

ADVENT

A 25-DAY DEVOTIONAL // DECEMBER 1-25

25

DAYS
OF

JOY



An Advent Devotional: Seeing Jesus Through the Eyes of the Christmas Story Characters

You know, it's funny. When we read Bible stories, we tend to view the characters as supernatural beings – heroes at the least and almost perfect people close to deities at the most. Neither is probably true. Oh sure, they accomplished heroic deeds and are worthy of admiration, but the truth is they were humans, just like us, with all our foibles and failures, fears, and worries. Maybe it's time to see them for who they really are and learn from their experiences.

In this devotional, we take you through the Christmas story through the eyes of the story's characters – from Mary and Joseph to the angels, shepherds, and rulers. Experience what it might have been like to witness firsthand the true Christmas miracle – Emmanuel, God With Us.

We want this to be a hands-on and very fun experience for everyone in the family, so we've included some ideas for family activities. One of the ways you can do that is by creating Christmas activity cards with a fun seasonal activity that you select each day during Advent. See pages 3 and 4 for activity ideas.

Finally, we've included ideas for you and your family to reach out to your neighborhood and community this holiday season to be the hands and feet of Jesus. We hope you find these ideas inspirational as you keep your family focused on the real reason for the season – Jesus.

It is our hope and prayer that by reliving those precious moments, you will gain a fresh and deeper understanding of why Jesus became a little baby in a manger; and what that means for you today.

You can also follow along on your devices using the YouVersion reading plan found here:

<https://www.bible.com/reading-plans/52035>

Family Seasonal Activities

The idea behind this activity is two-fold: to do something together as a family every day to celebrate the season (and hopefully create some treasured family memories), and more importantly, to have fun doing so!

Get a stack of index cards. Put Christmas decorations on one side and on the other, write out something you'd enjoy doing together as a family. Choose 25 activities from this list or come up with your own. You can number them in the order you plan ahead of time (to ensure the things that have specific dates mesh with your family schedule), or just do it ad-lib, picking whatever comes up and going with that. Make it fit your family's personality and schedule! It should be something you all look forward to, not something you just do out of obedience.

Food Related

1. Make hot cocoa
2. Bake Christmas cookies
3. Make popcorn balls
4. Sip apple cider
5. Build a gingerbread house
6. Make Christmas treats for a friend or neighbor

Shopping Related

1. Go Christmas shopping for Mom
2. Go Christmas shopping for Dad
3. Go shopping for a family or child in need (think Operation Christmas Child, Angel Tree or Adopt a Family)

Movie Related

1. Watch a Christmas movie
2. Watch A Charlie Brown Christmas
3. Watch the Polar Express
4. Watch The Grinch Who Stole Christmas
5. Watch the classic Christmas Story
6. Make it a fun movie night – Home Alone or the Santa Claus

Craft Related

1. Pick out a Christmas tree
2. Decorate the tree
3. Make Christmas ornaments
4. Make paper chains for your room
5. Cut-out paper snowflakes
6. Make a card for someone special
7. Make a card or gift for your teacher

Community-Related

1. Buy a gift for a child in need
2. Put together donations for a family in need
3. Visit Santa at the mall or your church
4. Write a letter to Santa
5. Visit the elderly in a nursing home or a sick neighbor or lonely friend

Reading Related

1. Read the Nativity Story
2. Read the Candy Maker's Gift
3. Read A Christmas Story

Seasonal Related

1. Play & sing along to Christmas Carols
2. Decorate your room for Christmas
3. Decorate your bedroom door for Christmas
4. Wrap Christmas presents
5. Attend a Christmas play or concert
6. Make a video sharing your favorite Christmas traditions
7. Mail Christmas cards
8. Color a Christmas picture
9. Do a Christmas puzzle
10. Put up your family's Christmas decorations
11. Go Christmas Caroling

Activity Related

1. Go ice skating
2. Build a snowman
3. Go look at Christmas lights
4. Build a snow fort

ADVENT DAY 1: Dec. 1 – Angel Gabriel, God's Chosen Messenger

Devotional

Have you ever wondered what the angel who carried God's message to the world thought about that task?

Gabriel was the angel chosen by God to tell:

- Zechariah that he and his wife would have a son who would prepare the way for God
- Mary that she would mother Christ
- Joseph that he should not be offended by Mary's pregnancy and marry her anyway
- The shepherds that their Savior was born and encourage them to tell the world
- Joseph again, to take his child, the son of God, to Egypt to avoid being slaughtered by a king

Those are challenging circumstances and very difficult messages! How can you convince someone well past their childbearing years that they will soon be a parent? What do you say to a young teenage girl who is cowering in your presence that she will become pregnant and bear a child even though she's never been with a man? How do you convince a man that the woman who was promised to him was pregnant (not by him) and that he should accept her and the child as his own anyway?

Was the task difficult? Did he understand the weight of his message and the historical turning point that he ushered into the world of humans? Did he face battles along the way, spiritual warfare with the enemy who certainly did NOT want to see God's son born to man?

In his book, *An Angel's Story*, author Max Lucado assumes a fierce and ongoing battle in the spiritual realm. In the angel Gabriel's view:

We knew we could not fail. But we had no idea that the battle would come so soon. Suddenly I was entangled in an invisible net. Row after row of angels tumbled in upon me. Even the final flank was moving too fast to avoid the trap. Within moments we were a ball of confusion: wings flapping against wings; angels bumping into angels.

According to the scenario Lucado envisions, that was the first of several spiritual battles between God's army of angels and Satan's cadre of demons before Gabriel even makes it to earth.

On a wave of worship, I flew, this time alone. I circled through the clouds and over the ground. Below me was the city where Mary was born. The Father was right; I knew her in an instant. Her heart had no shadow. Her soul was as pure as any I've seen.

I made the final descent. "Mary." I kept my voice low so as not to startle her.

She turned but saw nothing. Then I realized I was invisible to her. I waved my wings before my body and incarnated. She covered her face at the light and shrank into the protection of the doorway.

“Don’t be afraid,” I urged.

The minute I spoke, she looked up toward the sky. Again I was amazed. I praised my Father for His wisdom. Her heart is so flawless, so willing. “Greetings. God be with you.”

Her eyes widened, and she turned as if to run. “Mary, you have nothing to fear. You have found favor with God. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call His name Jesus. He will be great. He will be called the Son of the Highest. The Lord God will give him the throne of His father David; He will rule Jacob’s house forever – no end, ever, to His kingdom.”

If I were Gabriel, I would have been thinking, “Are you kidding me Lord? They’ll never believe those messages.” And then, after carrying out his mission, apologizing to God for ever doubting Him. Gabriel finishes his assignment with Mary, makes sure she is willing, and leaves her as the Holy Spirit comes upon her, pleased he was able to do what God had entrusted to him and ready for his next assignment.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 1:26-38

Key Verse: “The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.’” (Luke 1:35)

Pray: Father God, thank you for Gabriel and his commitment to you. Thank you for Mary and her faith in you. Give us the determination and strength of Gabriel to accomplish what you call us to do. And give us the heart of Mary to be ready to obey no matter what you ask. May we be prepared for spiritual battle, and always remember to look up to you for help in our times of need.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Share with your family any spiritual battles you’ve faced in the past and how you were able to overcome them. Talk about things that seem too big to handle and ask God to help you attack them one small step at a time.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., put up the Christmas decorations).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Look into ministries and nonprofit organizations in your town; check out those your church may have a partnership with – see if they have any Christmas wishes for those they serve and decide as a family to meet one or more of those needs this Advent season.

ADVENT DAY 2: Dec. 2 – Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Devotional

As we celebrate this season looking through the eyes of all the characters of Christmas, there is none so unlikely to be at the center of this divine story as Mary. As a young, poor woman (guesstimates are she was around 14 or 15), she wasn't looking for prominence. She was simply living out an ordinary life in an ordinary town with unassuming dreams. She was all set to marry humbly, give birth to many children, and never travel far from home. She could be described as a nobody in a nothing town in the middle of nowhere.

Then, out of nowhere, this angelic being appears and tells her she had been chosen to bear the Son of God. Her initial response recorded in Luke was one of fear and confusion, and a little human skepticism. Several thousand years later we may think how cool to have an angel appear, but when Gabriel came to Mary, God had not spoken to his people or through his prophets for 400 years. And there are precious few moments recorded in Scripture when angels show up in person at all. So it's natural to think Mary was overcome with emotion – fear, doubt, confusion. She had never been with a man and the idea of becoming pregnant with the Son of God was overwhelming. I imagine her thinking, “Me, pregnant? With the Son of GOD? I'm just an ordinary girl, little more than a child myself.”

And then there was the task she was being asked to bear. When Mary says, “I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word,” she was saying Yes to bearing the shame of an unwed pregnancy at a time when this carried incredible social stigma. Would her friends and family believe her claim that the baby came from the Holy Spirit? Heck, she wasn't sure she believed it. And what about Joseph? Would he stay with her or send her away? We know how the story ends, but she did not.

She was saying Yes to raising the Son of God. It's hard enough to be a parent to a human child; can you imagine the burden of raising Jesus? Would every maternal fear be magnified because He was God's son entrusted to her? When she fed Him and clothed Him and rocked Him to sleep, did she wonder what would become of this child sent to save the world? It would be staggering.

Mary was also saying Yes to a lifetime of roller-coaster emotions. She would see Jesus feed multitudes, raise people from the dead, and walk on water. But she'd also see Him mocked, taunted, and rejected even by His family and hometown friends. And being the good Jewish girl she was, she'd be aware of what would eventually come – her son unjustly put on trial by His own people, her people. Every parent's nightmare is to see their children suffer, and Mary would live this in the most agonizing way possible.

And yet...she still said Yes. Will you?

Mary didn't know everything. She didn't understand everything Gabriel told her. Mary, like all of us, was prone to doubt and worry and fear. But Mary did cling to what she knew. The child inside her womb was no ordinary child. He would save His people, including her. He would reverse sin's curse. This child would rule the nations.

Think you're insignificant living in the middle of nowhere? God knows your name. No matter what you've done or who you are, you can be made new in Him. Mary's story can be our story, if we just say **Yes** to Jesus.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 1:26-38; Luke 1:46-49

Key Verse: “‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’ Then the angel left her.” (Luke 1:38)

Pray: Father God, thank you for Mary’s example. Thank you for her unwavering faith, especially in the difficult circumstances she had with the pregnancy, birth, and early years of Jesus. Give us that same faith and obedience to do whatever you ask of us, no matter how difficult or unbelievable it may seem. Help us to hear your voice. And during this Christmas season especially, help us to see through the eyes of those who witnessed your birth here on earth firsthand. Give us new insights into this Bible story. In Jesus’ name.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Was there ever a time in your walk with Christ when He asked you to do something that seemed impossible or improbable, something that would cause you to be shunned by your family or community, something that just flat-out stunned you and left you asking, “*What?*” Share that with your children and help them see how God walked you through that difficulty and provided for you when it seemed undoable. Consider playing “Mary Did You Know?” by Mark Lowry and talk about how the lyrics give insight to Mary’s perspective.

