where the
LIGHT
shines brightest
an advent devotional

where the LIGHT shines brightest

an advent devotional

Where the Light Shines Brightest:
rediscovering what it means to offer people the hope of the world

Copyright © 2016 by the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism.
All rights reserved.

Billy Graham Center for Evangelism
Wheaton College
500 College Ave.
Wheaton, IL 60187

Contact us:
1.630.752.5918
bgce@wheaton.edu
www.wheaton.edu/bgce

Cover image and page background
designed by Kjpargeter/Freepik.com

Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the King James Version, public domain.

Scripture quotations marked (NASB) are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

table of contents

Foreword 5
Contributors. 6
There is bread in the house. 8
What's in a name? 10
By every means: a lesson from the wise men. 12
Notorious women in Jesus' past 14
Wanted: a refuge and homes for pilgrims 16
Seeing salvation in the shadows 18
Anticipating the good news of Jesus. 20
Christmas humility 22
How much does Jesus love us? 24
When the wonder of the good news makes all else go silent 26
The salvation of advent. 28
A surprise: the nobody-baby 30
100x: for nothing is impossible with God 32
Advent prayer to Jesus 34
Preparing for the coming of the savior. 36
Lessons on sacrificial giving. 38
Living incarnationally 40
Following the tradition of wise men 42
Out of darkness, light 44
Preparing a sign for worship 46
An advent prayer: you break in 48
Peace on earth! 50
From word to word the same 52
Our advent mission from Christ 54
A prayer of St. Augustine 56

foreword

Advent is a time to reflect upon the coming of the Christ-child into our world. We open our Bibles and immerse ourselves in the narrative of Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, the wise men, and most of all, the Promised One.

Our hearts fill with thankfulness for the gift of "God among us." We celebrate with friends and family as we light candles, read scripture passages, share communion, and sing carols. But how does this moment—one of most powerful in all of history—the birth of Jesus, affect our evangelism and our call to be good news bearers in a broken and hurting world? Do we really see Advent as a time when we not only lean into God's promise of salvation, but also embrace opportunities to share the greatest news on earth with those far from God?

The Apostles Peter and John once said, "We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Imagine what the shepherds, the wise men, and others shared when they too "saw" and "heard." Imagine now what we must share as we "see" and "hear" all the goodness and glories of Jesus Christ born to rescue a world from sin.

Where the Light Shines Brightest is a 25-day devotional intended to help all of us begin to imagine how this Advent season, and our own personal reflection on the birth of Jesus Christ, can inform, and even transform, our desire and passion to show and share this good news with a broken and hurting world. Each daily devotional includes a short reflection on the birth of Christ and a prayer for applying this revelation to our gospel witness in the world today.

Our prayer is that as you are filled up with the wonders of Advent, you would go out and be a light that will shine brighter than any other.

Dr. Ed Stetzer, Executive Director
Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, Wheaton College

contributors

Jamie D. Aten is the Dr. Arthur P. Rech and Mrs. Jean May Rech Associate Professor of Psychology at Wheaton College and Founder and Co-director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute.

Jon Bloom serves as author, Board Chair, and Co-founder of Desiring God.

Laurel Bunker is Dean of Campus Ministries and Campus Pastor at Bethel University.

Chris Castaldo serves as Lead Pastor of New Covenant Church in Naperville, IL.

Samuel and Robbi Chiang have been married for 28 years and have three grown children and two daughters-in-law. Samuel is President/CEO of The Seed Company.

Matt Erickson is Senior Pastor of Eastbrook Church.

Joe Handley is President of Asian Access.

Kevin Harney is Lead Pastor of Shoreline Community Church in Monterey, CA, and Founder and Visionary Leader of Organic Outreach International.

Sam Kim is Founder of 180 Church NYC.

York Moore is National Evangelist for InterVarsity USA and Founder of the anti-trafficking movement Price of Life.

Laurie Nichols is Director of Communications at the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism and Managing Editor of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (EMQ).

Kim Reisman is Executive Director of World Methodist Evangelism.

John C. Richards is Managing Director of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism.

Rick Richardson is an Evangelism Fellow at the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, a Professor at Wheaton College, and Director of the MA in Evangelism and Leadership and the MA in Missional Church Movements degrees.

Evi Rodemann is part of the Lausanne European steering team and a member of the Lausanne YLGen Development team.

Jerry Root is an Evangelism Fellow at the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, a Professor at Wheaton College, and the Director of the Evangelism Initiative.

Mary Schaller is President of Q Place.

Ed Stetzer is Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism at Wheaton College and Executive Director for the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism.

Karen Swanson is Director of the Institute for Prison Ministries at the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism.

Sadiri Joy Tira is a Catalyst for Diasporas with Lausanne and Diaspora Missiology Specialist with the Jaffray Centre for Global Initiatives at Ambrose University and Seminary.

Tuvya Zaretsky is a Lausanne Catalyst for Jewish Evangelism, serves the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism (LCJE), and is a Jewish-Gentile Couples Ministry Specialist with Jews for Jesus.

day 1

there is bread in the house

Ninety miles—the distance Joseph and a very pregnant Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was census time in Judea. As David's descendant, Joseph made the trek to Bethlehem, the city of David, to register. The young couple was unaware that this trip would change the course of history.

Bethlehem means "house of bread." Centuries before Jesus' manger birth, there was a famine in Bethlehem. This famine led another man, Elimelech, on a journey with his wife and two sons. This journey cost him his life (see Ruth 1:1–3). All because there was no bread in the house of bread.

Over a thousand years later, another "man" took a journey that would cost him his life. He wasn't fleeing Bethlehem. He was born there. The same famine-stricken location now housed the most precious gift in human history. In a quaint manger in Bethlehem, the "bread" returned in the person of Jesus Christ.

