

ADVENT FAMILY WORSHIP GUIDE

This Advent Family Worship Guide is designed to be used nightly as a family devotional. Pastors, you are free to make copies and print them for your church families. I recommend that you put this in booklet form. Also, feel free to personalize the introduction on page 1 or replace it with your own.

Advent Family Worship Guide

Welcome to Advent. This is a most joyous and wonderful time of the year. I have prepared these study guides to help you find deeper meaning in the Advent celebration.

There is great mystery in the fact that God would care enough about us to enter very personally into our lives. Advent reminds us of this great love.

My prayer for you and your family is that this Christmas season will be more than just a time for food, fellowship, presents, and fun. I pray that it will spark anew in your hearts a deep desire to get closer to the One that made our happiness and joy possible.

Have a joyous and happy Christmastime. Use these guides to enrich your family time. If you will make this nightly ritual a priority, it can become a tradition that will be one of the most meaningful things you do at Christmastime.

From my family to yours, we wish you a very Merry Christmas.

Enthusiastically,
Gary Waller

Advent—What Is It?

The word *Advent* is from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “coming” and refers to the coming of Jesus into our world. Advent comprises the four Sundays preceding Christmas.

For the Early Church, Easter was the major Christian festival. Advent did not become part of the church calendar until the festival of Christmas was established. This came about in the fourth century.

The celebration of the Incarnation—God becoming man—was not very old when the church felt the need for a period of preparation for Christmas celebration.

Advent was originally 40 days long. It represented the 4,000 years of patient waiting on the part of the Hebrews for the promised Messiah.

The Advent Mood

The mood of Advent is best expressed as one of longing for deliverance from oppression, coupled with anticipation of the Messiah.

It is not a season of fasting; it is a season of prayer. The concept of King is uppermost. Jesus is the King of grace.

The Symbols of the Advent Wreath

The purpose of the wreath is to deepen our understanding of Christmas.

1. The base of the wreath is covered with green—the color green testifies to the continuation of life in Christ.
2. The circular base represents life without end—eternal life.
3. The candles signify God’s Son as the Light of the World. There are five candles in all. The first, second, and fourth candles are violet to symbolize our penitence and preparation. The third candle is pink to symbolize joy. In the center of the wreath is the white candle, which represents Christ.

HOW TO MAKE AN ADVENT WREATH

The wreath should be in the form of a circle. The base of the

wreath can be made from Styrofoam, wire, or wood. Anchor the candleholders securely in the base.

Cover the base with greenery. If live evergreens are used, make sure to protect them from fire. Spraying them with fire retardant is an excellent precaution and will ease your mind.

The wreath has five candles. Four candles are placed on the outside of the circle and one in the middle. Usually three violet candles, one pink candle, and one white candle are used. If you wish, you may use all red or all white candles.

WHAT TO DO EACH DAY

The Advent season will be most meaningful to you if you set aside a special time each day for lighting the Advent candles. Be sure and name each candle as you light it. This would be a great time to read the Scripture and talk about the significance of the holiday season. I have prepared devotionals for each day. Remember the focus of Advent is prayer, so pray together as a family. Make it a practice to include everyone in the celebration.

THE PROPHECY CANDLE

The First Sunday of Advent Key Word: PREPARE

Christians, take comfort and be glad, for once again the Long-Awaited One stands at our door! Let us prepare our hearts and homes to greet our Lord, Emmanuel.

The first candle is violet. It reminds us of the prophets who expected and predicted the coming of the Messiah who would bring peace and love and salvation to the world.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12, ESV).*

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel†

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.*

*O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And cause us in her ways to go.*

*O come, Desire of Nations; bind
All peoples in one heart and mind.
Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.*

*Scripture quotations marked ESV are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*® (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

†Words by unknown author, Latin, 12th century; stanzas 1 and 4 translated by John M. Neale (1818-66); stanzas 2 and 3 translated by Henry S. Coffin (1877—1954).