Activity: Look through keepsakes and pictures, and share stories of your parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents!

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., buy a gift for a child in need).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Is there someone in your neighborhood, school, or family facing really tough times? Could you reach out just to encourage them, let them know you’re there for them, and offer to pray for them? Check into organizations in your community that minister to young, unwed mothers and offer to volunteer or meet some specific need they have. Be the hands and feet of Jesus in your community to those hurting and in need.

ADVENT DAY 3: Dec. 3 – Angel Gabriel Brings Joy to the Elderly

Devotional

The first time we hear about an angel called Gabriel is in the book of Daniel, an angel sent by God in answer to Daniel's prayer that was delayed for three weeks due to fighting with the devil. It took the Archangel Michael to break him free. Then we don't hear about him again until Luke Chapter 1 as he retells the original Christmas story.

Gabriel had a huge task that first Christmas, and it began six months before the birth of Christ when he was sent to visit a simple priest in Jerusalem. The task that day should have been simple – he was to tell Zechariah that his prayer for a child had been answered; he and his wife would have a son. That should have been great news, right? If you've been praying for something literally for decades, wouldn't you be happy when it finally happened?

But Zechariah is scared at first, then very skeptical of the angel's message. "How can that be?" he asks.

Gabriel is not too happy when Zechariah questions him. He gives Zechariah his credentials – "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news." I imagine Gabriel rolling his eyes and thinking, "Good grief ... Why isn't he at least a little grateful? Maybe this wasn't the best choice to father the one preparing Israel for her Messiah."

He lets Zechariah know he's going to have a consequence of his unbelief: "And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Ouch, that's harsh. Or so it seems to human eyes.

In his book, *The Characters of Christmas*, Daniel Darling describes the scene this way:

God loves to hear our doubts, to field our questions, and to hear our anguished cries. But it is disbelief that is a sin, our unwillingness to trust God can do the impossible. And so Zechariah's punishment was to be struck mute for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

And in a way, this affliction was less of a punishment and more of a gift from God. To not speak would be to sit in silence before God, to quiet the chattering of the soul and the noise of his circumstances. In a way, this is the work God seeks to do in the heart of all of us. Christmas is a good time to practice silence, to sit and listen to the voice of God to put away the devices that so often keep us from faith. A priest, who often spoke words of blessing on God's people would be silenced and would emerge with a renewed faith in the possibility of God's promise.

Maybe that time spent in silence was just what Zechariah needed to prepare himself to raise John the Baptist. That's a tall order; one that requires concentration, dedication, and determination. All characteristics Zechariah honed during his time of solitude. When John was born, he was ready for the task. He named him John, and "Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God."

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 1:11-22; 1:57-66

Key Verse: "The angel said to him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.'" (Luke 1:19-20)

Pray: Lord, I know it's human nature to question the impossible, to be skeptical of things we do not know or cannot understand. Help us to learn to trust you, particularly in the unknown. Help us to embrace the callings you have on our lives and to joyfully obey even when it makes no sense. Help us to keep our eyes on you.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: The main message today is that even when we're skeptical, when we can't see how God can do what He says He will do, we can and should trust in Him. Talk about a time in your walk when God seemed to be asking the impossible yet came through and did exactly what He said He would do. Sharing these stories will both strengthen your faith and give your children seeds that will help their own faith grow

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., make hot chocolate and listen to Christmas carols, sit in silence from the outside world and enjoy God).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Is there a church in your community that could use some help – either yours or another? Take a step forward to serve where there is a need. Doing this as a family will be both fun and rewarding.

ADVENT DAY 4: Dec. 4 – Zechariah, the Father of John the Baptist

Devotional

The Old Testament ends with this verse from the book of Malachi:

See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents. (Malachi 4:5-6)

Why is that important? Because after that, God goes silent...for 400 years! No prophets, no angels, no word at all. If you know the Christmas story well, it's easy to shrug and just move on when you hear about an angel appearing – they're synonymous with Christmas after all. However, angels didn't appear in Zechariah's day – and rarely appear even overall recorded history. They just happen to be all over the Christmas story.

So is it any wonder that Zechariah is skeptical when he is visited by an angel – the same angel who appeared to Daniel 500 years earlier? His response was stunned disbelief. Some reports say Zechariah was 99 and Elizabeth was 88 when John was born, but if that can't be verified, you can be certain they were both well over 60 (that was considered beyond "child-bearing years" at the time). So long he had prayed, so many tears he had shed. And *now* it is happening?

Gabriel tells Zechariah that he and his wife will have a child, a child who will bring back many people to God, and in the Spirit and power of Elijah, he will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Not just any baby, but one empowered by the Holy Spirit even before he is born to point people to Jesus!

I don't know about you, but I'd be right there with Zechariah in asking, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

I mean get real...a baby...at that age? A prophet like Elijah? Who's going to make that happen? Turns out, God is.

Zechariah was not a very important priest in the temple – he was one of 300 priests in the family of Abijah (Luke 1:5) and one of 24 divisions of priests in Israel. An ordinary priest, but one God chose to have a pivotal role in the coming of Christ.

His eyes (and voice) were opened, and when John was born, Zechariah was ready, fully believing and trusting God would do exactly what He said He would. Zechariah goes on to prophesy over his son, "You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him" (Luke 1:76).

Zechariah served God devoutly in the temple. He obeyed God as the angel had instructed him. As John the Baptist's father, he raised his son as a Nazarite, a holy man pledged to the Lord. Zechariah contributed, in his way, to God's plan to save the world from sin.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 1:1-23, Luke 1:57-80

Key Verse: “But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John...And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah...’” (Luke 1:13, 17(a))

Pray: Father God, I thank you that you chose ordinary people like me to do your Kingdom work. I know that there are times when I just find it hard to believe, especially when it comes to something you’ve told me about myself. I pray right now that you would help me overcome that skepticism, help me hear your voice and be confident that you will do what you say you will do, even when it seems impossible with human eyes. Let me not doubt your ability to do *anything*, including what I cannot see or know. Help me be patient in my “seasons of silence” – and know that you are working even when I can’t see or feel your presence.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: There are those prayers we send to God that seem doable and reachable – and there are those we send with a wrapping of cynicism and doubt. Don’t pray small, pray BIG and expect God to respond. Talk about times when you were faithful and earnestly believed – yet heard nothing from God. Those seasons of silence are devastating but often teach us much. If you are in a season of silence now when God doesn’t appear to be listening, be encouraged by this story of Zechariah – the same God who remembered his people in Egypt and remembered his people in Judea and remembered his people on the cross also remembers you. God is not intimidated by the things that worry you. He will work it out for your good and His glory....in His time. God can work in our lives in spite of any circumstance. Things may look hopeless, but God is always in control. "All things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27). Faith is a quality God values highly. If we want our prayers to be answered, faith makes the difference. God does reward those who depend on him.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., go shopping for mom).

Look Out – Connect with Others

If you are not yet serving in your local church, take the step this Christmas season to fill a much needed role. If you already serve, go just a little deeper in that service. If there is someone in your circle of friends for family who are in a season of wanting children but are not able to conceive, share the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth with them, offer to pray for them and let them know you will stand with them through this season.

ADVENT DAY 5: Dec. 5 – Elizabeth, the Mother of John the Baptist

Devotional

Imagine the delight and joy in the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth! Not only would they become parents after decades of despair and disbelief, but they would parent the last of the Old Testament prophets and a forerunner of the Messiah. Can you imagine?

Elizabeth could have complained that God waited too long. She could have thought that it would be harder to raise a child. She could have decided that she no longer wanted a child. She could have even balked at the plans God had for her child's life.

But she didn't do any of those things. Rather, she turned and offered her praise back to God. She rejoiced over the blessing she was given and gave God the glory.

It's interesting to note that the first thing Mary did after finding out she would be carrying God's son was to go visit her cousin, Elizabeth. It's about a 100-mile journey from Nazareth to Elizabeth's house; Mary is not just scooting around the block to call on a relative. Luke tells us that she "hurried." Why? She just heard that Elizabeth was pregnant too. Given the fact that she was so unlikely to be pregnant by human standards, Mary may have thought Elizabeth would be the most likely to believe her situation – pregnant while still a virgin.

Mary needed someone to believe her, to rejoice with her, and to help her navigate the negative repercussions that were sure to come. She needed someone to help her figure out how to tell her fiancé that she was faithful, but pregnant. Elizabeth provided spiritual, physical, and emotional support to Mary. She took Mary into her care at a time when both women felt vulnerable and lonely, and the two were strengthened together. They rejoiced together in the "impossibility" that had become their reality.

Elizabeth's baby "leaped in her womb" when Mary entered the house and called a greeting. And the words she spoke to Mary when they met show that Elizabeth knew that Mary had a very important baby growing inside her, and that her baby would also have something to do with Mary's baby. Something she could only know because she, too, had been "filled with the Holy Spirit."

Elizabeth is known for being the mother of John the Baptist, the spirit-filled prophet like Elijah who will prepare the way for Jesus. But Elizabeth herself is described as being filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41).

In her book, *Advent*, Fleming Rutledge explains Elizabeth's joy:

Elizabeth's cry of supernatural joy has nothing to do with the ordinary human pleasure in contemplating the birth of a child. It is her response to that revelatory kick from John the Baptist, already vitalized by his destiny as "the prophet of the Most High" ... no phony innocence here, no sentimental glorification of motherhood, but the announcement of the turning point of world history – the entrance of God himself on the human scene.

The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah shows us that God can be trusted. His timing may not be the same as ours, but God will never lead us into something that He won't equip us for. He will not tell us to give away without supplying the means.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 1:36-56

Key Verse: “Why am I so honored that the mother of my Lord should visit me?” (Luke 1:43)

Pray: Lord, give me the faith of Elizabeth, to rejoice in your plans for me and my family and to faithfully walk in those plans no matter how difficult they may seem. Also, help me to see others around me who are in need of encouragement, mentoring, and support. May I reach out with your love in their time of need.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Talk about these three important lessons to learn from the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah:

- Being barren is not a curse. The ultimate calling of a woman is not that of motherhood. There are many barren women in the Bible, and God always blesses them. Not always with a child, but He always blesses them. While children are a blessing, our ultimate calling is to bring glory and honor to God.
- God's timing is perfect. Elizabeth fully saw the hand of God in her life and rejoiced over His plan for her. Is there something in your life that makes you wonder what God is doing?
- You can trust God. This story builds our trust in God. When God proclaims something over our lives or we read something in the Bible, we need to trust Him.
- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., visit someone in a nursing home or a neighbor who could use some company).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Visit someone in a nursing home or a neighbor who could use some company. Bring a meal or treats to someone who's not feeling well or recovering from surgery. Be a neighbor!

ADVENT DAY 6: Dec. 6 – Angel Gabriel Reassures Joseph

Devotional

Gabriel shows up a third time in the Christmas narrative, this time to reassure Joseph, Mary's betrothed, that she was not unfaithful to him but was carrying the Son of God. It was the first of two times Gabriel would reassure Mary's not-so-sure husband.

