AND HE WILL GO BEFORE HIM IN THE SPIRIT AND POWER OF ELIJAH, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS TO THE CHILDREN, AND THE DISOBEDIENT TO THE WISDOM OF THE JUST, TO MAKE READY FOR THE LORD A PEOPLE PREPARED."

LUKE 1:13-17

Naturally, Zacharias is startled by the appearance of the angel of the Lord, but he is assured that he doesn't need to be afraid. The angel appeared to announce good news- Zacharias' prayer for a child has been answered. Not only that, but God will use Zacharias's son to prepare the people for His own long-anticipated Son.

Zacharias' task of burning incense before the Lord in the Temple is part and parcel with lifting up the prayers of the people to the Lord. While he performed his intercessory function as a priest for the prayers of other people, an angel appears to him to announce that his own, personal prayer has been answered! Zacharias is told his own longing for a son will be the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. The prophecy is a promise to send someone to prepare the people of Israel to meet the Redeemer. The son promised to Zacharias will set the stage for the Promised One, and will prepare the hearts of people to be renewed and redeemed.

Would we be able to accept such a wild pronouncement about our own prayers being answered? Do we doubt the fulfillment of our own long-sought for and long-unresolved yearnings that we've lifted up in prayer? Are we content with God's itinerary over our own?

*Lord of Heaven,
enable and engage us to lift up in prayer
those You've providentially placed in our paths,
whether for the granting of long-held dreams
or for salvation of friends, family, and foes.
Help us prepare the way for those around us,
to receive Your Son as Redeemer in the present,
and as King rather than Judge,
at the second Advent,
through the Power of Jesus' Mighty Name. Amen.*

DECEMBER 19

FEAR V. FAVOR

26 IN THE SIXTH MONTH THE ANGEL GABRIEL WAS SENT FROM GOD TO A CITY OF GALILEE NAMED NAZARETH,
 27 TO A VIRGIN BETROTHED TO A MAN WHOSE NAME WAS JOSEPH, OF THE HOUSE OF DAVID. AND THE VIRGIN'S NAME WAS MARY.
 28 AND HE CAME TO HER AND SAID, "GREETINGS, O FAVORED ONE, THE LORD IS WITH YOU!"
 29 BUT SHE WAS GREATLY TROUBLED AT THE SAYING, AND TRIED TO DISCERN WHAT SORT OF GREETING THIS MIGHT BE.
 30 AND THE ANGEL SAID TO HER, "DO NOT BE AFRAID, MARY, FOR YOU HAVE FOUND FAVOR WITH GOD.
 31 AND BEHOLD, YOU WILL CONCEIVE IN YOUR WOMB AND BEAR A SON, AND YOU SHALL CALL HIS NAME JESUS.
 32 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,
 33 AND HE WILL REIGN OVER THE HOUSE OF JACOB FOREVER, AND OF HIS KINGDOM THERE WILL BE NO END."
 34 AND MARY SAID TO THE ANGEL, "HOW WILL THIS BE, SINCE I AM A VIRGIN?"

LUKE 1: 26-34

When life suddenly confronts us with something confusing, unexpected, or uncertain, our first impulse may be fear or anxiety. But God's Word to His people is not intended to bewilder, trouble, or frighten us. Instead, it is a means of His favor, or grace, towards us. Like Mary, we can choose to humbly trust the Lord's sovereignty and receive His Word to us, while we are yet still overwhelmed by questions and fears. We do not know what tomorrow and all its fitful uncertainties may bring. We do know His grace will meet us there. He promises that He Himself will be there (Matt 28:20, Isaiah 41:10), and He desires us to draw near to Him so that His perfect love, the ultimate divine favor, can cast out our belligerent fear.

*Lord of Hosts,
 You who lead us gently like a shepherd,
 Root and ground us in Your love, we pray,
 that we may comprehend the breadth and height and
 depth of Your great love for us.
 We offer our anxious thoughts to You,
 trading them for Your care and favor towards us.
 Fill us with the fullness of Your grace,
 so that fear no longer has any place.
 You are here with us this day.
 May we rest in the peace of your presence. Amen.*

DECEMBER 20

NO WORD FROM GOD FAILS

35 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.

36 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.

37 FOR NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD."

38 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.

LUKE 1:35-38

Our stories don't usually go how we planned them. Most of us aren't doing the job we said we would when we were 8, and aren't the kind of people we thought we'd be at 15. Few of us live many years on this earth unscathed by loss, trauma, disease, heartaches big and small. We may carry enormous grief from a great loss. We all carry quiet uncertainty about the way things have gone, or will turn out. We learn to navigate daily disappointments and small difficulties. Usually this happens gradually, our lives evolve into something other than we expected.

For Mary, the news came unexpectedly and directly. News that changed her plans, body, identity, social standing, and future. Yet the first response of her heart is obedient faith. As he delivers the news, the angel reminds Mary both of God's power and his faithfulness, and he gives her the gift of a companion in Elizabeth. She does not have to walk the difficult and unexpected road alone. She has the full knowledge of God's character and promises in her mind, and a human friend by her side. Mary's quiet, private obedience and her willingness to accept God's call on her life is a picture to us of how faith shapes our understanding of ourselves and our stories.

*Father, give us a faith like Mary's.
Her belief in Your character, and her faith in Your
promises allowed her to accept Your call on her life.
Our stories have turned out so differently
than we planned.*

*Give us trust as we look at our past,
obedience as we look at our present,
hope as we look to the future.*

Your Word never fails.