*O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

Refrain:

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!*

SUNDAY—Isa. 9:2, 6-7

Approximately 750 years before the birth of Christ, God gave the prophet Isaiah these promises about the coming Messiah. The people of Israel were living in darkness. They had a hope that the Messiah would come and bring light to their miserable existence. Jesus did that—He became the Light of the World. Never again will people need to live in darkness and despair. Around our present world we see evidence of people living in darkness and hopelessness. We have the light. During this holiday season how can God use you to help spread His light to a world that cannot see through their darkness, worry, fear, and despair? Discuss the importance of the names for the Messiah in verse 6. Why is this a comfort?

MONDAY—Isa. 61:1

Throughout His life and ministry, Jesus fulfilled the words of this wonderful prophecy: God's Spirit was on Him; He preached good tidings, healed the brokenhearted, proclaimed liberty to the captive, and opened the prison of those that were bound. Today we are fortunate because Jesus continues to perform these messianic roles in our lives.

He preaches good tidings—He is drawing us to himself.

He binds up the broken in heart—many of us who suffer from fractures of the heart have found this promise true.

He proclaims liberty for those who are captive—through Him we can experience freedom from those addictions and sins that control us.

Isaiah reminds us of what Jesus is doing for us if we let Him—He has come to set us free. Paul also voices his response: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).*

What changes does Jesus want to bring about in you? What do you need for God to do for you today? Ask Him.

TUESDAY—Isa. 40:1-8

What a glorious passage! This passage refers to the coming of a King. In biblical times, before a king would come, everyone would prepare for him. Everything was cleaned, refurbished, painted, and so on, and even crooked roads were straightened and fixed.

The theme of this week has been “prepare.” In the midst of the huff and puff of Christmas we need to stop long enough to open our hearts to Jesus. We should not give Him the leftovers but should focus our attention upon His coming. What a tragedy if we spend, spend, spend and find that it was all for nothing; that we were in such a frenzy that we missed the real point and the great joy and contentment of Christmas.

What are you doing to prepare for Jesus’ coming? Do others see the preparation in your life?

WEDNESDAY—Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23

When this message of Isaiah’s was given to Joseph, he was living in Nazareth. Nazareth was not the type of town you would expect a king to call home. In John 1:46, Nathaniel asks, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” “‘Come and see,’ said Philip.” Nazareth, to Nathaniel, was just another drab, quiet, little, country town. But unexpectedly, out of Nazareth came the greatest good the

*All Scripture quotations not otherwise designated are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*® (NIV®). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

world has ever known. *Nazareth* is therefore a word suggesting God's grace. In a humble home in that town, God found a virgin through whom, by His Spirit, the divine Savior would be conceived. There this child would grow up, secure His education, learn a trade, declare His mission, and go forth.

All those who receive Him become His disciples—people of grace. Are you a disciple? If not, it is not too late to begin.

THURSDAY—Matt. 1:1-17

This genealogy in Matthew is the genealogy of a King. There is something symbolic of the whole of human life by the way Jesus' pedigree is arranged. The first section takes the story of history up to David—greatness. The second section takes the story to the exile in Babylon—captivity, shame, tragedy, and disaster. The third section takes the story up to Jesus—liberation from captivity.

These verses also can symbolize three stages in our spiritual histories. Section one tells us that we were born in greatness. We were created in God's image. God's dream for us was for greatness. Section two speaks about how humanity used its free will to defy and disobey God. Section three tells us that greatness can be regained. God did not abandon us but sent His Son to redeem and rescue a lost world.

Praise the Lord for His grace. Center your prayer time as a praise time. Review again God's provision for salvation.

FRIDAY—Luke 1:46-56

Here we have a passage that has become one of the great hymns of the Church—the Magnificat. The key words are *favor* and *grace*. Favor is found in the choice of Mary to bear the most precious of all heavenly gifts. The message from Mary was one of awe and humility. She never felt worthy, yet knew that the honor was a great one. Isaiah foretold that a virgin would give birth to God's Son. But who would have thought it truly possible—not Mary.