What's an angel to do? Joseph was a godly man – he was faithful to the law. He could have publicly humiliated Mary for her infidelity, but he chose to do what was easier on Mary and “divorce her quietly.” How is Gabriel going to convince this very honorable man that Mary was a woman of honor too, even though things didn't look that way?

Gabriel chose to appeal to Joseph's godly character. He focused on two areas in speaking to Joseph:

1. He reminds Joseph of his royal ancestry – “son of David” – appealing to the pride of his legacy. “You are of royal ancestry”, he seems to be saying, “You are part of the people of God.”
2. He appeals to Joseph based on Scripture. This is, Gabriel reminds him, to fulfill Scripture: “The virgin will give birth...”

Joseph knew who he was and he was committed to Scripture, something vitally important to the man who would be the earthly guardian of Jesus. It's something we all should follow – know who we are as Christians and know what the Bible says.

And Joseph's response was what you'd expect from such a person – immediate obedience, even to such a difficult mission. He took Mary as his wife. But he took it a step further...he didn't consummate that marriage until after Jesus was born so there could be no doubt that he was not the biological father.

Having met the man who would father the prophet who would prepare the way for Christ, then the woman who would give birth to the Son of God, and finally the man who would serve as his earthly father, Gabriel was no doubt in awe of God and His choices, certain His plans to save humanity and bring them back to Him would happen despite the spiritual battles still to come.

And Gabriel had another assignment in this narrative...to lead the chorus of angels declaring the birth of Christ!

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Matthew 1:18-24

Key Verse: “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:20-21)

Pray: Father God, I thank you for the angels who come and give us your message, protect us, teach us, advocate for us, guide us, and fight battles for us. Thank you for Gabriel and his ability to convince Mary and Joseph that the words he shared were from God himself. Thank you for Joseph's obedience; may I be as quick to obey when God gives me an assignment.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Have you ever encountered an angel, or what you thought was an angel – in a dream, when reading Scripture, in real life? In Hebrews 13:2, God tells us, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." Have you ever experienced that or known someone who did? Ask God to give you a heart for hospitality and help you be aware of what might be happening in the spiritual realm.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., make popcorn balls).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Is there someone in your neighborhood you could reach out to invite over for a holiday treat? Be open to being a host this Christmas season and see what God does in and through you.

ADVENT DAY 7: Dec. 7 – Joseph, the Earthly Father of Jesus

Devotional

To understand Joseph's perspective of the Christmas narrative, we need to understand the customs surrounding betrothals/marriages of the time. In biblical times, people were married in their early youth, and marriages were usually contracted within the narrow circle of the clan and the family. Interpreting their "betrothal" as a modern-day "engagement" would be wrong. The Jewish custom in that time period involved a two-stage marriage: first, a legal contract of marriage, followed later by a party with the husband taking his wife into his home. This is shown in the Gospels: Joseph learned that Mary was expecting before she came to live with him so he planned to divorce her, but an angel instructed him not to; instead, he should take Mary into his home. Therefore, Joseph was already Mary's legal husband at the time Jesus was conceived.

We don't know how Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant. Luke doesn't even reference that and Matthew simply says, "she was found to be pregnant." Stop and think for a moment, *she was found*. "Hey Joseph, have you seen Mary since she got back from visiting Elizabeth?" She was found...I'll bet she was. Kind of hard to hide that fact.

Joseph didn't yet have the advantage of hearing from an angel, he just had Mary telling him what she believed. He didn't know what to think. He probably didn't really know Mary very well either; the custom at that time was that in the year between the betrothal and marriage the couple rarely saw each other. He no doubt felt betrayed, alone, even stuck. The breaking of a betrothal like this was worse than breaking a business contract. Yet that's what Joseph considered doing. He trusted Mary to be faithful and devout; he had pledged his life to her. And yet, it seemed, she had betrayed him.

We don't know how long Joseph was tormented with these thoughts; Scripture doesn't tell us how long it was before the angel Gabriel appeared to Joseph to tell him the baby was God's son. But we do know that once he did, Joseph obeyed.

Like Mary, Joseph signed up for a lot of pain and heartache when he said Yes to God. This was no easy assignment. In marrying Mary, he would be subject to endless scrutiny. In listening to the voice of God, Joseph was giving up his reputation. In his book, *Hidden Christmas, the Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ*, Tim Keller describes it this way:

Everybody in that shame and honor society will know that this child was not born nine or ten months after they got married; they will know she was already pregnant. That would mean either Joseph and Mary had sex before marriage or she was unfaithful to him, and as a result, they are going to be shamed, socially excluded, and rejected. They are going to be second-class citizens.

It's easy to glance over this and not give it another thought as you read this part of the Christmas story. But stop and consider how significant this decision was.

Mary and Joseph had to work together to move forward. They likely had several conversations about what had happened to them. They were no doubt anxious and uncertain about what the future would hold.

Joseph provided for his family as a carpenter and followed God's instructions to care for them. He named and circumcised his son, presented Him at the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22), and took Him to the Temple on holy days when possible, all in line with Jewish law. Joseph also protected Jesus from Herod (Matthew 2:13-15), the King of Judea who wanted to kill the child, by taking Mary and Jesus to safety in Egypt and then Nazareth. He was true to his calling and to his family.

Although he's not mentioned very often in Scripture, Joseph is an important role model of fatherhood and faith, truly an unsung hero of the Christmas story.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Matthew 1:18-24

Key Verse: “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.” (Matthew 1:24-25)

Pray: Lord, thank you for Joseph and his integrity. Thank you for working through ordinary people who don't look for fame or glory but look out for the best interests of those around them. Help me to be more like that, to be faithful to you and walk with integrity, always doing the right thing even when it means I'll personally suffer.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Mary and Joseph's life, particularly in the early years, was rough and full of challenges. Give your kids a Rocky Road candy bar and talk about the difficulties Mary and Joseph may have encountered on their way to Bethlehem, their first few years, their trek to Egypt and back to avoid persecution and death. Talk about sacrifices you've made that were for the benefit of the family and how you feel about those choices.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., color a Christmas picture or decorate your room).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Look through old toys or books or clothes that you could part with and donate them to a worthy cause in your community. Help your family learn the benefit of sacrificing personal desires to help others.

ADVENT DAY 8: Dec. 8 – Caesar Augustus, the Arrogant Ruler

Devotional

The prophet Micah prophesied 700 years before the birth of Christ that he would be born in Bethlehem. Have you ever thought about the fact that God caused a worldwide census to be taken by the emperor of Rome so that the two people He had foreordained as Jesus' parents had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem? Lineage was an important part of God's design for the family of His Son, and Scripture lists Joseph's family tree in both Matthew and Luke. Jesus came from the royal line of King David.

Most of us read the words of the Christmas story in Luke without giving them a second thought ... "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world" (Luke 2:1).

Augustus was the greatest Roman emperor, greater even than his grand-uncle, Julius Caesar. When he came to Rome, it was a city of brick, but when he left, it was a city of marble. Rome almost doubled in size under Augustus. The empire spanned from Great Britain to India.

Caesar Augustus was a larger-than-life figure in Roman history. The Senate acclaimed him "Augustus" (most revered), and he ruled for 41 years as Rome's first "emperor" from 27 BC to 14 AD. During that time he gave to the world the great Roman Peace, flourishing trade, and stability by the time of Jesus that spread across the Mediterranean world.

His greatest act – the one which would have the most lasting effect on world history – was to call for a census of the empire. This was a common custom, in keeping with the pattern of Roman control of conquered territories. Censuses were a favorite of Caesar Augustus. Taxes helped keep the Roman army healthy, build roads, and finance army campaigns to keep conquering the world. Plus, he was a very luxurious emperor. Romans taxed Jews and they followed Roman laws. Rome put in local authorities. So, when it came to the census, the Jews did what their Roman governors and local leaders told them.

Clearly, there was purpose behind Luke's unique recounting of Jesus' birth. He was locating Jesus in historical time and place. The birth of Jesus, the true God who took on human flesh, was not some sort of myth. The context was genuine. Additionally, Roman census methods required registration at the place of family origin. This meant that Joseph and his pregnant wife, Mary, would need to head 90 miles south from Galilee to Bethlehem – in fulfillment of a prophecy from Micah (5:2). God's plans happened as He said they would.

The census was a thoroughly secular decree, the kind of thing governments have been doing since the beginning of time. Yet God used it to serve His purposes...

This much is certain. Caesar Augustus never met Joseph or Mary, and he never knew of a certain Jewish baby born in a village outside of Jerusalem. When Augustus died, they mourned as if a god had died. Little did they know, his call for a census had been used by God to bring His Son to the earth, the one true God.

That's the history lesson. But consider the legacies. Caesar, a human, claimed divine status. Jesus, God from eternity, humbled himself to be born in time and die as a human to save humans from their sin. Augustus looks humanly impressive; Jesus appears humanly defeated. Appearances can be deceiving. Faith grasps the truth.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 2:1-5

Key Verse: “At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire.” (Luke 2:1)

Pray: Lord, you hold the mightiest rulers in your hand; nothing they do is beyond your command. Open our eyes to see your Invisible Hand moving through our world today. Help us to see the truth, as you show in your Word.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Are there people serving in government offices that you do not support? Talk about how God calls us to pray for authorities, even those who do not follow God, and trust that whatever is happening, God will ultimately turn it for His good. Share your thoughts about the current political environment and discuss how you, as a Christian family, can help positively impact the culture we live in.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., color a Christmas picture).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Is there currently a government initiative in your community that requires volunteer help? If so, step in and volunteer as a family. If not, check your local schools to see if they need any extra help this holiday season.

ADVENT DAY 9: Dec. 9 – Innkeeper, the Unlikely Host

Devotional

In his book, *An Angel's Story*, Max Lucado imagines the scene at the Inn in Bethany when Mary and Joseph arrive.

"But don't you have just one room?" Joseph pleaded

"To be honest, I did. But only moments ago a large delegation arrived and took every last bed. I don't have a place for you and your wife."

Joseph tried to be patient, but his jaw was tightening. He leaned forward so his face was inches from the innkeepers. "See that lady in the cart?" he asked through his teeth. "She is my wife. She could deliver any minute. She nearly had the baby this afternoon in a wagon. She is in pain right now. Do you want the baby to be born here in your doorway?"

"No, of course not, but I can't help you. Please understand, I have no more rooms."

"I heard you, but it is midnight and cold. Don't you have any place for us to keep warm?"

The man sighed, looked at Mary and then at Joseph. He walked into his house and returned with a lamp. "Behind the Inn is a trail which will lead you down a hill. Follow it until you come to a stable. It's clean, at least as clean as stables usually are." With a shrug he added, "You'll be warm there."

Have you ever wondered why God didn't make a room for Mary and Joseph? Did He forget? Was He unable to change the circumstances? For crying out loud, He can do anything; why can't He make provisions for His child to be born in warmth and cleanliness? Lucado posits that God engineered the overbooking at the Inn to ensure they were out of sight and protected from enemy attacks. We don't know because Scripture doesn't tell us.