Until that time, there was a spiritual famine in the land. Hundreds of years passed between Malachi and this moment in the manger. It was a moment that began a trip. The destination? The cross. As the Bread of Life who came down from heaven (see John 6:41, 48), this same Jesus would later be broken on the cross. And He did it to satisfy our spiritual hunger and reconcile us to God.

That's good news! Others need to know this truth. As Christians, it is our duty to share the gospel with a hungry world. It is our responsibility to look at the spiritual famine in our land and declare, "There is Bread in the House!"

–John C. Richards–

Lord,

Thank You for entering a broken world as a newborn in Bethlehem. I'm grateful that You are the only bread that can satisfy this world's spiritual hunger. Because of that glorious truth, give me a heart to share this life-giving bread with others.

Amen.

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

(Luke 2:6-7)

day 2

what's in a name?

Does your name mean something? I like to ask, because it is a way to learn about people and their culture. At the Christmas season, the meaning in Jesus' name is central to our celebration of His birth.

Jesus is English, a transliteration of the Greek, *Iesous*, which translates His Hebrew name—*Yeshua*. It means, "He will save." His parents didn't pick *Yeshua* for Him. In fact, an angel of the Lord told Joseph that his wife, Miriam (Mary), would bear a son and they should call Him *Yeshua* (Jesus).

Would you argue with an angel from the Lord? Actually, in the Old Testament, *Yeshua* was a common proper Israelite name. It was special when describing God, "Behold Yahweh is my Yeshuah" (Exod. 15:2), meaning my salvation or deliverance.

King David appealed to Yahweh for relief from the shame of his sin, "Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, Oh God, the God of my Yeshuah," (Ps. 51:11) "my salvation." And Isaiah told his Jewish people, "Behold, your Savior (Hoshea) comes; behold, his reward is with Him" (Isa. 62:11). When the Lord's angelic messenger gave Joseph the name *Yeshua* (Savior) for their baby, it was big news. This is Yahweh's Savior!

The angel also said, "He will save his people from their sins." Christmastime is a good season to remember what our selfishness cost the Lord. That baby, Jesus, is God's Savior. His sacrifice saves us from our sins. Joseph and Miriam may not have understood all that when they named Him *Yeshua*. However, you and I know His whole story—from the manger, to the cross, into the grave, and then lifted into heaven.

So, with the disciples, we say, "God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31). God's Christmas gift is the very best of all!

–Tuvya Zaretsky–

Lord,

My Yeshua, thank You for delivering me from my self-centered existence. I'm so grateful You saved me. This Christmas, please be my wisdom and grace to share Your gift of Yeshua to others in need.

Amen.

❝*She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*❞
(Matthew 1:21)

day 3

by every means: a lesson from the wise men

If you have ever wondered what kind of means God uses to draw people to Him, a quick look at scripture tells us that the answer is **nearly every means**! Talking donkeys, fire from heaven, parting seas, becoming similar to an ox… But in the birth narrative of Jesus, we find another interesting pathway to conversion and worship: astrology.

In Matthew 2:1-2, we read, "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'"

It is debated whether these wise men were kings, but what we do know is this: they were not Jews, and likely Zoroastrians or Persians—men who didn't know the Hebrew God! And what method did God use to draw them to Himself? Reading the stars. God drew an unlikely people through an unlikely means to Himself. It was the first story of conversion in the Bible!

With Advent upon us, and people more open than at any other time of year to faith conversations, we have the opportunity to reach people in new and creative ways. We can look around us and ask, "Where are my non-Christian friends and neighbors, and what are their interests and passions?" Perhaps they read science fiction novels or play chess. Perhaps they bake or play video games. Perhaps they are movie junkies or lovers of animals. Regardless of their passion, God can use their interests as entry points to point them to Him!

And God can use your interests too! Do what you love to do (like playing chess, reading science fiction, watching movies or baking Christmas cookies). And do those things with people who don't know Jesus yet, asking good questions along the way to find out where God might already be at work in their lives!

–Rick Richardson–

Lord,

Thank You that You use all means possible that all may come to know You as Lord and Savior. Guide our efforts to make You known to others this Advent. Open wide the doors for people to learn more about You, and to be changed by Your glory.

Amen.

❝*And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.*❞

(Luke 2:9-11)

day 4

notorious women in Jesus' past

Included in the list of Jesus' male ancestors in Matthew 1 are five women. Why? Precisely the question God means for us to ask.

1. **Tamar** (Matt. 1:3) entered the Messianic bloodline by disguising herself as a prostitute and seducing her father-in-law, Judah, so he would make her pregnant (see Gen. 38).

2. **Rahab** (Matt. 1:5) was once a very real prostitute in Canaan. She and her family were the only survivors of Israel's conquest of Jericho, because she helped Israelite spies escape. Once integrated into Israel, she married Salmon and became King David's great, great grandmother (Josh. 6:25; Ruth 4:21-22).

3. **Ruth** (Matt. 1:5) wasn't a native Israelite either. She came from Moab, whose people sacrificed their children to the idol, Chemosh. Through personal tragedy and loyalty, Ruth wound up at Bethlehem, married to Boaz, and the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:21-22).

4. **Bathsheba**, "the wife of Uriah" (Matt. 1:6), suffered sexual abuse and the murder of her husband by Israel's greatest king, and as a result became an ancestor of Jesus.

5. **Mary** (Matt. 1:16) became pregnant with Jesus before her wedding, and the Child's father was not her betrothed, Joseph. This scandal would have lingered in whispers and insults in and around Nazareth for many years.

These women all share something in common: disgrace. Their very names call to mind scandalous, even sordid things. But they all experienced something else in common: God's redeeming grace—grace purchased for each of them by the (future) work of Christ on the cross.

Before Matthew begins the Christmas story, he points us to five women who illustrate why Jesus came: to seek the lost, forgive sinners, reconcile His enemies, make foreigners His children, and transform disgraceful lives into glorious lives.