Grace is found in the results of Messiah's coming. We ought to be humbled to realize that God came in human form—not simply to be a sacrificial Lamb, but to experience life, to know us. We have a Savior that understands and knows our pressures, temptations, and trials. Yet, He is the provider of victory for us in the midst of it all.

Reread this passage with all of this in mind. God's favor and grace are upon us. Hallelujah!

SATURDAY—Eph. 2:3-14

On Christmas morning I am just like a little kid. I can't wait to see what is in my Christmas stocking or in the brightly wrapped packages under the tree. All of us think often about what we will get, and we all look forward to getting gifts at Christmas. This passage is one of the most beautiful in Scripture to describe God's gifting of life to us.

This passage uses the great word *lavished*. I love that word. It describes not only a gift of great value but also an intent that is motivated by love. Jesus Christ is God's gift to us. He was given not because we deserve it or have earned it, but because God desires to "bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10).

This week we have talked about how the prophets of old foretold of God's great gift to us. We have also been challenged to respond to His gift.

A Christian is one who has reached out and accepted God's free gift. If you have not accepted it, what a perfect time to accept God's free gift of salvation. This could be the best Christmas ever. If you have accepted Him, then thank God for His great love for you!

THE BETHLEHEM CANDLE

The Second Sunday of Advent

Key Word: HOPE

O come, O come, Hope of the Ages. Come through us to all who hunger for hope against great odds. May our hope be a beautiful Advent flame dancing in the darkness.

The second candle is violet. Each day light the prophecy candle and the Bethlehem candle. Be sure to repeat the names of each one.

The Bethlehem candle reminds us that Christ was born as a human baby in a specific place at a specific time in history. This is called Incarnation. One of the great mysteries of the Incarnation is that Jesus was both God and Man. Bethlehem reminds us of this.

O Little Town of Bethlehem*

*O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

*For Christ is born of Mary;
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars, together
Proclaim the holy birth;*

*Words by Phillips Brooks (1835-93).

*And praises sing to God, the King,
And peace to men on earth.*

*How silently, how silently
The wondrous Gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessing of His heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming;
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend on us, we pray.
Cast out our sin, and enter in;
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell.
Oh, come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord, Emmanuel.*

SUNDAY—Mic. 5:2; Matt. 2:1-6

Bethlehem had a long history. It was there that Jacob had buried Rachel. It was there that Ruth lived and married Boaz. But above all, Bethlehem was the home and the city of David. It was from the line of David that God was to send the great deliverer of His people. It was in Bethlehem that the Jews believed that the Messiah would be born.

What they didn't expect was that their Messiah did not come in a room of a beautiful palace. He was born across the tracks, on the poor side of town, in a stable—not a fit place for a king to be born, but a perfect place for the Son of God.

Bethlehem is a little town, an insignificant place. Jesus was born

in that unimportant town, in a lowly place in that town. How fitting for the One who would understand us better than we understand ourselves.

When one thinks of Bethlehem, it is easy to be reminded that God sent His Son for all of lost humanity—not for just the wealthy or the beautiful, but for all.

MONDAY—John 6:25-59 (esp. v. 35)

Bethlehem means “the House of Bread.” It stood in a fertile countryside. It was famous for its farming and production of wheat. How appropriate that Jesus, the Bread of Life, would be born there. The greatest tragedy of life is that our world has missed this fact. We scurry about looking for ways to feed, clothe, house, and entertain our bodies, when it is our souls that are starving to death.

Jesus came to be the Bread of Life. As this bread He seeks to sustain, satisfy, and nourish our lives. How does He do this? John 6:33 says, “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

How long has it been since the Bread of Life has nourished your soul? During this holiday season this living bread is given to nourish and sustain us. Spend time with God, listen to Him, do what He says. That is how to be alive in Christ.

TUESDAY—Luke 2:1-7

The Emperor Augustus ordered that every 14 years an assessment be made of the population and resources of the empire. Quirinius, the governor of Syria, was the overseer of the land of Palestine. Everyone went to the place of his or her birth to be registered. Mary and Joseph set out for Bethlehem, since he was of the lineage of David. The trip took approximately three days and was over 75 miles in distance. Mary was in labor, so Joseph sought whatever shelter he could find. Since there was no room for them in the Bethlehem inn, Joseph found the next best thing. They joined the animals in their warm, dry

dwelling. And so it was that the Prince of Peace was born amid the lowing of the cattle in the overcrowded town of Bethlehem.