Lucado imagined the angels surrounding the stable, protecting Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

We were a wreath of Light around the stable, a necklace of diamonds around the structure. Every angel had been called from his post for the coming, even Michael. None doubted God would, but none knew how He could fulfill his promise.

Just stop and think about it for a minute. If you were the innkeeper, would you try to find some small space within the building? What about later that night after Jesus was born? I'm sure the shepherds didn't waste any time spreading the good news. Would you feel like a heel knowing you refused to find a place for the Son of God? Or would you be proud of yourself for having the foresight to offer the stable as an alternative?

It was certainly a night to remember!

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 2:1-7

Key Verse: “And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.” (Luke 2:6-7)

Pray: Lord, thank you for stories like this of the innkeeper that show us how the way we behave in all circumstances can have eternal consequences. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear you at work in and around us each and every day. May we not push you away because we have “too much to do;” may we always find room for you.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Ever go on vacation and forget to make reservations? Then fail at finding a place to stay? I have, it's miserable! Relive those memories or talk about why you try and plan out vacations with accommodations ahead of time. Ask each other what you think the innkeeper was thinking that fateful night.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., go shopping for dad).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Does your church have any missionaries who are coming into town that may need a place to stay? Consider opening your home so they won't be left out in the cold.

ADVENT DAY 10: Dec. 10 – Manger Animals, the First Witnesses

Devotional

In his book, *An Angel's Story*, Max Lucado sets the scene for the animals.

"I've heated the water!"

"No need to yell, Joseph. I hear you fine."

Mary would have heard had Joseph whispered. The stable was even smaller than Joseph had imagined, but the innkeeper was right – it was clean. I started to clear out the sheep and cow, but Michael stopped me.

"The Father wants all of creation to witness the moment."

Mary cried out and gripped Joseph's arm with one hand and a feed trough with the other. The thrust in her abdomen lifted her back, and she leaned forward.

"Is it time?" Joseph asked.

She shot back a glance and he had his answer. Within minutes the Anointed One was born. I was privileged to have a position close to the couple, only a step behind Michael. We both gazed into the wrinkled face of the infant. Joseph had placed hay in a feed trough, giving Jesus His first bed.

All of God was in the infant. Light encircled His face and radiated from His tiny hands. The very glory I had witnessed in His throne room now burst through His skin.

Think about it for a minute...God wanted all creation to witness the birth – the cows and sheep, donkeys and goats. If you have a pet, you know how they become a part of the family. And this family, with no judgment or doubt or fear, happily gave up space in their small stable to make room for the King of Kings.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 2:6-12

Key Verse: "This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:12)

Pray: Father God, thank you for dogs and cats and goats and chickens that bring such joy and love to our lives; they help us learn what unconditional love truly is. May we show that same love and joy to each other as we prepare for Jesus's birth this Christmas season.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: If you have a family pet, talk about how you think he or she would have reacted had they been in the stable that first Christmas night. Remind yourselves that God created animals and gave them personalities too.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., take the family pet for a walk).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Contact your local animal shelter and offer to volunteer as a family to help animals in need. Alternatively, if you have access to a farm, you could offer to help the farmer prepare for the holidays.

ADVENT DAY 11: Dec. 11 – Angels, God's Announcers

Devotional

Angels serve a variety of roles in Scripture: they advocate, they protect, they make war, they announce, they teach, they comfort, and they guide. All of those roles can be seen in the Christmas story.

They announce to Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph. They flood the earth with a celebration to the shepherds. They warn the Magi. They protect Jesus, and they guide his parents to do what is needed. And they witness God's greatest achievements, including the birth of His son.

Max Lucado brings this scene to life in his book, *An Angel's Story*:

Once again I heard the words I had heard first in the throne room. Only this time I understood. So, this is He. Immanuel. So this is God's gift. A Savior. He shall save His people from their sins.

"Worthy is the Lamb." I whispered as I knelt before my God. My heart was full. I turned to Mary as she cradled her child and I spoke. It didn't matter that she couldn't hear me. The stars could. All of nature could. And most of all, my King could.

"Do you know who you hold, Mary? You secure the Author of grace. He who is ageless is now moments old. He who is limitless is now suckling your milk. He who strides upon the stars, now has legs too weak to walk; the hands which held the oceans are now an infant's fist. To Him who has never asked a question; you will teach the name of the wind. The Source of language will learn words from you. He who has never stumbled, you will carry. He who has never hungered, you will feed. The King of creation is in your arms."

"What manner of love is this?" Michael whispered, and again we were covered with silence. A blanket of awe. Finally Michael again opened his mouth, this time to sing. He began quietly, pausing between the words.

GLORY, GLORY, GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST

One by one we all joined in. Gradually the chorus grew louder and faster. Our praise rose into the realms of the universe. In the most distant galaxy the dust on the oldest star danced with our praise. In the depths of the ocean, the water rippled with adoration. The tiniest microbe turned, the mightiest constellation spun, all of nature joined with us as we worshiped.

IMMANUEL, THE GOD WHO HAD BECOME FLESH.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 2:8-15

Key Verse: “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’” (Luke 2:13-14)

Pray: Lord, give us eyes to see as the angels do – your glory and honor and beauty in all your creation. Deepen our faith to trust you in all circumstances.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Play “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” and in the lyrics hear the whole Christmas story retold from their vantage point. Talk about what it would have been like to be there at that moment, hearing the angels sing. Because they know God’s plans, they must have been just a little sad about what was to come, a time when they would *not* be allowed to protect Jesus or rescue Him from harm. Yes, they trusted God and knew His plan for redemption was good; it was just going to be so difficult to witness. Were those thoughts in their minds that first Christmas day?

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., sing along to favorite Christmas songs).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Join with some friends and go caroling around your neighborhoods to bring the good news to friends and neighbors.

ADVENT DAY 12: Dec. 12 – Shepherds, Humble Evangelists

Devotional

Stop for a minute and think – you have great news, the best news ever. Who do you want to tell? Who do you go to first? I don't know about you, but I'd tell my spouse, my closest friend, someone I trust, someone who would be there to celebrate with me.

Who did God choose to be the first to hear about Jesus' birth? The chief priests or religious leaders of the day? The kings or rulers of the land? No, God chose a bunch of shepherds out in the fields around Bethlehem.

Why shepherds? The Old Testament highlights several shepherds among Christianity's fabled past, including Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Moses, David, Job, and Amos – just to name a few. So I guess it's not too strange. But again, why these shepherds? We don't know who they were by name, or even how many there were. And while shepherds weren't highly regarded in Jesus' day, it's clear that God saw them as important. Here's what we do know:

- They were the first to be told; they were busy doing what they always do.
- They saw and heard the angel of the Lord; they were afraid at first.
- They saw and heard the host of angels praising God.
- They believed the angel of the Lord and went to see Jesus – with haste.
- They were the first evangelists; they saw Jesus long before the Wise Men. He was less than a week old in the manger.

Although we know very little about these shepherds, it's possible those near Bethlehem may have been taking care of the temple flocks, the sheep meant for sacrifice. There could be a symbolic reason as Jesus, the ultimate Lamb, would be sacrificed for the sins of the world.

But Scripture paints a more practical picture as well. Shepherds had the capacity to be humbled and amazed that God chose them to hear the news. Imagine how unworthy they must have felt, but how honored. They were far more likely to react the way God wanted than the religious leaders of the day. Because they were connected to Bethlehem they probably knew everyone and were familiar with the community. And because of that humility, because of their amazement, they couldn't keep it to themselves. After they had seen the baby Savior, they "spread the word" concerning what they knew. They weren't worried about what others thought of them. They didn't overthink the situation and talk themselves out of telling the news. They were exuberant, overflowing with joy, and probably still reflecting a bit of the glory of being with Jesus. "Can you believe this Joshua? Com'on we've got to go tell someone this wonderful news! They're gonna be amazed."

You know what happened when those uneducated, simple shepherds spread the word that a Savior had been born? People were amazed!

God in His infinite wisdom chose just the right group of people to entrust the greatest news of eternity. Those humble men took the good news of Jesus and did just what God wanted them to do – told others, and the world was never the same.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 2:8-20

Key Verse: “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.’” (Luke 2:15)

Pray: Father God, today we rejoice with the shepherds in the good news of Jesus’ birth. Help us to set aside any traditions that have become commonplace and help us again explore the amazement of Jesus’ birth. Thank you for sending a Savior for us. Give us the shepherds’ passion to spend our lives sharing this news.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Hand out candy canes to everyone in the family. Talk about the spiritual meaning that can be found in this holiday sweet treat. You can find those meanings in a story called, *The Candymaker’s Gift*:

- Stick of pure white, hard candy – white symbolizes the Virgin Birth and the sinless nature of Jesus; and hard to symbolize the Solid Rock, the foundation of the Church, and firmness of the promises of God.
- Form of a "J" – represents the precious name of Jesus, who came to earth as our Savior. It could also represent the staff of the Good Shepherd with which He reaches down into the ditches of the world to lift out the fallen lambs who, like all sheep, have gone astray.
- Stained with red stripes – three small stripes to show the stripes of the scourging Jesus received by which we are healed; a large red stripe was for the blood shed by Christ on the cross so that we could have the promise of eternal life.

So much more than just a fun minty flavored candy! Every time you see a candy cane, remember the wonder of Jesus and His great love that came down at Christmas, and that His Love remains the ultimate and dominant force in the universe today.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., make a Christmas card or gift for your teacher).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Have a small Christmas gathering for your neighbors or co-workers. Share what Christ has done for you and your family and invite them to share in celebrating his birth with you at church on Christmas. Alternatively, if your church is hosting a Christmas play or pageant, invite friends and coworkers to attend.

ADVENT DAY 13: Dec. 13 – Christmas Prophecies Come True

Devotional

Prophecy is an indispensable part of the Nativity story – with good reason. God has always spoken and acted in real history, through actual events and real human lives. He has made promises and kept them, and called people to record and remember them. He's not an obscure deity of myth and legend, but the true God who has done wondrous things – none more so than the birth, life, death and resurrection of His Son.

The facts of Jesus' life matter. The Christmas story isn't just about having all the holiday feelings. It's about a God who promised men and women long ago that he would send His Messiah for them, to save them and give them hope. And it's about God delivering on those promises centuries later, at the place and moment of His choosing, through the birth of His son Jesus.

There are over 300 prophecies that point directly to the Messiah. Let's start with eight that deal with the birth and early years of Jesus' life:

1. He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).
2. He would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14).
3. The Savior would come from the seed of a woman (Genesis 3:15).
4. He would be adored by Magi (Psalm 72:10,15; Isaiah 60: 3,6).
5. He would be called out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:14-15).
6. The Savior would come from the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 12:3; 17:19; Numbers 24:17), and the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10).
7. The Messiah would be an heir to King David's throne and would reign for eternity (2 Samuel 7:12-13;16).
8. A messenger in the wilderness would prepare the way for the Messiah so that the glory of God would be revealed (Isaiah 40:3-5).