–Jon Bloom–

Lord,

Thank You for this good news of great joy even in the genealogies! Make us bold Christmas ambassadors of this gospel of reconciliation that is for all the peoples.

Amen.

❝*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*❞
(Matthew 1:1)

day 5

wanted: a refuge and homes for pilgrims

What does Psalm 46:1-2—"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear..."—have to do with Advent? We sing upbeat carols, but when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, King Herod was terrorizing Jerusalem. Furthermore, King Herod had ordered his soldiers to search for the newborn baby who would become a potential threat to his regime. Children, particularly boys, were in hiding. The people were enveloped in fear. It was not joyful or peaceful.

Aware of the danger, Jesus' earthly parents, Joseph and Mary, took Him to Egypt. Imagine their perilous journey. But in Egypt, the young family found a refuge, a place of safety, security, peace, and rest.

Sixteen years ago, while serving as Senior Pastor of First Filipino Alliance Church (FFAC in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada), I met Nabil from Sudan and Jamal from Tanzania. Nabil was a believer whose life, along with his family's, had been threatened during the civil war in Sudan.

They all fled to Cairo, and while in Cairo, they applied for asylum in Canada. Jamal was born a Muslim but when he was a teenager, he decided to follow Jesus Christ as a teenager. His father, a Muslim imam (clergy), threatened to kill Jamal if he did not renounce his "new faith." Jamal fled to Kenya, where he attended Bible College. After finishing an undergraduate degree, he pursued further theological training at Canadian Theological Seminary. In 1990, Nabil and Jamal relocated to Edmonton, and FFAC invited both men to join our pastoral team.

From being persecuted in their homelands, Nabil and Jamal both fled to Egypt and Kenya, ultimately landing in Edmonton and becoming pastors of First Filipino Alliance Church. The Filipino congregation accepted them as their co-pilgrims and co-servants. Kenya, Egypt, and then Canada, had offered refuge. Today, both Nabil and Jamal continue to reach out to immigrants and refugees, introducing many to Jesus. May our countries, cities, congregations, and homes be places of refuge for the uprooted pilgrims.

–Sadiri Joy Tira–

Lord,

Provide the diasporas with refuge and a home. Like Jesus, Nabil, and Jamal, use them to be peacemakers and heralds of the good news.

Amen.

"God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble. Therefore
we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into
the heart of the sea."
(Psalm 46:1-2)

day 6

seeing salvation in the shadows

I like to see what happens in the shadows of the major events of life—the look on the groom's face as he waits in anticipation of his soon-to-be-wife to walk down the aisle, the 8-year-old outfielder practicing his catch in anticipation of the all-star batter going up to the plate, the millions of single moms working tirelessly to provide for their children while many families spend to excess.

In the story of Jesus' birth, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph take center stage—as they should. But I am astounded over and over again by the smaller narratives that surround the event as well—the shepherds, Anna, the wise men, Herod, but most of all, Simeon (Luke 2:25-35). Of Simeon it was said that he "was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 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" (vv. 25-26).

His hope was that he wouldn't die before he met the baby Jesus. He waited. And waited. And finally the day came. Scripture doesn't tell us how long he waited, but we get a sense that he didn't use his time wandering aimlessly. Quite the contrary! Instead, he worshiped God in the temple.

And as he worshiped God, he became deeply in tune with God's plan of salvation, which was to surpass what anyone could imagine. Simeon's prayer in verses 29-32 is one of the first precursors in the New Testament of the scope of the salvific plan:

> Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

Salvation will now come to the Gentiles—to the whole earth! Simeon waited and spent time worshiping God. As a result, he clearly announced a plan more wild than any imagined—Jesus didn't come just to save the Jewish people, but to save all. Today as well, Jesus doesn't come for just a select few. He is the Savior of the whole world—those in the spotlight, and those in the shadows. The all-star, and the clumsy. The rich, and the poor. The old, and the young. He has come for all.

–Laurie Nichols–

Lord,

Give us hearts of expectation that wait upon You. Fill our mouths with words of hope and life to all we meet, telling them that One has come who is the light that will cover all their darkness.

Amen.

"…for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles…"

(Luke 2:30-32)

day 7

anticipating the good news of Jesus

Some people enjoy looking forward to an upcoming event as much as they do actually engaging or experiencing the event itself. This anticipation—a feeling of excitement and joy—is what Advent is about. We mark off each day on the Advent calendar as we wait expectantly for Christmas to come—for the great celebration of Christ's birth.

Consider how the Jewish people must have felt. From the time they were born, they were taught about a coming Messiah. Zechariah 9:9 states, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Do we approach Advent with fear and trembling, understanding the profound significance of what happened on the day Jesus was born?

Do we fill the Advent days with thanksgiving and praise for the miracle of "God among us"?

Do our hearts overflow with expectation at the good news of Jesus' birth so that we tell others about the reason for Christmas, "for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20)?

Does our anticipation lead to proclamation?

Advent is a time unlike any other during the year. Hearts are open to the good news more than perhaps at any other time. May our anticipation of what we know lead to a desire to tell others the same good news that changed our world: A Savior was born, who is Christ the Lord.

–Karen Swanson–

Lord,

We wait with great anticipation for the celebration of the birth of your Son. Help us to live intentional lives that demonstrate the hope we have in Christ so that others desire you.

Amen.

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."
(Luke 2:11)

day 8

christmas humility

Christmas is a picture of God's humble entrance into the human story. Our Lord did not stand at a distance and bark salvation instructions. Jesus did not come in human power with glitz and fanfare. He was born in the stench of a stable, and no one noticed… except the heavenly host.

Eventually, wise men and shepherds got the invitation, but the first Christmas was not a fancy affair. Joseph, Mary, and a baby boy shivered in the exposure of a stable. The divine gift of heaven slipped into our world with hardly a ripple on the pond of human history.