Amen

DECEMBER 21

THE JOY OF ANTICIPATION

39 IN THOSE DAYS MARY AROSE AND WENT WITH HASTE INTO THE HILL COUNTRY, TO A TOWN IN JUDAH,

40 AND SHE ENTERED THE HOUSE OF ZECHARIAH AND GREETED ELIZABETH.

41 AND WHEN ELIZABETH HEARD THE GREETING OF MARY, THE BABY LEAPED IN HER WOMB. AND ELIZABETH WAS FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT,

42 AND SHE EXCLAIMED WITH A LOUD CRY, "BLESSED ARE YOU AMONG WOMEN, AND BLESSED IS THE FRUIT OF YOUR WOMB!

43 AND WHY IS THIS GRANTED TO ME THAT THE MOTHER OF MY LORD SHOULD COME TO ME?

44 FOR BEHOLD, WHEN THE SOUND OF YOUR GREETING CAME TO MY EARS, THE BABY IN MY WOMB LEAPED FOR JOY.

45 AND BLESSED IS SHE WHO BELIEVED THAT THERE WOULD BE A FULFILLMENT OF WHAT WAS SPOKEN TO HER FROM THE LORD."

LUKE 1: 39-45

For many children, anticipation for Christmas began months ago, and with each new day its approach is heralded with a new sign. First the weather grew colder. Then we picked out the Christmas tree, baked Christmas cookies, celebrated at Christmas parties. Finally, the gifts were wrapped and under the tree—joyful anticipation building at each new milestone.

This passage highlights the anticipation we all feel at some point in our lives— one particularly hallmarked by the Advent season. It's the anticipation to see a promise fulfilled. It's clear from this passage that Mary did not spend her nine months of pregnancy in fear that she was going to somehow disrupt the promise given to her by God. She trusted God, even before the promise was fulfilled. Mary experienced the joy of anticipation because she knew she had placed her trust in the One that is trustworthy. What events or milestones are you anticipating in the coming months and years? As you anticipate all that the upcoming year has to offer, how can you reflect back on God's promises so that you can view the unknown with joy instead of fear?

*Father God,
You alone are worthy of our trust and our praise.
We see Your endless faithfulness
Reflected in countless fulfilled promises.
Thank You for Your continued presence
In each new season.
Renew our trust in Your goodness.
Amen*

DECEMBER 22

SUNDAY*Worship for Families, Couples, or Individuals***SING***A cappella, with an instrument, or with a youtube video. Grab anyone around and sing together!***O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL**

O Come All Ye Faithful;
 Joyful and triumphant,
 O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.
 Come and behold Him,
 Born the King of Angels;
 O come, let us adore Him,
 O come, let us adore Him,
 O come, let us adore Him,
 Christ the Lord.

O Sing, choirs of angels,
 Sing in exultation,
 Sing all that hear in heaven God's holy word.
 Give to our Father glory in the Highest;
 O come, let us adore Him,
 O come, let us adore Him,
 O come, let us adore Him,
 Christ the Lord.

All Hail! Lord, we greet Thee,
 Born this happy morning,
 O Jesus! for evermore be Thy name adored.
 Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing;
 O come, let us adore Him,
 O come, let us adore Him,
 O come, let us adore Him,
 Christ the Lord.

DISCUSS*Questions are simple enough for kids, but feel free to modify for adults or yourself.*

1. What is this song about?
2. What does it mean to adore Christ? What does adoration feel/look like to you?

PLAY*The sabbath is a perfect time to be together and enjoy the season. If you can't today, choose another day for this activity*

Walk or drive your neighborhood to see Christmas lights!

DECEMBER 23

HUMBLE ESTATE

46 AND MARY SAID,
 "MY SOUL MAGNIFIES THE LORD,
 47 AND MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY SAVIOR,
 48 FOR HE HAS LOOKED ON THE HUMBLE ESTATE OF
 HIS SERVANT.
 FOR BEHOLD, FROM NOW ON ALL GENERATIONS
 WILL CALL ME BLESSED;
 49 FOR HE WHO IS MIGHTY HAS DONE GREAT
 THINGS FOR ME,
 AND HOLY IS HIS NAME.
 50 AND HIS MERCY IS FOR THOSE WHO FEAR HIM
 FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION.
 51 HE HAS SHOWN STRENGTH WITH HIS ARM;
 HE HAS SCATTERED THE PROUD IN THE THOUGHTS
 OF THEIR HEARTS;
 52 HE HAS BROUGHT DOWN THE MIGHTY FROM
 THEIR THRONES
 AND EXALTED THOSE OF HUMBLE ESTATE;
 53 HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD
 THINGS,
 AND THE RICH HE HAS SENT AWAY EMPTY.
 54 HE HAS HELPED HIS SERVANT ISRAEL,
 IN REMEMBRANCE OF HIS MERCY,
 55 AS HE SPOKE TO OUR FATHERS,
 TO ABRAHAM AND TO HIS OFFSPRING FOREVER."

LUKE 1:46-55

Mary's song is the first true Advent hymn. Her anticipatory joy leaps from the pages of Scripture with every word she proclaims. There is much wisdom to be gleaned not only from her beautiful words, but from the person of Mary herself. Mary lives in the unremarkable town of Nazareth. She is young, unwed, and a virgin carrying the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God. How many of us would bear this weighty news with such trust and faithfulness? Would we be more inclined to question the Lord's decisions and focus on our lack of qualifications?

Nor does Mary seek to affirm her own worthiness to try to justify why the Lord chose her. Rather, she is fully aware of her humble estate and that liberates her to receive His unmerited favor. Her song demonstrates that we are most moved to praise God out of our awareness of our own insignificance. Certainly Mary's role as the mother of Jesus is unique to her alone. But we who have been given life in Christ are also recipients of His unmerited favor. This is reason to sing!