Mathematician Peter Stoner figured out the probability of one man fulfilling just eight of these prophecies and concluded that the chance of the prophesied Messiah fulfilling all eight is one in 100,000,000,000,000,000 (that's 17 0s!). He illustrated that by saying if you took that many silver dollars and laid them on the face of Texas it would cover the state two feet deep. Then, blindfold a man and tell him he must pick up one specific silver dollar previously marked. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Stoner concludes, "Any man who rejects Christ as the Son of God is rejecting a fact proved perhaps more absolutely than any other fact in the world."

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: It looks like a lot, but each of these verses is tied to one of the prophecies about Jesus' birth: Micah 5:2; Isaiah 7:14; Genesis 3:15; Psalm 72:10, 15; Isaiah 60: 3, 6; Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:14-16; Genesis 12:3; 17:19; Numbers 24:17; Genesis 49:10 ; 2 Samuel 7:12-13; Isaiah 40:3-5.

Key Verse: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14)

Pray: Father God, it is so humbling and amazing at the same time to see how science and fact prove the truth of your Word. May our faith be deepened and emboldened to know that there is scientific proof that Jesus is who He said He was – the Son of God and Savior of the world. You have given us more than enough for even the most skeptical among us to understand and accept. Thank you for sending Jesus to us. May we be forever grateful for Him.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Talk about the probability of Jesus being the Messiah. Try to come up with other “proven” facts you just accept as true and compare their “proof” with that offered in this devotional. For example, when you walk into a room, you see a chair and you sit down. You assume it will be strong enough to hold your weight, but you have no proof that it will. Why is that easier to accept than Jesus being the Messiah talked about in Scripture for 1500 years before He was born?

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., play a board game).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Gather some kitchen staples needed for holiday dinners and donate them to a local food pantry.

ADVENT DAY 14: Dec. 14 – Luke, the Doctor of Details

Devotional

Every year on Christmas Eve my father would grab the family Bible, open it to the Gospel of Luke, and read the Christmas story to seven young children, wide-eyed and rapt with attention. Yes, it was a requirement before we were allowed to open our presents, but we couldn't wait to hear the story and we hung on his every word.

Without the Gospel of Luke we wouldn't know the details of the birth of Christ. We wouldn't know about the characters involved in that birth and we certainly couldn't look as deeply into the spiritual meaning of Jesus' birth like we have throughout these Advent devotionals. And Luke himself tells us why he wrote what he did, "so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught."

Why all these intimate details, and why do these facts come to us only via the pen of Luke? Luke, a physician, consistently provides more detailed physical descriptions than the other Gospel writers do. His training in observation and accurate diagnosis evidently led to greater interest in and closer attention to physical details.

So, as you revisit the Christmas story this year through a sermon, Sunday School lesson, play, or Christmas carol, think about the fact that without Luke, these presentations would be considerably shorter – and a whole lot more boring! Only Luke draws back the curtain and allows us a look into the delivery room to watch as "the Word became flesh and dwelled among us" (John 1:14). What a difference just one person can make!

This Christmas season, give thanks yet again for the Creator God who took on the form of a baby in a manger. This year, however, perhaps stop to also give thanks for the contribution of the Gospel of Luke and its author. Without Luke, we would not have the story of the actual birth of Jesus that means so much to all of us. Remember: it is only Luke that Linus quotes when he stands under the spotlight, blanket in hand, to tell us about the real meaning of the season in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

Maybe we could take time to consider the similarities between Luke and ourselves: like Luke, most of us are not Jewish, not born in Israel, not among Jesus' first disciples, and not trained as theologians. Yet also like Luke, because of our own unique background and relationship with Him, God is able to use us to convey the good news of Jesus' rescue mission in a way that no one else can.

This Christmas, let's agree to appreciate the unique "presence" God has given to us, and to be willing to share some of His "presence" with those who have none.

Like so many who have read Luke's version of the Christmas story, there are people just waiting to hear *your* version of His story.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 1:1; Luke 2:40

Key Verse: “Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write an accurate account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught.” (Luke 1:3-4)

Pray: Thank you Lord God for choosing a medical doctor to be an author of one of the Gospels. We are so thankful for Luke – his years of professional training, his attention to detail, his willingness to use his skills to bless others, his obedience to be used by you in such a unique way to provide us such a unique look into the life of the Master. And thank you Lord for coming to earth as a baby to experience life as we do. We love you.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: What part of the Christmas story as told in Luke (or Matthew for that matter) is the most special to you and why? How do you think being a doctor changed the way Luke tells the story of Jesus?

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., build a gingerbread house).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Gather a variety of books telling the Christmas story to children and drop them off at your local children’s hospital, orphanage, or other organization focused on helping children in need.

ADVENT DAY 15: Dec. 15 – Simeon, the Elder

Devotional

Unlike most popular versions of the Nativity story, Luke's doesn't end at the manger, and the three Magi do not appear. Instead, like any Jewish newborn of the day, Jesus is circumcised eight days later and is presented at the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:21–22). At this occasion, a devout man named Simeon rejoices to see the Messiah and gives a prophecy concerning him (Luke 2:29–32).

Who is this Simeon character that just appears from the shadows into the Gospel story? Luke only included one thing about Simeon – he was “righteous and devout,” waiting for the consolation of Israel (the Messiah). Simeon was a faithful follower of God.

God revealed to Simeon that he would not see death until he beheld the Lord's Christ (Luke 2:26), the comforter of Israel who would fulfill all the promises of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, the One who would bring both personal and national salvation. Simeon counted the days until God revealed what he had promised to him personally.

We don't know how long Simeon waited, but we do know that he was led by the Spirit to go to the temple that day, and he recognized Jesus the moment he saw Him.

Imagine the scene in the temple that day. An old man, stooped and praying, coming often to the temple expecting to see the Messiah. He was probably seen as an eccentric, the one we make jokes about – you know the ones we roll our eyes at?

Simeon, and generations before him, waited for the coming of the One who would console God's people. But unlike those around him, Simeon still believed God would save His people. He believed the promise of a coming Servant-King, the son of David threaded throughout the law and the prophets. He may not have understood everything he read, but he knew enough to believe. Simeon knew enough to listen to the Holy Spirit's whisper and was more in tune with God than the scholars who were paid to study and the scribes who were paid to teach.

And then the day came...the day he would finally meet his Savior. In this child Simeon saw the fulfillment of all the hopes and dreams of the Jewish people down through the centuries, and he was overjoyed.

Simeon's own name comes from a word that means “to hear intelligently.” And he is portrayed as deliberately listening to God's Spirit. We are told that the Holy Spirit rested on him (v. 25), the Holy Spirit showed things to him (v. 26), and the Holy Spirit moved him (v. 27).

The outcome of Simeon's listening is one of the most tender scenes in Scripture: Simeon enters the temple to discover Mary and Joseph with their newborn. Then he picks up baby Jesus (v. 28). He has the distinction of being the only person in the Bible who we are explicitly told held the Christ child in his arms.

In that act, he provided a striking visual of not just meeting Jesus but receiving Him unto himself. As Simeon gazed into the brand-new eyes of the Ancient of Days, Christ for him went from being “God with us” to “God with me.” Nothing outwardly about Simeon’s life had changed, yet he told God he could die in peace (Luke 2:29). His inner disquiet had been calmed by Christ, and his soul was at rest.

There is so much to learn from Simeon’s life. His perseverance, his attentive listening to God in a cynical age, his worship of the baby Jesus. But what is most important about Simeon was his relationship with Jesus. Simeon could die not because he’d checked off all the right religious boxes or performed all the outward rituals of the Jewish faith, but because he put his faith in the God-man.

We all should do the same.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 2:22-35

Key Verse: “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.” (Luke 2:26)

Pray: Father God, what a tremendous and encouraging story of faith. Give us Simeon’s perseverance, teach us to listen to you as attentively as Simeon did. We love you Lord and we worship you.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Talk about how in times of waiting it helps to remember the promises God made and the times He fulfilled those promises. Come up with one or two ideas for practicing attentive listening in your family and share those experiences with God as you invite Him to hone this skill in all your lives.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., wrap Christmas gifts).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Reach out to senior citizens in your church, neighborhood or family and ask them to share stories of times they waited expectantly for something they treasured. Listen to how they did it and what the outcome was. Learn from their experiences. If the opportunity arises, share your faith with them and talk about Simeon and the reason you’re asking for their wisdom.

ADVENT DAY 16: Dec. 16 – Anna, the Faithful Widow

Devotional

Soon after Simeon appears in the Temple to meet Jesus, we are told of an enigmatic prophetess named Anna (Greek form of Hannah) who also happened to be there to witness these events.

Anna is described as a “prophetess,” which tells us she was gifted and unafraid to declare the word of the Lord. Unlike prophets who predicted what was to come, Anna’s role was to show up at the temple and remind God’s people of God’s words of promise and hope.

Anna had planted herself in God’s presence for decades, turning the grief of a young widow into a lifelong prayer. Waiting on the Lord became her daily practice. Anna had her eyes fixed on God and was in attendance for the presentation of the Son of God because of it. God visits those who wait on Him day and night.

Anna responded to Jesus much the same way as Simeon. His sheer existence was the only evidence she needed to recognize God’s redemptive hand. Christ – a baby who couldn’t even walk – became the focal point of her praise.

Anna made a point of talking about Jesus to all who were waiting for redemption (v. 38). She didn’t view Jesus as a secret revelation exclusively for her. Anna didn’t wait to see how Christ’s life unfolded before spreading the word. She didn’t need to see how things turned out first. And the sharing itself expanded her own joy. Because of her response, many consider her the first “evangelist.” God’s comfort is intended to reach outward.

Anna is 84 years old, according to Luke, and she does not want to die; she wants to proselytize. Like the disciples who will follow her, she is driven to bear witness to what she has seen. Mary was the first to have the good news announced to her, but Anna is the first woman to understand fully and proclaim the good news.

Anna is the New Testament’s only named female prophetess. Luke gives her father’s name, Phanuel, but not her husband’s. He mentions her tribe, Asher. As such, she numbers among the few New Testament characters with tribal listings. Others include Jesus, of the house and lineage of David and the tribe of Judah (Luke 2:4; Matthew 1:1-16), Saul of Benjamin, (Philippians 3:5) and Barnabas, a Levite (Acts 4:36). That’s a pretty strong listing to be a part of, especially for a woman.

Anna was a widow for most of her life, clinging to distant promises, declaring good news to people worn out and weary – and she did this every day for decades. If she was married young as was the custom and was married for 7 years before her husband died, she would have been around 21 when she became a widow. In this story, she is 84. Luke tells us she was a constant presence at the temple. She fasted day and night longing for the Messiah.