What do we learn from the way Jesus came? Humility. Sacrifice. Service. Yes, all of these!

We who carry the Spirit of Jesus deep within our souls ought to walk through this world like Jesus did. We who bear His name and good news should look a lot like the One born in Bethlehem. We are called "Christians." When people look at us, they should see the Savior of the world reflected in our words, attitudes, and daily behavior. Humility should mark all we say and do.

Our evangelism should be natural and driven by deep humility. Let's set judgmental attitudes aside. Let's not expect non-believers to act like Christians. If we are completely honest, it is hard enough for Christians to act like Christians, and we are filled with the Holy Spirit! Let's show grace and kindness to people who are not yet aware that God loves them. Let's treat each person we meet this Christmas season with gentle love and humble grace, remembering that Christ came to save sinners.

–Kevin Harney–

God of the manger,

Remind me of Your humility this Christmas season. Let my words, attitude, and actions reflect the humble heart of Jesus. Help me set aside all pride and self-serving attitudes, and let me love people like You do, right where they are. Open doors for me to gently tell stories of Your work in my life as well as Your gift of grace for all who will receive Your goodness.

Amen.

❝*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*❞
(Philippians 2:5-7)

day 9

how much does Jesus love us?

A few years ago I was given the book *Loving Jesus More* by Dr. Phil Ryken, President of Wheaton College. The title intrigued me, and I moved it to the top of my growing pile of books to read. I felt a little stalled in my faith and wanted to love Jesus more! The question for me was *how?* The book reminded me that there is a deep connection between loving and being loved. If we want to love Jesus more, we need to know more of His love personally. The apostle John confirms this concept when he says, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

If I am truly honest with myself, like my non-Christian friends, I often have doubts about God's love for me. Perhaps they are not as predominant in my mind, but they do keep me from loving Jesus more. It's a struggle to be acknowledged and a temptation to be resisted. Ryken advises us to "doubt our doubts." Over and over again, I must go back to the gospel and God's word, which is an assurance of God's love. *Do I honestly seek His word for confirmation of His love?*

Advent is a time to seek confirmation of God's love for us and to hide His word even deeper in our hearts. Jesus arrived as a baby in a lowly manger, taught us all how to live in fellowship with God, and then died on a bloody cross for our sins—demonstrating God's tremendous love for us. While not typically a verse used much at this time of year, the profound reality of John 3:16 should sink deeper and deeper into our souls: God so loved the world (including me and you!) that He gave His one and only Son to live, die, and conquer death for us.

What good news this is! Receiving His love for us results in a whole and lasting life with Him that can be shared.

Popular singer and songwriter Jack Johnson, in his song "Better Together," sings, "Love is the answer….at least for most of the questions in my heart." Maybe when God answers the deepest questions of our own hearts through His contagious love, others around us may also know the profound love of Jesus.

–Mary Schaller–

Lord,

Help me to love You more by receiving more of Your love. Dispel my doubts about Your love through spending time in Your word and experiencing Your presence. Allow that love to go so deep into my soul that it overflows with love for others.

Amen.

❝*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.*❞

(1 John 4:7-9)

day 10

when the wonder of the good news makes all else go silent

That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown! —Linus van Pelt

If you are like me, you grew with the tradition of watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas* during Christmas season—that, along with *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. I loved those shows and couldn't wait to watch them when December came around.

That word *wait* is important. This same season is known as Advent, which means "coming" in Latin—*adventus*. As we believers wait for His coming (both His coming again and the commemoration of the waiting for Jesus' birth), we have an even more compelling anticipation for the wonder Christ will bring: hope for the world!

What I love about the story *A Charlie Brown Christmas* is how the plot develops, building momentum for the climax when Linus quotes Luke 2. Every year, I waited with great anticipation as the plot thickened and the story unfolded. Then, Linus, probably the youngest of the cast, shares the great wisdom of Jesus coming: His advent! For Jesus came to bring us "tidings of great joy" (Luke 2:10, KJV). The hope of the world rested in this child Jesus.

The beauty of this artistic production is that this great news is so overwhelming that everything else goes silent as Linus shares. The news is so fantastic that the angels burst forth in praise sharing what has happened. The anticipation of Advent is that Jesus has come and is coming. He is the hope of our world. Nothing else even compares.

Why Charlie Brown? Why Linus? Because this story for me is both a wonderful inspiration and an opportunity to share this awesome news with those around me. It's so easy to talk about *A Charlie Brown Christmas* with my family, friends, and those I pass by. For my generation, it's very familiar and opens the doors for the telling of Jesus' great story.

How about you? As we celebrate Jesus' coming and long for His return, what's your story? What inspires you so much that you, like Linus, must share the hope of the world? We have "tidings of great joy" that are worthy of the angels' praise! Join me in sharing their great news this year.

–Joe Handley–

Lord,

Help me as I lean into sharing this good news with those around me. Give me the right words at the right time to bless those I know and bring hope and joy to the world.

Amen.

❝*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.'*❞

(Luke 2: 8-10)

the salvation of advent

As a teenager working in the mall during Christmas, I was the guy who ran products from the warehouse to the store clerks. This cavernous stockroom was 6,000 square feet and filled wall-to-wall with boxes.

On one occasion, I found myself at the rear side of the windowless warehouse opposite the door when someone turned off the lights. There I was, alone in the dark with 15,000 boxes between the light switch and me. I couldn't see an inch before my face. I know what you're thinking: *Just find an aisle and walk toward the door!* Yeah, if only there was such a path. Boxes were haphazardly piled everywhere.

I remember what I felt during those 30 minutes of groping around the room: isolation, fear, and dread. It was the kind of defining moment that is all too common in the human experience.

After the 29th minute, I crawled around a pile of boxes, and there, in the distance, I saw a dim exit sign. I knew that below the sign was a door, and beside the door was a light switch. At once, a new sensation emerged: hope.