*O Holy Spirit,
 Just as You inspired Mary's song of praise,
 We ask that You would compose
 Your song in our hearts.
 As we come near to the celebration of Your birth,
 O Christ, may the joy of Your arrival
 be reborn in us.
 While we meditate on the gift of
 Your unmerited favor, O Father,
 Help us receive this gift with humility like Mary's.
 O Triune God, usher us into Christmas Day,
 With merriment and rejoicing.
 Amen*

DECEMBER 24

WHEN GOD VISITS HIS PEOPLE

68 "BLESSED BE THE LORD GOD OF ISRAEL,
 FOR HE HAS VISITED AND REDEEMED HIS PEOPLE
 69 AND HAS RAISED UP A HORN OF SALVATION FOR
 US IN THE HOUSE OF HIS SERVANT DAVID,
 70 AS HE SPOKE BY THE MOUTH OF HIS HOLY
 PROPHETS FROM OF OLD,
 71 THAT WE SHOULD BE SAVED FROM OUR ENEMIES
 AND FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US;
 72 TO SHOW THE MERCY PROMISED TO OUR
 FATHERS
 AND TO REMEMBER HIS HOLY COVENANT,
 73 THE OATH THAT HE SWORE TO OUR FATHER
 ABRAHAM, TO GRANT US
 74 THAT WE, BEING DELIVERED FROM THE HAND OF
 OUR ENEMIES,
 MIGHT SERVE HIM WITHOUT FEAR,
 75 IN HOLINESS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE HIM
 ALL OUR DAYS.
 76 AND YOU, CHILD, WILL BE CALLED THE PROPHET
 OF THE MOST HIGH;
 FOR YOU WILL GO BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE
 HIS WAYS,
 77 TO GIVE KNOWLEDGE OF SALVATION TO HIS
 PEOPLE
 IN THE FORGIVENESS OF THEIR SINS,
 78 BECAUSE OF THE TENDER MERCY OF OUR GOD,
 WHEREBY THE SUNRISE SHALL VISIT US FROM ON
 HIGH
 79 TO GIVE LIGHT TO THOSE WHO SIT IN DARKNESS
 AND IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH,
 TO GUIDE OUR FEET INTO THE WAY OF PEACE."
LUKE 1:68-79

At first, Zechariah the priest did not believe. An angel of God visited him in the Temple to personally tell him of God's plan. But even an angelic visit was not enough to convince Zechariah. So the angel shut his mouth, and the priest had to bottle up his words for more than nine months. When Zechariah's son John was finally born, his tongue was loosened, and he burst forth in praise for the LORD, the God of Israel. No doubt Zechariah had spent those long months silently searching the Scriptures while he watched God's miraculous plan unfold in his own home, in his wife, and in his wife's cousin Mary. Zechariah's song of praise weaves in God's mighty acts of salvation for Israel, the messages of the prophets, God's covenantal promises to Abraham and King David, and hope for all the world, even to those still living in darkness. While Zechariah was humbly and obediently silent before God, he could finally see God's plan and believe. God has visited us too, and through His Holy Spirit, has personally told us His plan of salvation. We have watched it unfold around us. Too often, we have done so silently or with disbelief, like Zechariah. Today, on the day before Jesus' birth, let us proclaim our belief and burst out in praise for what God has done for us now and through the ages, for what we will celebrate tomorrow, and for what God will continue to do for us. Praise God!

*Lord, we sing with Your servant Zechariah.
 Praise God, You have redeemed Your people.
 Praise God, salvation has come as You promised.
 Praise God, You have fulfilled Your covenants.
 Praise God, You have rescued us from our enemies,
 so we can serve You without fear.
 Praise God, Your tender mercies are new each morning.
 Praise God, You guide us on the path of peace.
 Amen.*

DECEMBER 25

THE KING IN A MANGER

1 IN THOSE DAYS A DECREE WENT OUT FROM CAESAR AUGUSTUS THAT ALL THE WORLD SHOULD BE REGISTERED.

2 THIS WAS THE FIRST REGISTRATION WHEN QUIRINIUS WAS GOVERNOR OF SYRIA.

3 AND ALL WENT TO BE REGISTERED, EACH TO HIS OWN TOWN.

4 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,

5 TO BE REGISTERED WITH MARY, HIS BETROTHED, WHO WAS WITH CHILD.

6 AND WHILE THEY WERE THERE, THE TIME CAME FOR HER TO GIVE BIRTH.

7 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.

LUKE 2:1-7

Roughly 2,000 years ago, Caesar Augustus was King. His very name, Augustus or “Revered One” signified that Romans regarded him as a god. But he was not the ultimate authority. Caesar’s taxation decree had a higher, eternal purpose, unknown to him. It sent Joseph and Mary to the exact city where the Messiah’s birth was prophesied. The famous Roman roads he built later served as pathways for the unhindered, rapid spread of the Gospel. Even though rulers appear to have power, ultimate overarching authority belongs to God. “In the Lord’s hand the king’s heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please him” (Proverbs 21:1 NIV).

God channeled the stream of Caesar’s heart to cause Jesus to enter the world at exactly the right time and place. Caesar Augustus had a notion of time. But not of the fullness of time. “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law” (Galatians 4:4 NIV). The kings and rulers of this World are merely subjects. Remember today to see beyond pomp and ceremony. Look to the King in a manger.

*Today, we fix our eyes on your kingdom, Jesus.
Everyone else is a pretender to the throne.
Help us to see beyond the temporary,
to see the unseen
You are the one true King.
Open the eyes of our hearts to see You,
To see this World’s rulers
as subject to Your authority.
We praise You for Your humble birth
And for Your sacrifice for us.
Amen*

DECEMBER 26

GLORY TO GOD AND PEACE ON EARTH

8 AND IN THE SAME REGION THERE WERE SHEPHERDS OUT IN THE FIELD, KEEPING WATCH OVER THEIR FLOCK BY NIGHT.

9 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.

10 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.

11 FOR UNTO YOU IS BORN THIS DAY IN THE CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOR, WHO IS CHRIST THE LORD.