In Anna’s story and so many others throughout Scripture, we see that the church mostly advances along through the winding paths of the ordinary and the outcasts, the misfits and otherwise mundane.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 2:36-38

Key Verse: “Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:38)

Pray: Lord it is hard to imagine longing for something for so long and then finally seeing it happen. When we read of Anna and her commitment to you, may it give us the encouragement we need to faithfully wait for your promises. May we, like Anna, always look to you and tell others the wonderful things you’ve done in our lives.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Have you ever felt like a misfit? Do you doubt God could ever work through you? Talk about your insecurities and fears and look to Anna for encouragement that God surely will use anyone willing and devoted to Him.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., mail Christmas cards).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Fill a shoe box with gifts through Operation Christmas Child, Angel Tree, Adopt-A-Family, or some other ministry in your community.

ADVENT DAY 17: Dec. 17 – King Herod, the Monster of Christmas

Devotional

Every story needs a villain, and the Master storyteller doesn't hold back in the Christmas story. This one has one doozy of a villain – enter King Herod.

Pretty sure your Nativity set doesn't include King Herod. But to ignore him is to not only ignore the world into which Jesus was born, but to miss an important thread in God's grand plan of redemption. For Jesus to be born during the reign of Herod might have been the worst possible time for a new king of Israel to be born. Underneath the warm glow of our Christmas is a dark thread of violence, just a hint of a cosmic war against all that is good.

In his book, *The Characters of Christmas*, Daniel Darling puts it bluntly:

At the heart of the incarnation, the story of God leaving heaven to become flesh, is the cosmic struggle between God and Satan. Ever since the devil fell from glory, he and his band of demons have had one single mission: to thwart God's plan.

They still have that mission today.

Herod was worse than the well known bad-guys of Christmas – the Grinch or Scrooge. They are merely fictitious characters. This is a true historical person known as Herod the Great. Herod was a strange mix of a clever and efficient ruler, and a cruel tyrant.

On the one hand, he was distrustful, jealous, and brutal, ruthlessly crushing any potential opposition. The Jews never accepted him as their legitimate king, and this infuriated him. On the other hand, he encouraged the development of the synagogue communities and when times were tough, he canceled taxes and supplied the people with free grain. He was also a master builder – he rebuilt and beautified the temple in Jerusalem and built Greek-style theaters, amphitheaters, and hippodromes (outdoor stadiums for horse and chariot racing). Judea prospered economically during Herod's reign. He extended Israel's territory through conquest and built fortifications to defend the Roman frontiers.

He became the governor of Galilee at the age of 25, which was a very high position for such a young man. It was the desire of the Romans to control the Jewish people in the area. So they thought Herod was the man to do it because he was so tough and cruel. And they even voted in 40 BC to give him a title. He was a villain. He was mean. He was a murderer. He constantly feared conspiracy.

He was renowned for his cruelty. He had members of his own family put to death because he saw them as potential threats to his throne. His brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, two of his own sons, and even his wife were killed by Herod. Herod was sort of like Adolf Hitler or Saddam Hussein or Muammar Kaddafi. He murdered out of spite and killed to stay in power. Life meant nothing to him.

So is it any wonder that he would order the murder of all boys aged two and under to ensure the “future king of the Jews” never made it to adulthood? He was the Roman-appointed king of the Jews and he wasn’t letting anyone take that away from him.

But he didn’t know God and surely couldn’t see how pointless such a move would be. He wasn’t as powerful as he thought. Herod may have seemed powerful. He may have initiated a culture of fear in Israel. But he was no match for the King of Kings. Like every ruler who seeks to challenge God, his attempts to kill the real King of Israel were thwarted by God. More about that when we look at Christmas through the eyes of the Wise Men.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Matthew 2:16-18

Key Verse: “When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.” (Matthew 2:16)

Pray: Father God, thank you for including the story of Herod within the Christmas story. We may not like what it describes, but we can certainly learn from it and see your hand at work even though evil surrounds us. May we learn to look to you always, especially when we wonder where you are in the midst of trials and war and famine and hate that permeate our world today. The story of Herod reminds us that You give us hope that it will all be overcome one day.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Meditate on the ways in which we are tempted to yield to the “herod” impulses in all of us:

- How are we tempted to step on the toes of the “little people” in order to gain power?
- How are we tempted to marginalize those who get in our way?
- How do we resist the rule of Christ over our lives?
- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., cut out paper snowflakes).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Invite one (or more) of the kids in your neighborhood over for hot chocolate and cookies. Make them feel welcome and special, let them know your home is a safe refuge for them. You never know what God will do with that relationship later on.

ADVENT DAY 18: Dec. 18 – Men Wise Beyond Their Years and Culture

Devotional

The story of the Star of Bethlehem appears only in the Book of Matthew. The Gospel tells us that a bright star appeared in the eastern sky when Jesus was born, famously seen by a group of Wise Men.

Although the Wise Men are a prominent part of the Christmas story – in nativity scenes, pageants, carols and Christmas cards – we know surprisingly little about them. Scripture doesn't tell us who they were, only that they came from "the East" and were "Magi" or Wise Men. We don't know their occupations, why they were so committed to finding the King or even how many of them there were. But that's OK, we can argue the religious details till we're blue in the face; it won't matter. Matthew probably left out the details because they were unimportant to gleaning the spiritual truths that are there.

"Wise" is a good term for these men because they were willing to learn the source of all true wisdom. What is clear to us is that the Magi were earnest in their desire to find the King of the Jews. They may have used their reliance on astrology, but God met them where they were and used his power over the heavenly bodies to lead them to His son. I don't know about you, but I am eternally grateful that God will reach out to a seeking sinner, with impure motives and uncertain beliefs, and point that soul to His son. It's how He drew me in.

According to Matthew, a bright star led the Magi from the East until it stopped "over the place where the child was," and "upon entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother." No doubt a surprise to the Wise Men – the star from Heaven didn't point to Herod, but to Jesus.

In his book, *The Characters of Christmas*, Daniel Darling describes the scene this way:

These were men of the world, wise and cultured and sophisticated in every way. They came expecting a young king on a throne, surrounded by servants and the trappings of royalty. What they found, instead, was a poor family in an otherwise quiet neighborhood. To the average onlooker, unfamiliar with the ancient prophecies and unaware of the guiding star, this was all so pedestrian. But to those who were open to God's leading, who were only seeking Jesus, they saw what the prophets predicted, what the angels serenaded, and what Mary understood: there toddling in a dirty tunic was the Son of God. In that moment, the real power was not in the wealthy coffers of these rich rulers. It was not in the gilded halls of Herod's palace. It was in the infant God-man standing before them. And so they bowed in reverent, real worship. They had followed the star and now they worshiped the One who hung the stars.

Darling posits that Matthew included the story of the Magi to show us how true worshippers worship the King. He breaks it down into four responses that we should emulate in our own worship:

1. **Seek** – they sought the truth by following the star and reading the ancient prophecies.
2. **Obey** – they obeyed the voice of the angel who told them not to return to Herod.
3. **Bow** – they bowed at the sight of Jesus.
4. **Give** – they gave precious gifts as an act of devotion and worship.

We would all be wise to follow their lead and ignite our worship with awe, vigor and passion this Christmas.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Key Verse: “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)

Pray: Lord, how often is our worship just a check-the-box and move-on type of experience? Forgive us for that. Instead, ignite a passion in us to see more than a cuddling baby this Christmas but the God He is. Have us fall to our knees in reverent worship and offer you our heart, mind, body and soul. May we always seek and obey as the Wise Men did.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Can you trace your own journey to Jesus? How did God work in the twists and turns of your life to bring you to him? This would be a great opportunity to share your faith testimony with your children.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., make a snowman and have a snowball fight).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Find a local organization offering holiday meals and volunteer as a family to serve. Or ring the bell for the Salvation Army in your community, and sing or play Christmas carols during your shift. Hand out candy canes with a note explaining the spiritual meaning behind the candy to folks who walk by.

ADVENT DAY 19: Dec. 19 – Angel Gabriel, God's Protection

Devotional

Gabriel, the angel sent by God to be His messenger and coordinator of all His plans, had one more task to complete the Christmas season.

An angel appears to Joseph, again in a dream, letting him know his family was in danger and he needed to get out of town. Gabriel isn't specifically mentioned, but since this whole story started with Gabriel being the angel in charge, it's reasonable to assume that God had him complete the task. And given Joseph's response, it's equally possible Gabriel was the angel because the history of trust between them would help Joseph to respond quickly.

Joseph's response was what we've come to expect from this humble man of God – he obeyed, *immediately*. Scripture tells us he took Mary and Jesus *in the middle of the night* to Egypt and stayed there until Herod died. Don't read over that passage too quickly – he didn't wait until the next day; he woke his family up in the middle of the night and left right away.

The Magi story in Matthew 2 is part of a larger sequence that involves danger for the newborn child and his parents. When King Herod hears about the child, "King of the Jews", as a potential rival for his power, he seeks to have Jesus killed. As a result the family flees to Egypt, while Herod orders the execution of all boys under two years old in the area of Bethlehem. Only after Herod's death does the family return to the Land of Israel, though to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem. At each point in their itinerary, the family is guided by dreams and texts from the Jewish Scriptures.

Why was all that necessary? Scripture tells us in the rest of the story – don't skip over these familiar passages, they are rife with meaning and significance. Three times Matthew refers back to prophecies about the Messiah that were fulfilled in these parts of Jesus' life:

1. He would come from Egypt – "Out of Egypt I called my son." (Hosea 11:1)
2. There would be weeping over the loss of life – "Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." (Jeremiah 31:15)
3. He would be called a Nazarene – a branch from the root of Jesse.

Three times an angel came to warn, protect, and guide Joseph and his family – to get them out of Bethlehem to avoid the mass murder implemented by Herod, to tell them it was safe to return to Israel, and to direct them to Galilee rather than Judea just to guarantee a safe childhood for Jesus.

Isn't it comforting to know there are angels all around us maneuvering the circumstances and guiding us to the paths God has called us to? May we hear them when they appear to us in whatever form.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Matthew 2:13-23

Key Verse: “When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’” (Matthew 2:13)

Pray: Father God, thank you for sending your angels to guide us, teach us, and protect us. Help us to hear them and see them...and most importantly, obey them, when you send them to us. Give us Joseph’s heart to obey *immediately*.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Looking back over your life either pre or post conversion, can you see any times when there were angels working around you? If not, how do you think God would present an angel if he sends one to you in the future – in a dream, in the words of another person, through scripture? Do you believe angels still come to God’s people here on earth? This should be a lively discussion and give you insights into the hearts of your loved ones.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., cut out paper snowflakes).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Offer to shovel the driveways and sidewalks/porches of elderly neighbors, or perform some other task that helps someone out.

ADVENT DAY 20: Dec. 20 – Who Trained the Wise Men?

Devotional

Before we leave this story of the Wise Men, the horror in Bethlehem and the escape to Egypt, I have one question for you – how did the Wise Men know to look for the star and follow it to the Messiah? They were from the East; Scripture tells us, they were not fully trained in the complete Old Testament. Recall they had to ask Herod *where* the long awaited king would be born.

So, how did they know? How did they know about Christ's birth from over 500 miles away from the event (as the crow flies) and around 700 miles away traveling route?