What does this little story have to do with Advent? Everything. Jesus entered history and said, "I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Apart from Jesus Christ, we are trapped in darkness, left helplessly groping for life's meaning and purpose. But there is good news. The crucified, risen, and majestic Lord stepped into the shadows of our suffering and pain and created an exit. Therefore, follow Christ and enjoy the eternal light of life. And be someone who can point others towards an exit sign that opens to new hope and new life.

–Chris Castaldo–

Lord,

Please show us Jesus—the Way, the Truth, and the Life—and grant us the grace to follow Him out of darkness and into the light of your presence.

Amen.

❝*Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'*❞
(John 8:12)

day 12

a surprise: the nobody-baby

As I sat in the hospital with the new parents and their baby girl, nurses walked in and out to check vital signs, telling the parents how cute their little girl was. Family members gathered in the room, and an older sister stared at this new being who was joining her daily life. Usually, new babies receive a lot of attention. Yet at Jesus' arrival, He received little attention by any earthly measure. Surprisingly, the King of all creation was born as a lowly, disregarded nobody-baby.

In part, that was because Mary and Joseph were nobodies. Joseph was a craftsman from the small town of Nazareth in Galilee. Mary was a young woman with an apparently questionable character. Still, they were the nobodies God wanted to use, and that was a surprise.

No matter how charming they may look in many sentimental paintings, the shepherds were also cast-offs from society. According to the standards of their day, shepherding was a lower class, messy career, even though the shepherd's role had kingly associations in scripture. These rough-around-the-edges nobodies were the very first to see God in the flesh after Mary and Joseph. This is certainly a surprise.

Even the magi were not what we might expect. Although apparently wealthy, they came from outside Israel and, as Gentiles, were some of the least expected to receive a message from God. Yet onward they came as part of God's vital story. Nobodies in the spiritual sense, they traveled great distances in response to God's surprising message sparked by a miraculous star. They worshiped this child king, this nobody Messiah. Gentiles around the Jewish King was a jarring surprise.

Again and again, God does surprising things. His plans come in unexpected packages, and His ways touch unexpected lives. God is the God of the nobodies. That is my story, and that is your story. May we be the sort of people who reach out to other nobodies with the surprisingly good news of a nobody-baby who makes us somebody with God.

–Matt Erickson–

Lord,

Thank You for pursuing nobodies. Thank You for pursuing me, even though I am nobody by the world's eyes. Give me Your eyes to see other nobodies the way that You do. Help me to share Your unexpected message of hope and life with everyone I encounter today.

Amen.

"For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."
(1 Corinthians 1:25)

day 13

100x: for nothing is impossible with God

Advent looks towards the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. The Bible narrates with details of the angel's interaction with the leading actress—Mary. *Was it possible that a virgin is going to give birth to the Savior of the world?* Ultimately, in that conversation, the angel declared that "for nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

This is not a quiet theme in the Bible. In Genesis 18:14, Sarah laughed at God with unbelief that she would be pregnant, but the Lord countered with, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Job, Jeremiah, and Zechariah all asked the same rhetorical question: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

The gospel narrative, and indeed the entire biblical narrative, calls us to hold on to both the mystery of God and our faith in God. In fact, we are called to 'exercise' faith in God! If you are like me, you might wonder if God declared anything that is impossible to this generation.

At the middle of the last century, the atheistic communistic government of China closed its borders and declared that there is no God. People of God from around the world went to prayer for the Christians in China. At that time, with an approximate one million remnant Christians in China, God went to work. Within six decades, God multiplied the followers of Christ 100x in China! Any business that can achieve 100x is studied over and over.

But how do you grow a church when persecution is occurring, and the border to the country is closed? It's a mystery, and it requires faith in the prayers of God's people globally.

During the Advent season, we are pointed to the real "Hope" of the world. *Do we believe God can do the impossible? Do we believe that God's word will never fail? Have you tested God and trusted Him for what is utterly impossible?*

–Samuel and Robbi Chiang–

Lord,

You know my heart, and I am going to ask You for what I know is not impossible in my family, neighborhood, workplace, and this nation—that revival will come.