12 AND THIS WILL BE A SIGN FOR YOU: YOU WILL FIND A BABY WRAPPED IN SWADDLING CLOTHS AND LYING IN A MANGER."

13 AND SUDDENLY THERE WAS WITH THE ANGEL A MULTITUDE OF THE HEAVENLY HOST PRAISING GOD AND SAYING,

14 "GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST, AND ON EARTH PEACE AMONG THOSE WITH WHOM HE IS PLEASED!"

LUKE 2:8-14

Have you ever wanted something for someone else so badly that you could hardly sleep? Perhaps acceptance to a certain college for your child, a new job for your spouse, or a cancer-free test result for your mom. That's what it feels like here when the angels come to praise God on our behalf because peace has finally arrived on earth through the Christ! Angels, the ones who do not need the work of Christ and already know peace, cannot help but celebrate what we can not yet comprehend. The Christ has arrived and His peace is for us! The humble beginnings of our Prince of Peace, are exclaimed by angels in triumphant song to an audience of lowly shepherds, historically rejected by the mainstream culture. Then they are personally invited into the presence of God by the Angels! They are explicitly told to go be with the presence of God with specific directions on how to find him! Do we understand the magnitude of this event? Glory to God in the highest! On earth peace is now among us! The work of reconciliation has begun. The ultimate Peacemaker has come and as Immanuel, God With Us, we are no longer alone. But by His grace, His peace reconciles our relationship with God, our relationship with our brothers and sisters, and even our relationship with ourselves. The Angels had much to rejoice in, and so do we!

*Glorious God,
Thank you for the angel's lavish
display of celebration
Before an audience of the forgotten and rejected.
Holy Spirit, help us to understand
the magnitude of your Peace
In our own hearts. Jesus,
remind us that you have come
To rescue each one of us
And that You are always near,
even when we feel forgotten and rejected.
Your peace is always right here.
Your presence is the peace we desperately seek.
Amen.*

DECEMBER 27

COME AND SEE

15 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."

16 AND THEY WENT WITH HASTE AND FOUND MARY AND JOSEPH, AND THE BABY LYING IN A MANGER.

17 AND WHEN THEY SAW IT, THEY MADE KNOWN THE SAYING THAT HAD BEEN TOLD THEM CONCERNING THIS CHILD.

18 AND ALL WHO HEARD IT WONDERED AT WHAT THE SHEPHERDS TOLD THEM.

19 BUT MARY TREASURED UP ALL THESE THINGS, PONDERING THEM IN HER HEART.

20 AND THE SHEPHERDS RETURNED, GLORIFYING AND PRAISING GOD FOR ALL THEY HAD HEARD AND SEEN, AS IT HAD BEEN TOLD THEM.

LUKE 2:15-20

In Jewish culture shepherds were unable to maintain any sense of ritual purity or ceremonial law because of the nature of their professions and the constant demands of their flocks. Shepherds were outcasts in their own society, but it was to them that the angels appeared! Many of us can identify with the shepherd's station in life, because we feel similarly unable to live out our lives by the meticulous standards of society due to the demands of our own commitments. We come as we are from the fields of our toil—disheveled, un-showered, and exhausted to bow before Christ and ponder the mysteries of God. Many who think themselves worthy are not invited to the manger, but those who have no standing in society are offered a holy invitation. We all know someone we fear might miss out on a "come and see the mysteries of God" invitation, due to either their own pretentiousness about their "fitness" to show up, or their feelings of complete unworthiness. What could the Lord perhaps use to change their mind about their unwillingness to "come and see"? What would it be like to start praying for that to happen?

*Almighty and everlasting God,
we praise You for Your call to the shepherds,
outcasts of polite company, as some of us are,
to come and see the mysteries of Your salvation.
Let us be so affected by Your glory,
that we too, like the shepherds,
would make known what we have tasted and seen
through the advent of Christ our Lord. Amen*

DECEMBER 28

WAITING FAITHFULLY

22 AND WHEN THE TIME CAME FOR THEIR PURIFICATION ACCORDING TO THE LAW OF MOSES, THEY BROUGHT HIM UP TO JERUSALEM TO PRESENT HIM TO THE LORD

23 (AS IT IS WRITTEN IN THE LAW OF THE LORD, "EVERY MALE WHO FIRST OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD")

24 AND TO OFFER A SACRIFICE ACCORDING TO WHAT IS SAID IN THE LAW OF THE LORD, "A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES, OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS."

25 NOW THERE WAS A MAN IN JERUSALEM, WHOSE NAME WAS SIMEON, AND THIS MAN WAS RIGHTEOUS AND DEVOUT, WAITING FOR THE CONSOLATION OF ISRAEL, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT WAS UPON HIM.

26 AND IT HAD BEEN REVEALED TO HIM BY THE HOLY SPIRIT THAT HE WOULD NOT SEE DEATH BEFORE HE HAD SEEN THE LORD'S CHRIST.

27 AND HE CAME IN THE SPIRIT INTO THE TEMPLE, AND WHEN THE PARENTS BROUGHT IN THE CHILD JESUS, TO DO FOR HIM ACCORDING TO THE CUSTOM OF THE LAW,

28 HE TOOK HIM UP IN HIS ARMS AND BLESSED GOD AND SAID,

29 "LORD, NOW YOU ARE LETTING YOUR SERVANT DEPART IN PEACE,

ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD;

30 FOR MY EYES HAVE SEEN YOUR SALVATION

31 THAT YOU HAVE PREPARED IN THE PRESENCE OF ALL PEOPLES,

32A LIGHT FOR REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, AND FOR GLORY TO YOUR PEOPLE ISRAEL."