I am confident that as Mary and Joseph gazed upon the face of their newborn child, they weren't upset because they were in a smelly stable. They must have felt as if they were the most fortunate of all the residents of Bethlehem, for they were gazing upon the King, the Son of God. It is amazing that when Jesus comes, He brings perspective even in a stable.

WEDNESDAY—Matt. 2:1-12

Nothing in the birth story is quite so fascinating as the journey and worship of the wise men. Who were these “wise guys”? Tradition has suggested that they were astrologers with religious interests, who lived in the Far East. They observed a strange star in the sky and decided that it signified a special happening, a royal birth. Tradition lends itself to the belief that there were three because of the number of gifts that were brought to the Christ child.

These wise men were not present at the stable but arrived from one to two years after the first sighting of the star. Matthew 2:11 suggests that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus lived in a house in Bethlehem.

The message of the story of the wise men is important. Christ is for men and women of all nations. Jesus was not just the King of the Jews but also the Redeemer of all lost humanity.

THURSDAY—Matt. 1:1-2

It may seem to us extraordinary that these men should set out from the East to find a king. But the climate of the day was such that there was a real feeling of expectation, a waiting for the coming of a world king. William Barclay says, “There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world.”* When Jesus came, the world of His

*William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1956), 18.

day was in an eagerness of expectation. Men were waiting for God. All eyes were focused on the Middle East, particularly Israel.

This is not unlike what we are experiencing today. All eyes are focused on the Middle East one more time. The reasons are different, yet similar. All of humanity is searching for a leader, a powerful ruler.

While we are celebrating the first coming of Jesus, it is a great time to look expectantly for the return of Jesus. Maranatha! Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

Pray for those in the Middle East during this time. Pray for their families. Pray for the rulers of the world. And wait with great expectation to see what God has in His plan.

FRIDAY—Matt. 2:13-23

The wise men go in search of this new King. They are uncertain where to go. They use excellent logic and head for the palace of King Herod. Obviously he must have fathered the next king. The results are unbelievable. Herod issues a decree to massacre all babies in Bethlehem two years and under.

This passage speaks of the protection of God. He warns the wise men not to return home the same way. He warns Joseph to hurry his family off to safety.

But this passage also is an illustration of what people will do to get rid of Jesus Christ. We see this evident everywhere. The commercialization of Christmas is appalling. People are working very hard to make sure that the true meaning of Christmas is nowhere to be found. It is time for Christians everywhere to stand up and be counted.

Discuss with your family how you can take a stand for Jesus that will make it clear to others whose you are.

SATURDAY—Rom. 12:9-21

The key word for this week has been *hope*. This passage in Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the greatest discussions on this subject. I particularly love the admonition found in verse 12, "Be joyful in

hope.” I have discovered this to be particularly important in the midst of my own dark valleys. Joy and hope don’t seem to go together very well. But the truth is that they go together better than the proverbial “horse and carriage.” Joy is founded in hope, and hope springs forth out of the joy in our hearts.

This holiday season I encourage you to experience the joy of the celebration of the birth of the Savior. Focus your hope on the things above. God has a wonderful plan for His children. I challenge you: feast on the Bread of Life, respond with joy from the depths of your soul, and look forward with great hope that the God who sent His Son for you is working faithfully in your life. And then take the hope challenge—spread hope wherever you go. This world needs it.

THE SHEPHERDS' CANDLE

Third Sunday of Advent

Key Word: JOY

Sing to the stars, O children of God, for Christmas is near. Make of each prayer and good deed a radiant gift of adoration to the stable-born Prince of Heaven and Earth.

The first candle is the prophecy candle. The second candle is the Bethlehem candle. The third Advent candle, the shepherds' candle, is pink to represent joy and celebration. Light all three candles; be sure to name each one. Remember, the candles remind us that Jesus is the Light of the World.