Scripture doesn't tell us specifically, at least not here in the book of Matthew. But the Bible does give us a clue in the writings in the Old Testament. Not prophetically, like so much of what we learn and can decipher, but from the historical records of Daniel in the king's service in what was then Babylon.

Recall that Daniel was one of several Israelis taken to Babylon and put into service in the king's court. The book of Daniel records the use of "wise men" to help the kings understand their dreams and visions. It's not hard to imagine that Daniel, who rose to prominent positions in Babylon – in fact, he was put in charge of teaching the wise men (Daniel 2:48) – had an influence on several generations of eastern intellectuals. Daniel was very outspoken about his faith in the coming Messiah. This meant that Daniel, the Jewish prophet, had leadership over those who would later be termed the magi. It is possible that Daniel taught Hebrew scriptures and messianic prophecies to the other sages, especially to those who were Jewish. A Jewish tradition even claims that Daniel founded an order of magi and instructed them to watch for the Messiah through the generations. This is very likely because of what we see in the knowledge and response of the Magi that appear at the time of Christ – they were wiser and more in tune with what was happening than the religious leaders of the day, something Christ would berate them for later on (Matthew 16:1-4). Jesus even mentions Daniel in Matthew 24:15.

Further back in history, another 1,000 years or so, Balaam prophesied that, "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel," (Numbers 24:17(b)). Daniel would have shared that prophecy with his students. But that, by itself, even with the appearance of the star and its placement in the constellations, was hardly enough to cause them to set out on such a long and dangerous expedition. That would take the prophecy of Daniel given to him by the angel Gabriel in Daniel 9 which included the exact timing of when these things would occur.

And then there were the gifts they brought ...

- **Gold:** Declaring their understanding of His royal lineage, both earthly and heavenly.
- **Incense:** Declaring their understanding that He was Immanuel, which means, "God with us."
- **Myrrh:** The bitter herb of death and burial; they knew He was the Sacrifice for the sins of mankind — King, God, and Sacrifice all in one!

These men were obviously followers of the greatest and most powerful Magi of both Babylon and Persia — *Daniel, the servant of the Most High God*. And what they learned from the sky was only interpretable in an accurate way by their knowledge of Holy Scripture — the book of Daniel. Daniel had left them instructions telling them exactly when they should begin looking for the Messiah!

It blows my mind to think that some 600 years before Jesus' birth, God planted servants in the East to begin teachings that would ultimately lead them to the newborn King, His son, Jesus Christ. A journey that would take them a year to accomplish. Makes you wonder what he's planting in your life today that will be "birthed" in coming generations, doesn't it?

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Key Verse: "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." (Matthew 2:10)

Pray: Father God, I thank you for planning so far ahead and always thinking of us as you put the pieces of your divine puzzle in place. We can only glimpse at the master puzzle you're constantly maneuvering to ensure we find our way back to you. May we never take for granted that precious gift and may we be more attentive to seeing the way you direct our paths to where we are today. We love you Lord.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Looking back over your life, can you identify things God put in place years ago that ultimately led to your salvation? Did you have someone praying over you? Hindsight is always 20/20 and helps us appreciate and see that God is always at work in our lives even when we didn't know who he was. Discuss this as a family and perhaps start a thank-you journal when you identify those preparations.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., plant a seedling for your spring garden).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Check out organizations that have community gardens in your area and volunteer to help plant/tend those gardens. Often food banks will have greenhouses to supplement fresh produce in their ministries. Be a part of making that happen.

ADVENT DAY 21: Dec. 21 – John, a Voice Crying in the Wilderness

Devotional

Why include John the Baptist in the characters of Christmas? Think back to the beginning of the Christmas story in Luke – it starts with the birth of John the Baptist. The two were cousins. No doubt they spent a lot of time together growing up; their mothers were close after all. And the two are intricately tied to Jesus' ministry on earth. John would, ultimately, prepare the way for Christ, calling people to repentance and baptism. You can't have one without the other.

Apart from Jesus Christ, John the Baptist is probably the most theologically significant figure in the Gospels. Their lives were divinely similar:

- John's birth was miraculous. He was born of elderly parents who had never been able to have children (Luke 1:7). Jesus' birth was miraculous, he was born of a virgin who had never been with a man.
- The angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah, a Levitical priest, that he would have a son. Gabriel announced to Mary that she would have a son.
- When Gabriel told Mary that she would give birth to Jesus, he also told her about John.
- When Mary was carrying Jesus in her womb, she visited Elizabeth, and John leapt in his mother's womb for joy at the sound of Mary's voice (Luke 1:39-45). This incident shows that even though they are not yet born, John acknowledges the superiority of Jesus and recognizes that Jesus is God's son.
- John's coming was foretold over 700 years previously by another prophet: "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.'" (Isaiah 40:3-5). Jesus' birth was also foretold by Isaiah, among other prophets (Isaiah 7:14, 9:6).

John's adult life was characterized by devotion and surrender to Jesus Christ and His kingdom. John's voice was a "lone voice in the wilderness" (John 1:23) as he proclaimed the coming of the Messiah to a people who desperately needed a Savior. He was the precursor for the modern-day evangelist as he unashamedly shared the good news of Jesus Christ. He was a man filled with faith and a role model to those of us who wish to share our faith with others.

His message and ministry marked the culmination of the law and the prophets, but heralded the breaking in of the kingdom of God (Matt 11:12 ; Luke 16:16). So John was truly a transitional figure, forming the link between the Old and New Testaments. He spans the ages with one foot firmly planted in the Old Testament and the other squarely placed in the New.

Makes you wonder if these two, as they were growing up, ever had discussions about what they would be when they grew up – and what they would mean to each other and ultimately, the world. "John, what do you want to do today?" I imagine Jesus asking. "Anything you want, cousin, you're more important than me. But what do you say we go catch some fish or chase down some bugs?"

Next time your kids are interacting with cousins or other close relatives, think about Jesus and John and how you might be raising the next generation of evangelists who will change the world.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 1:57-80

Key Verse: “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,” (Luke 1:76)

“And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.” (Luke 1:80)

Pray: Lord, help us to follow John’s example of faithful and obedient trust in God as we live and proclaim His truth in whatever life circumstances you give us.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Do your children have close relationships with cousins or other family members? Talk about their friendships and what it means to nourish those relationships and carry them through to adulthood.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., make a card for someone special).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Reach out to a ministry in your community that serves children like Big Brother/Big Sister. Ask if there is anything you can do as a family that would bless their ministry.

ADVENT DAY 22: Dec. 22 – Isaiah, the Messianic Prophet

Devotional

The story of Jesus saturates the Bible narrative and prophecies of His first Advent are found throughout the Old Testament. One scholar, J. Barton Payne, found as many as 574 verses in the Old Testament that somehow point to or describe or reference the coming Messiah. Alfred Edersheim found 456 Old Testament verses referring to the Messiah. Conservatively, Jesus fulfilled at least 300 prophecies in His earthly ministry.

As one of the major prophets, the book of Isaiah has many of those prophecies, perhaps more than any other book of the Old Testament. In fact, Isaiah 53 is the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament. Maybe that's why Matthew quotes Isaiah in the story of Jesus' birth (Matthew 1:23). Jesus himself quotes Isaiah when he announces who He is at the start of His ministry (Luke 4:21).

We just can't look at the birth of Jesus without considering the many prophecies He fulfilled, and Isaiah is the best place to find those predictions. Known as the "Shakespeare of the prophets," Isaiah has often been called the "evangelical prophet" because of his incredibly clear and detailed messianic prophecies – all written nearly 800 years before Christ.

Someone calculated that the 36 details about the Messiah in chapter 53 alone have a 1 out of 68,719,476,736 chance of fulfillment by one person. Jesus fulfilled all of them in His first coming. Yet, there are many more prophecies by Isaiah, and these are astoundingly accurate. Here are just a few found in Isaiah:

- God promised to send a Son who would be "God with us" ("Emmanuel"). (Isa. 7:14, 8:10)
- God promised that a virgin would conceive. Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. (Isa. 7:14)
- God promised a "stone" that people would trip over. Jesus is our cornerstone. (Isa. 8:14-15)
- God promised David His Spirit would rest on his offspring. Jesus is that offspring. (Isa. 11:1-2)
- God promised a time when the blind would see. Jesus healed the blind. (Isa. 29:18, 35:5)
- God promised a time when the deaf would hear. Jesus healed the deaf. (Isa. 35:5)
- God promised a time when the lame would be healed. Jesus healed the lame. (Isa. 35:6)
- God promised a time when the mute would speak. Jesus healed the mute. (Isa. 35:6)
- God is the shepherd who tends His sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. (Isa. 40:10-11)
- God will send His servant as a light to the Gentiles. Jesus is a light to the Gentiles. (Isa. 42:6)
- He will not be rebellious or turn away. Jesus obeyed God all the way to the cross. (Isa. 50:5)
- Isaiah speaks of one who will be beaten and spit upon. Jesus was beaten and spit upon. (Isa. 50:6)
- The Suffering Servant will be so abused He will not look human. Jesus was beaten, whipped, crucified, and pierced by a spear. (Isa. 52:14)
- He will be despised and rejected by His own people. He will bear the abuse we deserve for our physical and spiritual healing. Jesus' tormentors rejected Him and spit in His face. (Isa. 53:4-5)
- The Suffering Servant will bear our sins. Jesus bore our sins. (Isa. 53:6)
- The Suffering Servant is like a lamb that does not defend itself. Although Jesus spoke during His trials, He never offered a defense. (Isa. 53:7)

- The Suffering Servant's people did not protest His death. Only Pilate protested Jesus' death. (Isa. 53:8)
- The Suffering Servant will die with the wicked. Jesus died with the two thieves. (Isa. 53:9)
- The Suffering Servant will be buried in the grave of a rich man. Jesus was buried in the grave of Joseph of Arimathea. (Isa. 53:9)
- God ordained that the Suffering Servant would suffer and die. God sent Jesus to die. (Isa. 53:10)
- The Suffering Servant's sacrifice offers forgiveness of sins. Jesus' sacrifice offers forgiveness of our sins. (Isa. 53:11)
- The Suffering Servant will intercede for His abusers. Jesus asked God to forgive those who crucified Him. (Isa. 53:12)
- God promises someone to declare good news for the brokenhearted, captives, and prisoners. Jesus is that someone. (Isa. 61:1 – verse Jesus quotes in announcing who he was)

In addition to his prophecies of Christ, Isaiah is where that famous verse we so often quote comes from: “Here am I; send me.” (Isa. 6:8). Are we ready to be sent?

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Take any one (or 2 or 3) of these prophetic verses and talk about how they were fulfilled in Jesus. Discuss the probabilities any one man could fulfill even a small percentage of those prophecies. Marvel at God's handiwork and wonder why it's so difficult for people to accept the truth of who Jesus is.

Key Verse: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

Pray: Lord, open our eyes to see, hear, and understand your truth. Thank you for providing such compelling evidence that Jesus is your son. Deepen our faith to believe what you say, always. We are ready to serve you.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Which of the prophecies is most compelling to you? What does that do for your faith?