LUKE 2: 22-32

Even in our fast-paced world of drive-thrus, online ordering, and modern appliances, waiting remains an inescapable certitude of life. We wait for the stoplight to change, the oven to preheat, holidays to arrive, relationships to deepen, and health to be restored. Many times, waiting involves an inability to know exactly when the expected moment will arrive—When will our name be called at the doctor's office, or when will our scrupulous diet and exercise achieve the goals we've set? Whether we must wait years or merely seconds, waiting faithfully means waiting with a watchful awareness and readiness to respond when the right moment comes. It is not idleness, but preparedness. Simeon spent many years of his life waiting for "the consolation of Israel," and one day when the Savior appeared in the temple, Simeon was there, ready to hold and bless Him. One day Jesus will return to gather us to Himself. Let us be like Simeon, ready to greet and embrace His arrival.

*Almighty God,
You who are not slow but most patient with us,
give us grace to wait
with tranquil and forbearing hearts.
Equip us with expectancy
to embrace the work
You have prepared for us this day.
May we watch and pray with faithfulness,
knowing that today could be the day,
this hour could be the hour,
of Your blessed return. Amen.*

DECEMBER 29

SUNDAY*Worship for Families, Couples, or Individuals***SING***A cappella, with an instrument, or with a youtube video. Grab anyone around and sing together!***JOY TO THE WORLD**

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD IS COME!
 LET EARTH RECEIVE HER KING;
 LET EVERY HEART PREPARE HIM ROOM,
 AND HEAVEN AND NATURE SING,
 AND HEAVEN AND NATURE SING,
 AND HEAVEN, AND HEAVEN, AND NATURE SING.

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE SAVIOR REIGNS!
 LET MEN THEIR SONGS EMPLOY;
 WHILE FIELDS AND FLOODS, ROCKS, HILLS AND
 PLAINS
 REPEAT THE SOUNDING JOY,
 REPEAT THE SOUNDING JOY,
 REPEAT, REPEAT, THE SOUNDING JOY.

NO MORE LET SINS AND SORROWS GROW,
 NOR THORNS INFEST THE GROUND;
 HE COMES TO MAKE HIS BLESSINGS FLOW
 FAR AS THE CURSE IS FOUND,
 FAR AS THE CURSE IS FOUND,
 FAR AS, FAR AS, THE CURSE IS FOUND.

HE RULES THE WORLD WITH TRUTH AND GRACE,
 AND MAKES THE NATIONS PROVE
 THE GLORIES OF HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS,
 AND WONDERS OF HIS LOVE,
 AND WONDERS OF HIS LOVE,
 AND WONDERS, WONDERS, OF HIS LOVE.

DISCUSS*Questions are simple enough for kids, but feel free to modify for adults or yourself.*

1. What is this song about?
2. What does it mean to prepare room in your heart for Jesus? Any ideas on how you can do that this next year?

PLAY*The sabbath is a perfect time to be together and enjoy the season. If you can't today, choose another day for this activity***Family Game Night!**

DECEMBER 30

A SEASON FOR LONGING

41 NOW HIS PARENTS WENT TO JERUSALEM EVERY YEAR AT THE FEAST OF THE PASSEOVER.

42 AND WHEN HE WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD, THEY WENT UP ACCORDING TO CUSTOM.

43 AND WHEN THE FEAST WAS ENDED, AS THEY WERE RETURNING, THE BOY JESUS STAYED BEHIND IN JERUSALEM. HIS PARENTS DID NOT KNOW IT,

44 BUT SUPPOSING HIM TO BE IN THE GROUP THEY WENT A DAY'S JOURNEY, BUT THEN THEY BEGAN TO SEARCH FOR HIM AMONG THEIR RELATIVES AND ACQUAINTANCES,

45 AND WHEN THEY DID NOT FIND HIM, THEY RETURNED TO JERUSALEM, SEARCHING FOR HIM.

46 AFTER THREE DAYS THEY FOUND HIM IN THE TEMPLE, SITTING AMONG THE TEACHERS, LISTENING TO THEM AND ASKING THEM QUESTIONS.

47 AND ALL WHO HEARD HIM WERE AMAZED AT HIS UNDERSTANDING AND HIS ANSWERS.

48 AND WHEN HIS PARENTS SAW HIM, THEY WERE ASTONISHED. AND HIS MOTHER SAID TO HIM, "SON, WHY HAVE YOU TREATED US SO? BEHOLD, YOUR FATHER AND I HAVE BEEN SEARCHING FOR YOU IN GREAT DISTRESS."

49 AND HE SAID TO THEM, "WHY WERE YOU LOOKING FOR ME? DID YOU NOT KNOW THAT I MUST BE IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE?"

50 AND THEY DID NOT UNDERSTAND THE SAYING THAT HE SPOKE TO THEM.

51 AND HE WENT DOWN WITH THEM AND CAME TO NAZARETH AND WAS SUBMISSIVE TO THEM. AND HIS MOTHER TREASURED UP ALL THESE THINGS IN HER HEART.

52 AND JESUS INCREASED IN WISDOM AND IN STATURE AND IN FAVOR WITH GOD AND MAN.

LUKE 2:41-52

We are all always longing for something, but the Christmas season gives us special permission to be honest about those longings. We drop hints, make wish lists, and write letters detailing what we want. We might look around our offices, closets, and homes considering what will make our lives better or easier, what might make us feel happier or more confident. We are hardwired to long for good things.

For Jesus, His longing to be in the presence of God is magnetic; it supersedes everything else going on in his life. Jesus is drawn away from his schedule, his family, his planned route, into His Father's presence in the temple. Jesus is God so he knows God fully. But this knowledge didn't make him apathetic. Instead, he longed to be in God's presence, to sit among teachers, asking questions to draw them out and showing God to them. When his parents rebuke him, he is unashamed because He acted on the good desire of His heart, to sit in the presence of His Father.