The shepherds were able to share in the joy of Jesus' birth. What a privilege. This week you will also get an opportunity to share in the results of the special birth.

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks*

*While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around,
And glory shone around.*

*"Fear not," said he, for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind.
"Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind,
To you and all mankind."*

*Words by Nahum Tate (1652—1715).

*“To you, in David’s town, this day,
Is born, of David’s line,
The Savior, who is Christ the Lord;
And this shall be the sign,
And this shall be the sign:”*

*“The heav’nly Babe you there shall find
To human view displayed,
All meanly wrapped in swathing bands,
And in a manger laid,
And in a manger laid.”*

*Thus spake the seraph, and forthwith
Appeared a shining throng
Of angels praising God on high,
Who thus addressed their song,
Who thus addressed their song:*

*“All glory be to God on high,
And to the earth be peace.
Goodwill henceforth from heav’n to men
Begin and never cease,
Begin and never cease!”*

SUNDAY—Luke 2:8-20

It is simply wonderful that the initial announcement of the birth of the Messiah King, the Christ, would come to lowly shepherds. Shepherds were the lowest and most common of people because it was very difficult for them to keep the ceremonial laws and still care for their sheep. But it is to simple men of the fields that God’s message first came.

As we read the Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus, we are struck by the rough simplicity of His birth. We might have expected

that the King of Kings would be born in a mansion or a palace. God saw fit to have His Son born in the common fashion, thus opening the door for all to come.

There is a story of a European monarch who would worry his court by disappearing and walking incognito among his people. When asked why he did this, his reply went something like this: “I can’t rule unless I know how they live.” I think that God must have thought much along these same lines. The letter to the Hebrews tells us Jesus knows who we are because He was, and still is, one of us. (See Heb. 2:11, 14-18.) I am glad that the Christmas story reminds us that this is true.

MONDAY—Luke 2:8-20

I have always been fascinated by the story “The Little Drummer Boy.” I know that it is purely fictional, but I love the concept of offering music to the newborn King. In fact, during this time in Israel’s history, when a child was born, local musicians often came to greet the new child with simple music. Jesus was born in secret in a stable in Bethlehem, so local musicians would not know to come and celebrate. However, it is exciting that God sent the greatest musicians of all, His angels, to herald the birth of His Son.

TUESDAY—Luke 2:8-20

The shepherds are a real inspiration to me. First, I am not surprised that they were frightened. Wouldn’t you be if an angel appeared to you and started talking? The thing that amazes me is that they didn’t faint. Second, they seem to know who sent the angel. These lowliest of their culture were expecting a Messiah. They were not surprised when God came through. Too often I miss little miracles in my life because I don’t expect God to come through. Third, they responded right away. They didn’t hesitate long, but headed for Bethlehem to check out this thing, which the angels had told them about. Fourth, this announcement may have seemed strange and al-

most improbable, but they betray no doubts, no questions, and no hesitation. They hasten to Bethlehem and there find everything exactly as had been told them. Their simple faith received a rich reward. Fifth, they didn't keep quiet but told everyone who would listen. I imagine that the chorus that the angels sang kept running through their minds and out of their mouths. Moved by a blessed faith to worship and glorify God, they became the first converts, first disciples, and first evangelists. Oh, for a simple faith.

WEDNESDAY—Luke 2:8-20

What happens when we see Jesus? The Scriptures say, “Mary treasured up all of these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). Her heart must have been ready to explode with the love she felt as a mother of a newborn, especially with the realization that she had indeed given life to the Son of God. How could she doubt when she heard the story of the shepherds? About Joseph, we have little information; but I am inclined to think that he was humbled by the awesome responsibility of being part of this most excellent plan. Later we see Joseph obediently following the warning of the angels to protect Jesus. When they saw Jesus, the shepherds responded with praises and glory to God.

My prayer is that more of us would really see Jesus. For when we do, we can't help but respond with praise and glory to our loving God. “For God so loved the world that he gave . . .” (John 3:16). Hallelujah!