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., watch a movie about Jesus).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Bring a plate of Christmas goodies to a neighbor or two, along with an invitation for them to join you at Christmas services at your church.

ADVENT DAY 23: Dec. 23 – Lessons from Advent Devotionals

Devotional

So far we've spent the month of December trying to see Christmas through the eyes of the people who actually lived it, and we've learned a lot about God in the process. We see:

1. ***It is always better to obey God, even when it doesn't make sense. We can trust God.*** Even when we're skeptical, when we can't see how God can do what He says He will do, we can and should trust in Him. Just ask Gabriel, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, or Joseph!
2. ***He works through ordinary people, not rulers or kings or rich people. He even works through government officials who don't believe in Him.*** Zechariah was an ordinary priest, one of many. Elizabeth was an old woman. Mary was just a young girl in a small backwater village. Joseph couldn't afford the cost of circumcision in the temple. If you think you're insignificant, remember God knows your name. No matter what you've done or who you are, you can be made new in him. Caesar Augustus had no idea he was helping pave the way for Jesus.
3. ***When circumstances seem dire, don't blame God.*** He may have planned it exactly that way. Remember Mary and Joseph wound up in the stable because there were no rooms at the Inn. Then they had to go hide in Egypt for a few years for safekeeping.
4. ***God chooses the humble over the important, proud, and rich.*** Just ask the shepherds. God didn't announce the birth of his son to rulers or the religious elite but to the lowly shepherds. The church mostly advances along through the winding paths of the ordinary and the outcasts, the misfits, and mundane. If you feel like a misfit, be encouraged. God can and will use you.
5. ***God visits those whose eyes are fixed on Him.*** Simeon and Anna waited patiently for several years to see God in human form. And because they never wavered in keeping their eyes fixed on God, they had the privilege of meeting Jesus while Temple priests, scribes, and religious officials missed it entirely.
6. ***Age is not a requirement for God.*** He works through the young and old alike and everyone in between. Elizabeth was beyond child-bearing years and Zechariah was almost 100. Anna and Simeon were in their 80s. Mary was barely a teenager.
7. ***God often tells us ahead of time what He plans to do.*** Just check out the prophecies about Jesus. He's not shy about proving the truth of what He tells us in his Word. Stories are great, and we love the Christmas story, but don't lose sight of the fact that it can all be proven scientifically and mathematically!
8. ***He plans things out far ahead of time – decades and even centuries.*** Micah prophesied 700 years before Christ that He would be born in Bethlehem. Isaiah prophesied almost 800 years before Christ about the traits He would have. And the Wise Men were being trained to look for the star for centuries before they actually saw it. God is always planning and preparing for what He says will come to pass.
9. ***God always wins.*** No matter how bad the bad guys are, they're no match for God. Just ask Herod.
10. ***God can reach anyone whose minds are open and searching for the truth.*** The Wise Men will forever be known as wise because they were searching for the truth. When it turned out to be completely opposite of what they assumed they would find, it mattered not. They had seen the real God and they worshiped Him.

11. ***If we want our prayers to be answered, faith makes the difference.*** God does reward those who depend on him. The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth builds our trust in God. When God proclaims something over our lives or we read something in the Bible, we need to trust Him.

12. ***Appearances can be deceiving. Faith grasps the truth.*** So much of the Christmas story is opposite of what people would have expected – the rulers and authorities were powerless and clueless; the simple, poor and ordinary were the heroes. David, as the youngest in his family, knows better than anyone that God looks at the heart, not the outside trappings. Always look for the truth and trust your faith to help you find it.

Let's not just be hearers of the Word, but doers (James 1:22), always looking for how we can apply its truths to our lives today. Don't ever open God's Word without asking yourself what you learned from it and how your life should change to reflect that knowledge.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: 2 Timothy 3:14-17; James 1:22-25

Key Verse: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right." (2 Timothy 3:16)

Pray: Father God, thank you for your precious Word of Truth. May we always look for what we should do when we hear that word; help us to put it into practice every day.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Which of these lessons learned resonates the most with you and why? Which gives you the most difficulty? Talk about what steps each of you can take to put this knowledge into practice.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e, invite a neighbor to Christmas services at your church).

Look Out – Connect with Others

Do you know anyone who may be alone this Christmas? Invite them over for dinner and share part of your family's tradition with them.

ADVENT DAY 24: Dec. 24 – Jesus, Our Savior God

Devotional

If you are a parent, you no doubt have had times when you wished you could read your child's mind – to know what they were thinking, to get a glimpse into their heart. We used to play a game where we would ask, "If you could have one wish, what would it be?" I would wish for the ability to read my children's minds – not only when they were misbehaving (what *were* you thinking?), but when they would do the most unexpected and sweetest thing (what *were you* thinking?) It would have been so much easier to parent them.

Now I find myself wondering what that little baby Jesus was thinking when He finally emerged as fully human. Still God, was He able to comprehend what was happening around Him even though he couldn't yet speak? Did He wonder what was happening when He messed His diaper? Did He know what that pain in his stomach was when He needed food? Did He want to reach out and offer a hug of comfort to His earthly mother and father when things looked bleak, but unable to physically do so because His muscles had not yet fully developed?

When He was a toddler and the most common word he heard was "No," did He think, "If only you knew who you were talking to, you'd never say no."

We know in Scripture when Jesus was 12 and the family went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, Jesus stayed behind and was separated from His mom and dad for 4 days. They were frantic when they finally found Him in the Temple listening to the teachers and asking them questions. Can you imagine losing your child for 4 days? I freaked out when my son would disappear in the clothing racks at a store for a few minutes.

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49)

I can imagine Him thinking, "Good grief, don't you know me by now? I've been with you for 12 years!" Sounds like the hallmark of a rebellious pre-teen, but that would not be Jesus. Luke tells us He went to Nazareth with them and was *obedient* to them. Can we pause for just a minute? Obedient all throughout His teen years? Obedient all throughout His young adult years? Every parent's dream.

Yet Jesus had just one mission during His time on earth – to save sinners and provide a way to reconcile God's people with God. Was that always in the back of His mind as He made friends, delighted His parents, grew up in stature with God and man? Would the heaviness of that purpose weigh Him down or would He be able to fully enjoy His time as man?

Take time today to give thanks for Jesus' sacrifice and wonder at the impact such a small baby boy had on the entire world – an impact still felt today some 2,000 years later. Christmas is so much more than a baby in a manger...it's the greatest gift of all time.

If you haven't yet accepted that gift of salvation, today's the day! Admit you've sinned and need a savior, tell Jesus you believe He's God's son and He came to save you; surrender to Him. Your life will never be the same!

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Go back and reread the entire Christmas narrative in Luke or Matthew.

Key Verse: “Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?” (Luke 2:49)

Pray: Father God, we cannot begin to fathom what it took for you to send your Son to save us, and what it took for your Son to come and fulfill His mission. But we are so eternally grateful that He did. From the innocent face of an infant wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger to the compassion of the man hanging on the cross, we have been forever changed. And we will never stop telling everyone we know about His amazing love. Thank you Lord.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Which character we talked about during this devotional do you most resonate with and why? Be honest and vulnerable, you'll be amazed at how close your family will be after such sharing.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., go to Christmas service).

Look Out – Connect with Others

It's Christmas Eve! Bring a plate of seasonal treats and drop off at your local fire and police departments. They still have to fully staff on holidays. Let them know they are very much appreciated. Offer to pray with them when you drop them off. Then pray for them during your Christmas service.

ADVENT DAY 25: Dec. 25 – 12 Days of Christmas to Epiphany

Devotional

After Christmas, the church calendar enters twelve days of Epiphany – from Dec. 26 to Jan. 6.

The dictionary defines an epiphany as “a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something, an intuitive grasp of reality through something (such as an event) usually simple and striking or an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure.” To have an epiphany is to say, “Aha” or “I get it now.” That is what we should experience on the other side of Christmas. For 1500 years, church traditions continued the season for 12 days. Maybe this year you could leave up the decorations for a few days past New Year’s to help remind you of Christ’s birth.

When I was growing up, my mother every year would pull out the old song lyrics and force all of us to sing the “Twelve Days of Christmas” after family dinner, assigning each of us one verse to solo throughout the song. I grew up in a family of 9 people so some of us got assigned two verses and we all chimed in on the “5 golden rings”.

Then I ran across some teaching on the song that said it had much deeper meaning. A popular story behind the tune goes back to the 16th century when Queen Elizabeth of England really went after the Catholics, persecuting them to the point that admitting you were Catholic or even suspected of being a Catholic meant torture and death. England had shifted to Protestantism over Catholicism in favor of the Anglican church. Despite the dire consequences they faced, many Catholics still held onto their beliefs, even passing them down to their children. But they couldn’t do it publicly. So, according to a popular story, English Catholics of the 16th century devised coded ways to pass on their teachings. One secret message was “The Twelve Days of Christmas.”

Another theory is that it is simply a device utilized by Christian teachers to help children understand the key tenets of their faith. The story goes that the twelve days of gifts are symbols for catechetical learning, particularly aimed at children hoping to learn their catechism, but also to serve to remind adults of the realities of the Christian faith.

Or the “Twelve Days of Christmas” might be the days after Christmas up until the Epiphany.

Just thinking the song had deeper meaning made it a whole lot easier to belt out those lyrics each year and I treasure those family traditions. Here are the deeper meanings:

- 2 Turtle Doves = the Old and New Testaments
- 3 French Hens = faith, hope, and charity, as the principle theological virtues
- 4 Calling Birds = the four Gospels
- 5 Golden Rings = the first five books of the Old Testament, the “Pentateuch,” which gives the history of man’s fall from grace (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, & Deuteronomy)

- 6 Geese A-laying = the six days of creation (highlighting life)
- 7 Swans A-swimming = the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven sacraments
- 8 Maids A-milking = the eight beatitudes
- 9 Ladies Dancing = the nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit
- 10 Lords A-leaping = the Ten Commandments
- 11 Pipers Piping = the eleven faithful apostles
- 12 Drummers Drumming = the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed

And the “partridge in a pear tree”? Why, Jesus, of course. Jesus Christ is symbolically represented by a mother partridge protecting her helpless nestlings. Luke 13:34 recounts the words of Christ: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 13:34

Key Verse: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” (Luke 13:34)

Pray: Lord, thank you for the creativity of people who come up with songs like “The Twelve Days of Christmas” to help us treasure the key tenets of our faith. May we remember what each gift signifies every time we hear that song – this year and in the years to come.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: What family traditions do you treasure – from your past as a child to those you celebrate with your nuclear family today? Let everyone tell their favorite, then talk about starting a new tradition. Consider listening (or singing along) to “The Twelve Days of Christmas” with a new understanding of what each gift means in your faith.

- Advent Activity Cards: Select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., start an “after Christmas family tradition)

Look Out – Connect with Others

If your family is still off of work/school, reach out to community organizations to see if they have any wish lists or special needs after Christmas, then volunteer as a family to help out. You’d be amazed at the drop off of volunteers and attention nonprofits get after the holidays. Consider hosting a special New Year’s event at a local ministry.