As we consider all the things we wish for, may all our longings pale in comparison to our desire to know and love God.

God of all comfort, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

But we tend to look so many other places for comfort and fulfillment before we turn to You.

As we know You and see Your character more, we will love and desire You more.

Show yourself to us! Give us hearts that seek to know and love You more.

Teach us to long to be in Your presence, the way Jesus did.

Open our eyes to You and amaze us with Yourself. Amen

DECEMBER 31

I AM NOT THE CHRIST

19 AND THIS IS THE TESTIMONY OF JOHN, WHEN THE JEWS SENT PRIESTS AND LEVITES FROM JERUSALEM TO ASK HIM, "WHO ARE YOU?"

20 HE CONFESSED, AND DID NOT DENY, BUT CONFESSED, "I AM NOT THE CHRIST."

21 AND THEY ASKED HIM, "WHAT THEN? ARE YOU ELIJAH?" HE SAID, "I AM NOT." "ARE YOU THE PROPHET?" AND HE ANSWERED, "NO."

22 SO THEY SAID TO HIM, "WHO ARE YOU? WE NEED TO GIVE AN ANSWER TO THOSE WHO SENT US. WHAT DO YOU SAY ABOUT YOURSELF?"

23 HE SAID, "I AM THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' AS THE PROPHET ISAIAH SAID."

JOHN 1:19-23

Have you ever gotten lost? Imagine you're hiking with friends when all of a sudden you realize you've lost your way. Nothing looks familiar. You begin to look wildly about you for your companions, for some recognizable landmark. You feel your heart start to race, your palms start to sweat. And then...relief. A voice calls out to you, and you realize you never really were alone after all. In an instant, your perspective changes from an attitude of fear to one of comfort.

John describes himself in this passage as a voice crying out in the wilderness. His role was not as a savior, but as a messenger. To guide the people from lives of sin to lives of repentance. From believing lies to knowing the truth. From being lost to being with Jesus. Like John, we also bear witness to Christ. But even with the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, we have no power to change hearts. Only God does that. We are called to go and bear fruit, in the midst of the wilderness of this world, by proclaiming the gospel—in hopes that by hearing and receiving God's word others might indeed turn their hearts to the truth. How does your voice bear witness to the wilderness where we live?

*Gracious Father,
Thank You for staying with us
Even in seasons where we feel lost and alone.
Thank You for understanding our hearts
And knowing we need Your guidance.
Your grace is sufficient for us, Father.
Help us to learn to recognize Your voice
As we follow You our whole life long.
Amen*

JANUARY 1

IN TIME

1 FOR EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON, AND A TIME FOR EVERY MATTER UNDER HEAVEN:
2 A TIME TO BE BORN, AND A TIME TO DIE;
A TIME TO PLANT, AND A TIME TO PLUCK UP WHAT IS PLANTED;
3 A TIME TO KILL, AND A TIME TO HEAL;
A TIME TO BREAK DOWN, AND A TIME TO BUILD UP;
4 A TIME TO WEEP, AND A TIME TO LAUGH;
A TIME TO MOURN, AND A TIME TO DANCE;
5 A TIME TO CAST AWAY STONES, AND A TIME TO GATHER STONES TOGETHER;
A TIME TO EMBRACE, AND A TIME TO REFRAIN FROM EMBRACING;
6 A TIME TO SEEK, AND A TIME TO LOSE;
A TIME TO KEEP, AND A TIME TO CAST AWAY;
7 A TIME TO TEAR, AND A TIME TO SEW;
A TIME TO KEEP SILENCE, AND A TIME TO SPEAK;
8 A TIME TO LOVE, AND A TIME TO HATE;
A TIME FOR WAR, AND A TIME FOR PEACE.
9 WHAT GAIN HAS THE WORKER FROM HIS TOIL?
10 I HAVE SEEN THE BUSINESS THAT GOD HAS GIVEN TO THE CHILDREN OF MAN TO BE BUSY WITH.
11 HE HAS MADE EVERYTHING BEAUTIFUL IN ITS TIME. ALSO, HE HAS PUT ETERNITY INTO MAN'S HEART, YET SO THAT HE CANNOT FIND OUT WHAT GOD HAS DONE FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE END.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-11

The Christmas season is coming to a close and we find ourselves at the beginning of another new year. Maybe this comes as a welcome change, or perhaps you find yourself in a season of burden. This passage in Ecclesiastes reminds us that none of these variations in life, pleasant or painful, are arbitrary. All things reside within the hands of a providential God who makes "everything beautiful in its time." And while the promise of beauty is a precious hope in seasons of painful endurance, we must not assume that promise will be ultimately satisfying. Even the most beautiful culmination of a season proves only to be temporary.

We can never be fully satisfied with the transient, for God "has put eternity into man's heart." Whatever season we find ourselves in, it is prudent not to demand to understand the why of things. Not all of God's doings are revealed for us to know. However, we are free to be captivated by the Who behind it all. Our eternal Creator. Our true satisfaction is found in knowing God and being known by Him. And even though a growing intimacy with God does not remove us from experiencing life's seasons, it gives our hearts their proper resting place in His character. We dwell secure in the fact that He is making all things beautiful because God Himself is beautiful.

*Everlasting Creator,
Not only are you the author of beauty,
You are beautiful.
We enter into this new year watchful of Your glory,
Which is threaded throughout every season.
We lay aside our selfish ambitions
And open our hands to You,
That with trusting hearts, we may receive
Your good and perfect will.
Amen*

JANUARY 2

FROM EVERLASTING TO EVERLASTING

1 LORD, YOU HAVE BEEN OUR DWELLING PLACE
IN ALL GENERATIONS.

2 BEFORE THE MOUNTAINS WERE BROUGHT FORTH,
OR EVER YOU HAD FORMED THE EARTH AND THE
WORLD,
FROM EVERLASTING TO EVERLASTING YOU ARE
GOD.