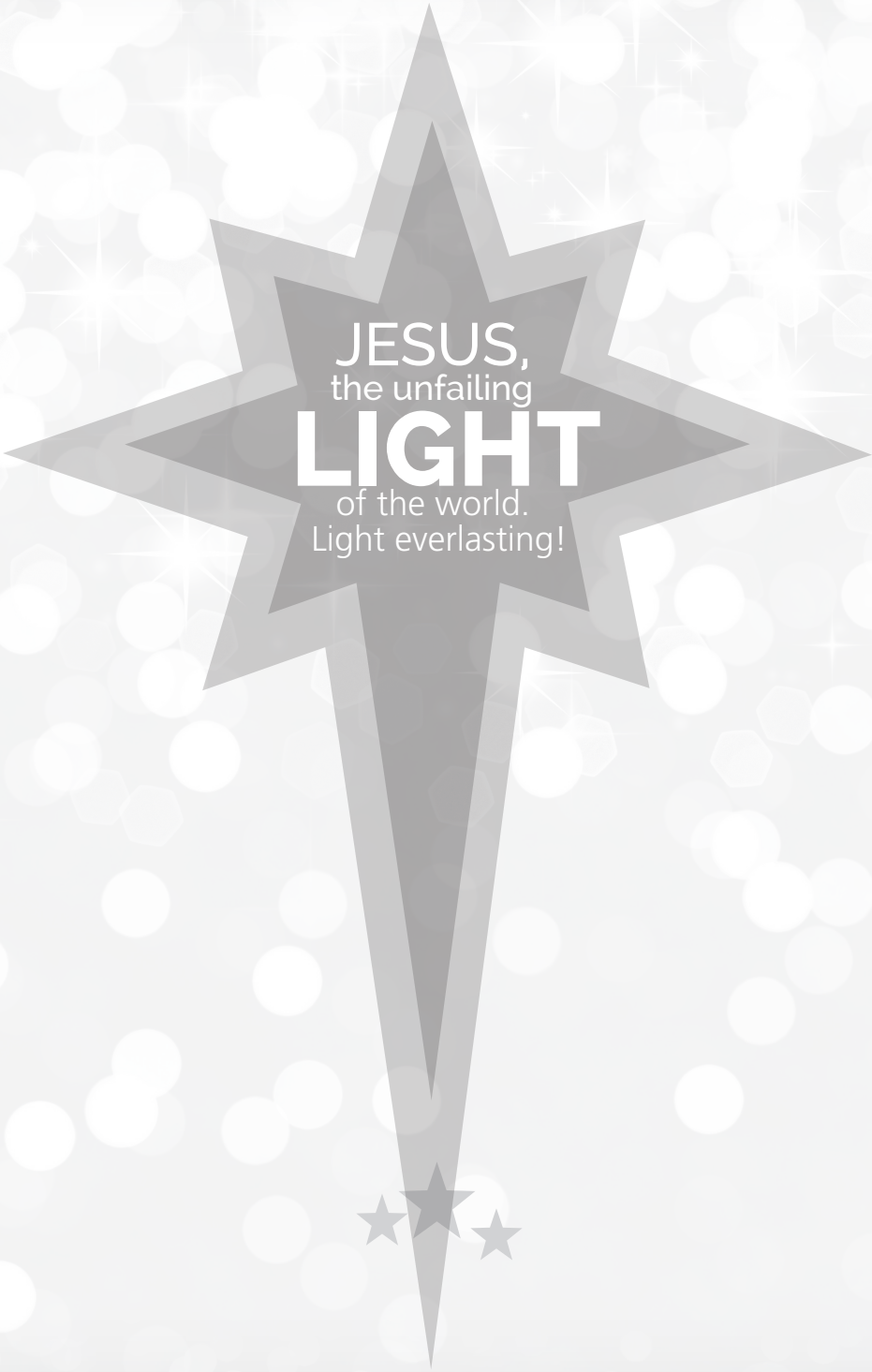
Amen.

❝*For nothing will be impossible with God.*❞
(Luke 1:37)

advent prayer to Jesus

You are our eternal salvation,
The unfailing light of the world.
Light everlasting,
You are truly our redemption.
Grieving that the human race was perishing
through the tempter's power,
without leaving the heights
You came to the depths in Your loving kindness.
Readily taking our humanity by Your gracious will,
You saved all earthly creatures, long since lost,
restoring joy to the world.
Redeem our souls and bodies, O Christ,
and so possess us as Your shining dwellings.
By Your first coming, make us righteous;
at Your second coming, set us free:
so that, when the world is filled with light
and You judge all things,
we may be clad in spotless robes
and follow in Your steps, O King,
into the heavenly hall.

–Unknown Author, 10th century–


JESUS,
the unfailing
LIGHT
of the world.
Light everlasting!

day 15

preparing for the coming of the savior

Every year as we enter the Advent season, I get excited, not just about the Christmas cookies and marzipan in the stores, but about being able to celebrate the amazing and actual story of remembering the birth of our Savior. A real story about a real person being the real and only Savior of the world.

People around us long for a real person being a real savior. They deal with enough copies, fakes, and artifacts. Especially in this season, it is our privilege to prepare hearts for this unique celebration, which should never lose its awesomeness and wonder.

Although a traditional form set of four Sundays, Advent helps us to expect and prepare for the yearly reminder of this miracle. Advent comes from the word *adventus*, which means "coming". In our instant society we must constantly relearn what it means to wait and prepare for something, Someone.

Mary conceived Jesus miraculously and waited patiently for Him to be born (Luke 2). God could have just sent to earth a readymade person; instead, He chose Mary to carry Jesus and prepare for the birth. It was not a quick fix, but it was God´s commitment to humanity—from the cradle to the grave and beyond. The mother of Jesus knew there was an advent as Jesus was being born. The question was never about whether or not Jesus was the Savior of the world. He was and He is.

In light of that, are we willing to help prepare those who do not yet know our Savior has come and is coming?

–Evi Rodemann–

Lord,

We thank You for this time of Advent, when we have an opportunity to reflect on Your coming. As we prepare our hearts, may You also prepare hearts of beloved people around us who do not yet know You.

Amen.

❝*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.*❞
(Isaiah 9:6)

day 16

lessons on sacrificial giving

Not long ago, some of my colleagues from the Humanitarian Disaster Institute (HDI) sat in a room full of church leaders who had gathered to discuss how to help a new wave of displaced refugees. One of the ways they decided to help was by tithing.

This might not seem extraordinary, but you have to consider the context. These weren't just any church leaders—*these were refugee church leaders* in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. The tithe they proposed was comprised of their food rations, which they were preparing to have cut by nearly 20 percent due to the Syrian war.

These refugee pastors gave much more than a tithe—they gave of themselves. This is an example of sacrificial giving that embodies the spirit of Advent. This sort of giving is consistent with what bestselling author Philip Yancey has described as "hands to heart" evangelism.

If you look to the Gospel of Matthew (2:1-14), you'll learn about another refugee, who was born in Bethlehem, named Jesus, who gave the ultimate sacrifice for all humankind.

My prayer for you this Advent season is that you, too, would learn to give sacrificially and give in ways that makes your faith alive and real to a hurting world in need of hope.

–Jamie D. Aten–

Lord,

Thank You for the incredible gift of Christ and the ultimate sacrifice He made for us. Help me learn to live more sacrificially this Advent season so that others may come to embrace Your love, grace, and mercy.

Amen.

❝*Greater love has no one than this,*
that someone lay down his life
for his friends.❞
(John 15:13)

day 17

living incarnationally

We worship an incarnational God—a God who came to us in the flesh, willingly choosing to become human in Jesus. That's not just the message we proclaim at Christmas; it's the model for the way we live our faith and share it year round.