THURSDAY—Ps. 100

I was a very young child when I first memorized this psalm. It still means a great deal to me. It is a call to praise God, to shout for joy. In the midst of the rapid pace of our lives, it is often hard to sense any joy at all. Look around you at the faces of the folks you see. Do their faces reflect any joy? We live in the wealthiest nation in the world. Yet we run here and there trying to find that magic “thing”

that will finally bring us happiness. The sad thing is that it never does. The Bible tells us that real joy comes only from knowing Jesus. “It is he who made us, and we are his” (Ps. 100:3). When my daughter Sarah was two years old, an evangelist friend of mine asked her who she was. She very proudly grabbed the leg of my pants and said, “I am his daughter.” There was real joy in her voice because she knew she belonged to somebody. Our joy comes from belonging to God. To whom do you belong?

FRIDAY—Luke 2:21-40

In this passage we see Jesus undergoing three Jewish ceremonies that every boy had to go through.

First is circumcision. This signified His identification with the people of God, the people of Abraham.

Second is the “Redemption of the Firstborn.” Every firstborn male, both human and animal, was sacred to God. A sum of five shekels was given to the priests to redeem or buy back their firstborn son.

Third is purification. This was to purify the mother for uncleanness in childbirth. Mary and Joseph could only afford the sacrifice of the poor, which was “a pair of doves and two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24).

All three of these ceremonies show that a child is a gift from God.

God had promised Simeon, an old man, that he would see the Messiah before he died. When he saw Mary and Joseph and Jesus, he knew that this Child was more than an ordinary child. He knew that this was the Messiah. Simeon took Jesus and dedicated and blessed Him.

Jesus is more than a good man, a nice guy, and a prophet. He is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Joy comes in seeing Him.

SATURDAY—Luke 2:39-40

Mary and Joseph have always been important figures throughout history. These simple verses portray to us the depth of character that

these two people possess. Mary and Joseph were ready and willing to do everything that was necessary to help God fulfill His promise. Mary was willing to endure gossip, rejection, and the threat of death. Joseph was willing to suffer ridicule, embarrassment, and shame. They traveled to Bethlehem, endured birth in a stable, before they were married, and followed the prescribed procedures of their religion. Yet throughout it all you don't hear a "Why me, God?" or "This isn't fair" or "Can You make this a little easier?" No, in fact, we see only faithful obedience. When I look at these two selfless folks, I am challenged. Lord, help us to be more faithful.

THE ANGELS' CANDLE

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Key Word: LOVE

God, You who so loved the world that You sent Your Son to live in human flesh, help us be Your living gifts of love to family, friends, and strangers. Amen.

The first candle is the prophecy candle. The second candle is the Bethlehem candle. Third is the shepherds' candle. The last is the angels' candle. Light all four candles, repeating their names. The angels' candle, which is violet, tells us that the angels were messengers proclaiming Christ's birth to Mary and the shepherds.

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*

*Hark! The herald angels sing:
"Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth, and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled."
Joyful, all ye nations, rise;
Join the triumph of the skies;
With th' angelic hosts proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem."
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King."*

*Christ, by highest heav'n adored;
Christ, the everlasting Lord!
Long desired, behold Him come,
Finding here His humble home.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;*

*Words by Charles Wesley (1707-88).

*Hail th'incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel!
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King."*

*Hail, the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Ris'n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die.
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King."*

(Special Note: If Christmas Eve and Christmas come during this week, turn ahead to those pages.)

SUNDAY—Luke 1:26-38

The chief angel startled Mary with the greeting, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). After she gained her composure, Gabriel delivered his famous message: "You have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High" (vv. 30-32). The messenger indicated that the birth would be one of great importance, in fact the most important birth ever. Mary would bring forth the long-awaited One, the Messiah.

Mary, like any devout Jewish woman, would love to be the mother of the Deliverer of the Jewish people. But this would be scandalous, for she was unmarried. And what would Joseph think?

After evaluating the situation, she realized that the risk was in God's hands, and her response was, "I am the Lord's servant . . . May it be to me as you have said" (v. 38).