3 YOU RETURN MAN TO DUST
AND SAY, "RETURN, O CHILDREN OF MAN!"

4 FOR A THOUSAND YEARS IN YOUR SIGHT
ARE BUT AS YESTERDAY WHEN IT IS PAST,
OR AS A WATCH IN THE NIGHT.

PSALM 90:1-4

Where is "home" for you? For most people, home is where they grew up. Home is where most of their family lives, and where generations of their people lived and died. Home is where they feel comfortable living. Take a moment and imagine the place you call home. Imagine it at its best.

If you belong to God, your true home is with Him. It is where you came from, where all your people live, and where everything is as it should be. It is the place God created not just for you to live in peace and harmony, but for all of His people who came before and after you. And God is there, living with us. Our home with God has always been that way, and always will be. When we are living in fellowship with God, time stands still. Every moment can be savored and fully lived. In God's home, the tensions of this fallen world fall away, and we find perfect peace. Jesus' entry into our world brought us more than a hint of what our home with God will be. Take a moment to imagine the peace, joy, and comfort of your eternal home with God.

*Lord, You are our true home,
the eternal home for all Your people.
It is where we belong.
You have no beginning, and no end.
Without you, there is no life,
and we are no more than dust.
With you, we have abundant life forever.*

JANUARY 3

TEACH US TO NUMBER OUR DAYS

10 THE YEARS OF OUR LIFE ARE SEVENTY,
OR EVEN BY REASON OF STRENGTH EIGHTY;
YET THEIR SPAN IS BUT TOIL AND TROUBLE;
THEY ARE SOON GONE, AND WE FLY AWAY.

11 WHO CONSIDERS THE POWER OF YOUR ANGER,
AND YOUR WRATH ACCORDING TO THE FEAR OF
YOU?

12 SO TEACH US TO NUMBER OUR DAYS
THAT WE MAY GET A HEART OF WISDOM.

13 RETURN, O LORD! HOW LONG?
HAVE PITY ON YOUR SERVANTS!

14 SATISFY US IN THE MORNING WITH YOUR
STEADFAST LOVE,
THAT WE MAY REJOICE AND BE GLAD ALL OUR DAYS.

15 MAKE US GLAD FOR AS MANY DAYS AS YOU
HAVE AFFLICTED US,

AND FOR AS MANY YEARS AS WE HAVE SEEN EVIL.

16 LET YOUR WORK BE SHOWN TO YOUR SERVANTS,
AND YOUR GLORIOUS POWER TO THEIR CHILDREN.

17 LET THE FAVOR OF THE LORD OUR GOD BE UPON
US,

AND ESTABLISH THE WORK OF OUR HANDS UPON
US; YES, ESTABLISH THE WORK OF OUR HANDS!

PSALM 90: 10-17

Where does the time go? We look through photos, incredulous. "Seems like just yesterday..." Psalm 90 is a study in contrast. Infinite, holy God; finite, sinful man. Teach us, the psalmist says. Teach us our days are numbered. Teach us because this mindset doesn't come naturally to us. But why? So we can mourn over the brevity of life? No. So we will gain a heart of wisdom. So that "God will establish the labor of our hands." Establish? Didn't we just read that nothing lasts? Yes and no. The work of the Lord, His covering of our sins, His work through us for his Kingdom, is eternal. Through Christ, the finite is transformed to the infinite. So we are not just waiting for Christ; we are actively anticipating. We stretch out our hands to receive His forgiveness and we give Him our days.

*Take my life, let it be
consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days,
let them flow in endless praise.
Take my hands, let them move
at the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet, let them be
swift and beautiful for Thee.
Take my voice, let me sing,
always, only for my King.
Take my will, make it Thine,
it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is Thine own,
it shall be Thy royal throne.
Take my love, my Lord, I pour
at Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself and I will be
ever, only, all for Thee.
--Francis Haverfield*

JANUARY 4

LIVING IN WONDER

1 O LORD, OUR LORD,
HOW MAJESTIC IS YOUR NAME IN ALL THE EARTH!
YOU HAVE SET YOUR GLORY ABOVE THE HEAVENS.
2 OUT OF THE MOUTH OF BABIES AND INFANTS,
YOU HAVE ESTABLISHED STRENGTH BECAUSE OF
YOUR FOES,
TO STILL THE ENEMY AND THE AVENGER.
3 WHEN I LOOK AT YOUR HEAVENS, THE WORK OF
YOUR FINGERS,
THE MOON AND THE STARS, WHICH YOU HAVE SET
IN PLACE,
4 WHAT IS MAN THAT YOU ARE MINDFUL OF HIM,
AND THE SON OF MAN THAT YOU CARE FOR HIM?
5 YET YOU HAVE MADE HIM A LITTLE LOWER THAN
THE HEAVENLY BEINGS
AND CROWNED HIM WITH GLORY AND HONOR.
6 YOU HAVE GIVEN HIM DOMINION OVER THE
WORKS OF YOUR HANDS;
YOU HAVE PUT ALL THINGS UNDER HIS FEET,
7 ALL SHEEP AND OXEN,
AND ALSO THE BEASTS OF THE FIELD,
8 THE BIRDS OF THE HEAVENS, AND THE FISH OF THE
SEA,
WHATEVER PASSES ALONG THE PATHS OF THE SEAS.
9 O LORD, OUR LORD,
HOW MAJESTIC IS YOUR NAME IN ALL THE EARTH!