Following Jesus is incarnational. We enter the worlds of others—our co-workers and friends, neighbors, strangers we meet as we go about our day. We're with them in the flesh, not just on the surface. And when we enter the world of others in the same way Jesus entered ours—incarnationally—it changes the way we share our faith. Our sharing takes on a different kind of rhythm, that of word and deed.

Whether we realize it or not, each day we proclaim the good news (both formally and informally) in our conversation, in our expression. This is the rhythm of word. All those beside whom we live, work, and play hear our words, not just those of our preachers and teachers.

When we struggle, they hear our struggle. When we celebrate, they hear our celebration. When we enter their struggle, they hear those words as well. When we share their celebration, their joy is enhanced by the sound of ours. For every divisive word spewed by others, they wait for a word from us. What will it be? A word of confirmation, or a word of the gospel?

Whether we realize it or not, each day we proclaim the good news—and we act, practicing what we preach and preaching what we practice. Word and deed come together, as intimately entwined as breathing in and breathing out. Deciding which is more important depends on which you did last.

Whether we realize it or not, each day we live out our faith beside with whom we live, work, play, hear, and watch. They watch as we treat or mistreat others, reach out or ignore the suffering, stand with or against the oppressed, work for or against reconciliation, trust and love.

What will they see? Will there be rhythm in our words and deeds?

–Kim Reisman–

Lord,

Allow us time and sensitivity to be in the flesh with those around us. Give us words to encourage and moments to love. May we be Your hands and feet and eyes and ears.

Amen.

❝*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*❞
(John 1:14)

day 18

following the tradition of wise men

Where on earth did the wise men, who came to baby Jesus in Bethlehem, actually come from?

Perhaps that's not the right question. We know they came from the East, most likely from Persia. But, *why did they come? What prompted them to come? And how did they happen to be watching for the birth of the King of the Jews from that distant land?*

While it might not be provable, there is at least a hint of evidence to suggest that the magi were prompted by a prophecy given by Daniel, the Old Testament prophet who was in exile during the days of Israel's Babylonian and Medio Persian captivity.

In fact, Daniel became a leader of a caste of wise men; furthermore, he prophesied the time of the birth and death of the Messiah in the ninth chapter of the book that bears his name.

Could it be that this one prophesy, given some 400 years before the birth of Christ, prompted the wise men to bring their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh as Daniel's birthday present to baby Jesus? It's all very possible! It's certainly no surprise to discover that this birth is full of possibilities!

Because of Christmas, it is possible that we can know God through the Incarnate Son of God. Because of this birth, it is possible to have our sins forgiven. It is possible that through Jesus' birth in a barn so long ago, that anyone believing in Him will have access to mansions in heaven.

Because of Christ, we can still hold on to the hope of peace on earth and good will toward men (Luke 2:14). Today, it is wise men, and wise women, who still respond to all the possibilities manifested in that great event that brought the wise men of old to Bethlehem.

–Jerry Root–

Lord,

Help us to be wise in our thoughts and actions. Give us feet that are shod with the good news of Jesus' birth to those who have never heard.

Amen.

❝*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.*❞
(Matthew 2:2)

day 19

out of darkness, light

The time has come upon us when the green of spring and summer has given way to the fiery reds and golds of autumn. And soon, autumn shall be eclipsed by the deep sleep of winter until spring comes again. During these days of increased darkness and bitter cold, we long for the sun that stretches over us during the wondrous days of summer, enveloping us in warmth and bringing forth life.

In seasons of darkness, any light that we are granted calls for humble gratitude as it reminds us of the power that even the slightest beam has to shatter the night into a thousand splendid pieces.

Isaiah 9 speaks of a time when the people of God longed for such a light, a glimmer of hope that would break into lives shrouded in deep despair. God's people could not see a future filled with hope. They could not live and could not rejoice—that is, until the Light of the World, the Eternal Word, was born.

In John 8:12, Jesus declared, *"I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life"* (NLT). What miraculous news that both the prophet and the apostle grant to a world in need of light. Jesus has come in the flesh to save us from sin and to light the way to eternal life. This indeed is reason to rejoice!

–Laurel Bunker–

Lord,

Thank You for being our Light that shines in the darkness and destroys all of our fears. Give us the faith to follow You, so that we may no longer walk in sin and shame but in the joy and freedom that comes as we surrender our lives to You. You are the Light of the World.

Amen.

❝*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.* ❞
(Isaiah 9:2)

day 20

preparing a sign for worship

One of my most beloved Christmas carols is "We Three Kings" by John Henry Hopkins Jr. The resonant chorus really captures the hope and the spirit of Advent:

Oh, star of wonder, star of might
Star with royal beauty bright
Westward leading
Still proceeding
Guide us to thy perfect light

We know, from the Gospel of Matthew, that these kings—wise men or "magi"—were beckoned to Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem by a celestial body that lit up the eastern night sky. However, it turns out that the three wise men weren't that wise after all. When viewing the magi apart from our usual holiday sentiment, it may be more fitting to call them the three obvious men.

Matthew tells us that the magi first visited Herod's palace to inquire about a newly anointed king foretold in Balaam's prophecy (Num. 24:17) who would ascend out of a rising scepter star. It's no wonder Herod went ballistic and immediately decreed genocide. The magi did not come to help King Herod decipher Balaam's prophecy; rather, they arrived with the assumption that Herod had already made the connection. This means the star of Bethlehem was not only visible, but actually impossible to miss!

During this Advent season, remember that before the wise men even arrived, God literally aligned the stars above. He moved heaven and earth to bring Immanuel to us.

While the world constantly looks to the sky for a sign, we must remember that God already aligned the stars over Bethlehem to remind us that He is with us. He already did the hard part. Let's now go and do the easy part and tell others about how God physically altered a constellation just for them this Christmas.