It would be something to have a visit from one of God's heavenly messengers. But, it would be quite another matter when that messenger gives you news that could cost you your life and at the very least drastically change your plans. But Mary's example reverberates across the centuries. Her yes is an encouragement to us to say yes to God when He invades our ordered world and turns it upside down. We learn from Mary that God's plan is always best.

MONDAY—Isa. 40:10-11; 53:2-7

What a powerful passage! Christmas is a day of *hope*. Earl Lee once said, "Christmas is not only a day in December; it is every time our tears are wiped away; every time new hope arises like a star in our dark night of the spirit; every time a sinner is saved by grace; every time a heart is filled with the Holy Spirit; every time a Blood-washed pilgrim enters into life eternal!"* This is the great hope of the gospel; this is what the name *Jesus* means to a lost and dying world.

The real Christmas message is that God would save lost humanity, and to Him this saving was worth any cost it would require. Hallelujah!

TUESDAY—Matt. 1:18-25

The message of the angel to both Joseph and Mary is "do not be afraid" (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:30). I imagine that would be a very important thing to be told when confronted with the presence of an angel. These heavenly messengers had the privilege to carry the greatest message ever told.

At Christmas there is no more fitting message than "do not be

*Earl Lee, notes in my Bible from a message I heard on tape from Pasadena First Church of the Nazarene.

afraid.” With the world so filled with fear and foreboding, it is exciting to know that the message the angel brought is as important to us today as it was to Joseph. How do we confront the fears of our day? It is only possible as we listen carefully to the message of the angel. He said, “Do not be afraid.” Why shouldn’t we fear? The answer is, because Jesus has come. What is so special about Jesus? He is “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). He is the One who desires to carry our burdens, concerns, and fears. Whatever your fears, Jesus, the Babe of Bethlehem, is ready to carry them.

WEDNESDAY—Heb. 1

Christmas is the celebration of the most wonderful gift in all of human history—God sent His Son to earth to redeem our world. The story is incredible, yet simple and beautiful. No wonder people’s lives seem to change at this remarkable time of the year.

Our families have discovered that celebrating the birth of Jesus in a memorable way doesn’t just happen. Unless preparations are made beforehand, we are overcome by Christmas chaos rather than the joy and peace we want to fill our homes. The angels spoke of joy and peace. With a little planning it is possible in the midst of this fast-paced season to allow the joy and peace of the season to reign.

I recommend creating some Christmas traditions that focus on togetherness and slowing down—reading the Christmas story together, talking about a favorite Christmas, singing carols, and so on. You will find Christmas to be very special. Focus on love—God’s love for us and our love for others.

THURSDAY—Luke 1:11-25

Talk about a surprise, this was a surprise for Zechariah. If Advent means anything, it means that we should get ready for, and wait patiently for, surprises. Nothing is more surprising than the birth of the Son of God to a pious Jewish girl and her carpenter spouse.

Many of us love surprises at Christmas. I never want to know what I am getting. But in life we don't care much for surprises. We're great for planning, for trying to work life all out in advance. We will marry on this date, have this many children, make this much money per year, live in this kind of house, take a vacation each summer for this many days, retire at this age—and no surprises, please. Just in case there are some surprises, we have insurance policies to run interference for us.

Fat chance. Remember: surprises are holy. The way we tend to live, a surprise is about the only place God can find some elbow room, some space to shake up our lives so we'll realize how deep is His love for us. The God of Advent is waiting. "Father, help me respect the surprises in my life and be sensitive to Your presence in them."

FRIDAY—Luke 1:39 ff.

Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, was unable to conceive a child. She and her husband, Zechariah, had prayed earnestly for this special gift from God. A miracle happened. Elizabeth became pregnant. At the time that Mary visited her, Elizabeth was already in the sixth month of her pregnancy that would soon end with the birth of John the Baptist. She welcomed the visit of Mary—Mary who was pregnant with Jesus.