PSALM 8

When David was writing this Psalm, he was clearly sitting in the wonder of creation, pondering his place in the world. He is in awe of the beauty of the skies and animals and his own role to play in this grand unfolding of God's larger story.. Wonder is defined as a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable. Are we comfortable sitting with the inexplicable? As adults with to-do lists and New Year's goals, how do we make space in our day for the practice of wonder? It takes practice in our rationally scientific and intellectual world to embrace the wonder of our small moments. It forces us to journey to the present moment, not to tomorrow, or yesterday, but right now. What wonder of God's love do you see around you? We live in a world bursting forth with His glory. Do we have the eyes to see? Do we have humility to sit in our own unknowing? Can wonder allow us to see our majestic Creator as bigger, deeper, longer, fuller than anything we can imagine?

Lord, You crown us with your glory and honor even when we don't understand.

You freely give us peace, endless mercy and love even in our unknowing.

Remind us of Your invitation to be still

And to be present with You in Your creation.

You enjoy us, and we long to feel satisfied in You.

In Your precious name, Amen.

JANUARY 5

PEACE IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

1 I WAS GLAD WHEN THEY SAID TO ME,
“LET US GO TO THE HOUSE OF THE LORD!”
2 OUR FEET HAVE BEEN STANDING
WITHIN YOUR GATES, O JERUSALEM!
3 JERUSALEM—BUILT AS A CITY
THAT IS BOUND FIRMLY TOGETHER,
4 TO WHICH THE TRIBES GO UP,
THE TRIBES OF THE LORD,
AS WAS DECREED FOR ISRAEL,
TO GIVE THANKS TO THE NAME OF THE LORD.
5 THERE THRONES FOR JUDGMENT WERE SET,
THE THRONES OF THE HOUSE OF DAVID.
6 PRAY FOR THE PEACE OF JERUSALEM!
“MAY THEY BE SECURE WHO LOVE YOU!
7 PEACE BE WITHIN YOUR WALLS
AND SECURITY WITHIN YOUR TOWERS!”
8 FOR MY BROTHERS AND COMPANIONS’ SAKE
I WILL SAY, “PEACE BE WITHIN YOU!”
9 FOR THE SAKE OF THE HOUSE OF THE LORD OUR
GOD,
I WILL SEEK YOUR GOOD.

PSALM 122

Thinking of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem can be similar to Disney vacations, Hawaiian honeymoons, or summer-long treks through Europe –ideas typically more legendary in thought than execution. They seem epic, because they involve mentally inserting ourselves into the enormity of what we imagine the places to be-- like we are stepping into the setting of knightly fairy tales, bygone wars, and the cradle of western culture, tradition, and art. It’s hard not to conflate everything we think we know about a place and what we’ll find there into our expectations.

When a pilgrim recites a song such as this one, which recounts tribes, thrones, and palaces of the past and points to a future hope, he adds to its greatness. The pilgrim is seeking “shalom” – a destination where all is well between us, God, and His creation. Yet we seldom find “shalom” in the legendary places of others. We find shalom only in the presence of God. We can and ought to share those times when God “shows up” for us, supernaturally carrying us, in the midst of both profound disappointment and great adulation. Often it is simply His presence that transforms our own surroundings into monuments of personal miracles. Testimony about such experiences with God is what makes the Psalms the great soundtrack of God’s people and chronicle the pilgrimage of redemption and reconciliation with Him.

*Almighty God, Father of all Mercies,
guide us in all our circumstances and surroundings,
that we may find peace in Your presence,
whatever may befall us; tears or triumphs.
Let us be mindful that You are nearer than our breath in
daily routines that exasperate us
as well as special and exciting times;
that we may find peace in You
apart from the diversions of this life,
to the glory of Your Only begotten Son,
Christ our Lord. Amen.*

JANUARY 6

YOUR LIGHT HAS COME

1 ARISE, SHINE, FOR YOUR LIGHT HAS COME,
AND THE GLORY OF THE LORD HAS RISEN UPON
YOU.

2 FOR BEHOLD, DARKNESS SHALL COVER THE EARTH,
AND THICK DARKNESS THE PEOPLES;
BUT THE LORD WILL ARISE UPON YOU,
AND HIS GLORY WILL BE SEEN UPON YOU.

3 AND NATIONS SHALL COME TO YOUR LIGHT,
AND KINGS TO THE BRIGHTNESS OF YOUR RISING.

4 LIFT UP YOUR EYES ALL AROUND, AND SEE;
THEY ALL GATHER TOGETHER, THEY COME TO YOU;
YOUR SONS SHALL COME FROM AFAR,
AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL BE CARRIED ON THE
HIP.

5 THEN YOU SHALL SEE AND BE RADIANT;
YOUR HEART SHALL THRILL AND EXULT,
BECAUSE THE ABUNDANCE OF THE SEA SHALL BE
TURNED TO YOU,
THE WEALTH OF THE NATIONS SHALL COME TO
YOU.

ISAIAH 60: 1-5

We live in a reality where sin, disappointment, cancer, depression, and broken relationships press in on us like a thick blanket of fog. Our hearts grow heavy with the darkness we encounter, both out in the world and inside of ourselves. Isaiah's prophecy pierces through this constant fog we live in to illuminate a deeper reality. A day is coming when all the dark things will be made light. The prophet's vision does not require us to shrink back or flee from the intensity of Christ's brightness; instead we are invited to arise and join in shining forth and magnifying God's glory. Just as sure as the sun rises each morning, our Lord is coming again. One day His glory will arise over the horizon, obliterating the broken and painful darkness we now face, and drawing all creation to Himself in restored relationship. What hope we have, what joy awaits!

*Lord of Glory,
the sun's rays rise to greet You this day.
May the light of Christ so illumine our hearts
that we too shine forth Your glory in this dark world.
Lift up our eyes to see You today, we pray,
and grant that we may rejoice
in the radiance of Your truth.
May we hold fast to the hope
of Your sure and lasting promises
and Your kingdom that has no end.
Amen.*



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D O W N T O W N

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