–Sam Kim–

Oh, star of wonder,
star of might, star with royal beauty bright!
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.

Amen.

❝*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'*❞
(Matthew 2:1-2)

an advent prayer: you break in

Into the daily cycle of our lives
When all seems well
With us and with the world
When our yoke is easy
And the burden light
You break in
And scatter our complacency

Into the daily cycle of our lives
When we are comfortable
And at our ease
When the fire is lit
But eyes are closed
You break in
And challenge our dependency

You break into
Our daily prayers
Humble hearts
Lay souls bare
You break in
You break in

You break in
When defences are down
With an Angel's shout
Or the quietest sound
You break in
You break in

And we change
And all things change
When you break in

(from faithandworship.com)

day 22

peace on earth!

In first-century Rome, peace was not peace for all the earth. It was a peace imposed by Rome and for Rome. For most people, the ancient world was not a place of peace, but of fear and uncertainty. When Jesus came, He was the prophesied Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). The angelic chorus that invited the shepherds to Bethlehem brought a promise of peace on earth. It was a message perfectly fitted for the times!

The longing of human hearts for freedom from fear and assurance of peace existed in the first century and is still prevalent today. Through recent decades, there have been many surveys designed to identify the most common fears. At the top of the list have been things like: public speaking, heights, bugs, snakes, flying, and more. In a recent survey, there are a host of new fears moving up the list: crime (murder, theft, and burglary), economic (not having money for the future), environmental (global warming and overpopulation), and government (corruption, healthcare, and drones)…just to name a few. The more things change, the more it seems they stay the same.

As followers of Jesus and His ambassadors in the world, we have a message of peace. The world needs to hear that Jesus' entry into human history is the advent of peace for all…for them.

One of the best gifts we can give people this Christmas season is a picture of peace. *Will people look at us and see a confident and fearless peace based on an assurance that we know the Savior?* We can be peacemakers in crowded malls, gridlock traffic, tense family situations, and the busyness of the season. As you bear His peace, let the light of Jesus shine.

–Kevin Harney–

Prince of Peace,

Let me walk in Your peace and bear Your presence through this season. May my words and life bear the message, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Amen.

❝*Glory to God in the highest,*
and on earth peace among those
with whom he is pleased!❞
(Luke 2:14)

day 23

from word to word the same

John's Gospel opens on Jesus, not in a manger or being visited by shepherds but before time as an incomprehensible, invading life force! Before our God-Man Jesus took on flesh through the Incarnation, He is known primordially as the Word of God. Jesus as Word demonstrates something wonderful about the God who creates worlds out of nothing more than declaring them to be. God gives us the gift of joining Him in His creative process through words, spilling forth light and life through declaring.

From this first coming of the Word of God through the Incarnation, we see at His core a God who not merely values proclamation but rather is embodied in it and through it. God is not merely a declarative being; His being is itself expressed through Word, through proclamation. Jesus as Word is not something God has merely said; instead, Jesus as Word is the tangible demonstration of who God is. Proclamation then establishes the very real presence of Christ.

What it means to be the people of God is that we join God in bringing light and life into the world through our words, and most importantly, through proclaiming the Word, Jesus. When we participate in declaring Jesus, we share in the wonder of the Incarnation, when light and life came into the world, making the very power to become children of God possible!

Sharing Jesus this Advent season is one way we actually join God in bringing forth light out of darkness and life out of nothing. That is good news!

Jesus will also be revealed a second time as Word (see Rev. 19:11-13). Jesus as Word will one day recreate the world through judgment, declaring with a sword-like tongue a new beginning, all things new! We share in God's creative and re-creative work as we declare the Word to the world.

–York Moore–

Lord,

Thank You for allowing me to partake in the light and life of Christ. I own this Word as mine and ask that You use my tongue to bring Him into this world of darkness and death this Advent season.

Amen.

❝*He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*❞

(John 1:10-13)

day 24

our advent mission from Christ

Too often, people focus on livestock and furniture around the Christmas season. They want to know which animals were there and what kind of furniture the baby Jesus lay in. But what if we were to look at the Christmas message by not going back to the Gospel of Matthew (though it is wonderful and true), but by going back to the Gospel of John?

In that Gospel, John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1) and in verse 14 it says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Too often, followers of Christ get caught up in the furniture and livestock of the event to the extent that they lose sight of the power of the miracle of God sending His Son to our world to save us from sin and give us hope and life.

A first step towards helping us better proclaim Jesus this Advent season is to not get caught up in all the trappings that surrounded the miracle, but instead to look to the miracle itself. The miracle itself is that God—who has always existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—sent His Son, and that His Son became flesh and dwelt among us. This is the Incarnation. God among us.

In the Incarnation, we understand the depth of God's love, but also the passion for God's mission. For Jesus says to us, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." This Advent season, when we consider evangelism, it starts with remembering that just as God sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us, and now we are on a mission for His name and fame. John 1:5 says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

The Incarnation has given us the mission of pointing those in darkness to the light of Christ. The question is, *Will we focus on this mission, or will we get caught up in the livestock and furniture?* I hope the former.

–Ed Stetzer–

Lord,

The miracle of "God among us" has given us a mission greater than any other. Give us opportunities to show and share the light and love of Jesus this Advent season so that many will turn their hearts to You.

Amen.

❝*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*❞
(John 1:14)

day 25

a prayer of St. Augustine

Let the just rejoice,
for their justifier is born.
Let the sick and infirm rejoice,
For their saviour is born.
Let the captives rejoice,
For their Redeemer is born.
Let slaves rejoice,
for their Master is born.
Let free men rejoice,
For their Liberator is born.
Let All Christians rejoice,
For Jesus Christ is born.

–St. Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430)–

justifier
savior
redeemer
master
liberator
JESUS

BGCE

at Wheaton College

wheaton.edu/bgce