The movement of John in his mother's womb has been interpreted in tradition as his baptism. This may be simply a legend, but something happened. There was a miraculous recognition within the womb of Elizabeth. Mary and Elizabeth recognized one another as examples of individuals living in God's special grace. The joy of Mary, the woman blessed beyond all others, overflowed to Elizabeth, the sterile woman at last fulfilled by this pregnancy. I like to think that even today, holy people who are filled with God's presence still cause their brothers and sisters who are filled with that same presence to be moved with sudden joy as they recognize the existence of the living Christ in one another.

SATURDAY—Luke 1:42b

Christmas is first and foremost a story about a newborn Baby. It is amazing how children especially perceive the story of Christmas. Leo Buscaglia, in *Seven Stories of Christmas Love*, tells of being responsible for a school Christmas program. Mary and Joseph came onstage to strains of “Silent Night,” seated themselves on flour sacks, leaned against each other, and fell asleep. Other children were dressed as sheep and cows making animal sounds. An angel, with wings drooping, entered carrying Baby Jesus and placed Him on the straw, then quoted the Luke 2 ending: “wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.” The boy playing Joseph awakened. Leo doesn’t know what possessed the boy, but he said, “Mary! Wake up and see what you had during the night!”*

We all think as parents that our own newborn babies are special, and they are. Actually, in truth, most newborn babies are pretty much alike—red and wrinkled. But Mary’s baby really was special. Elizabeth said, “Blessed is the child” (Luke 1:42b). What made Jesus a blessed baby? Reflect on this thought as you discuss Christmas.

*Leo Buscaglia, *Seven Stories of Christmas Love* (Thorofare, N.J.: SLACK Inc., 1992), 101.

THE CHRIST CANDLE

Advent

On Christmas Eve, light the four Advent candles, repeating their names: prophecy, Bethlehem, shepherds', and angels'. Then light the center Christ candle.

The Christ candle symbolizes Christ's presence in our world. Now all the candles are burning. Christ is born! What a cause for rejoicing!

Silent Night!*

*Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin mother and Child.
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Silent night! Holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar;
Heav'nly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ, the Savior, is born!
Christ, the Savior, is born!*

*Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,*

*Words by Joseph Mohr (1792—1848), German; stanzas 1 and 3 translated by John F. Young (1820-85); translator of stanzas 2 and 4 unknown.

*Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth;
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.*

*Silent night! Holy night!
Wondrous star, lend thy light;
With the angels let us sing,
Alleluia to our King;
Christ, the Savior, is born!
Christ, the Savior, is born!*

CHRISTMAS EVE—Matt. 1:18-25

“You are to give him the name Jesus” (Matt. 1:21). In the history of the Jews this was a grand name. It was the same as Joshua, the successor to Moses. The priest who aided Zerubbabel in the restoration of the Temple following the Exile also bore that name.

The name Jesus meant “Yahweh (God) is Salvation.” The name gained real significance from the mouth of Gabriel: “Because he will save his people from their sins.”

William Barclay says, “Jesus enables us to see what God is and what man ought to be; Jesus opens the eyes of our minds so that we can see the truth of God for us; Jesus is the creating power come among men; Jesus is the recreating power which can release the souls of man from the death of sin.”*

For those of us who have learned to rely upon Jesus, there is beauty and mystery in His name. It is a name that is warm and inviting. He is a friend who is closer than a brother. The greatest truth of scripture is that God is like Jesus. I hope you know Him.

CHRISTMAS DAY—Matt. 1:22-23

I love the name Immanuel. Immanuel means “God with us.” It carries with it three ideas that are extremely helpful.

*William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1956), 13-14.

First, Christ came to dwell among His people. I am so grateful that God sent His Son to experience what it is like to be human. Read Phil. 2:1-11 for a better understanding of what Jesus did. He became the God-Man forever to redeem us.

Second, Christ came to interact with His people. As we read the Gospels, we are struck with the way Jesus interacted with people. His was a ministering love. That same love He showed then, He still shows today.

Third, Christ continues to be with His people. He intercedes for us—He never leaves nor forsakes. Immanuel—God with us. Thank You, Lord.

Have a Merry CHRISTmas!