

HEAVEN BREAKS THROUGH: AN ADVENT STUDY

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Advent is the season when the church leans forward in expectation looking back to Christ's birth in Bethlehem and looking ahead to his promised return. It is a season of holy tension, where longing meets fulfillment and darkness gives way to light. *Heaven Breaks Through* invites you to enter that tension with wonder, tracing how God's presence continues to pierce human struggle with divine hope, peace, joy, and love.

This four-week study complements our Advent sermon series of the same name. Each session explores how heaven's breaking-through power transforms despair into hope, turmoil into peace, expectation into joy, and division into love. Through Scripture, art, poetry, music, and guided reflection, participants are invited not only to learn about Advent but to live it and to recognize how God still interrupts our world with grace.

Each week includes:

- A **Cultural Challenge** that names where people experience spiritual tension today.
- A **Creative Expression** that opens the imagination through art, poetry, or music.
- A **Theological Background** that places each passage in its historical and Biblical context.
- A **Biblical Commentary** offering insight into language, symbolism, and meaning.
- **Conversation Starters** and **Scripture Questions** to guide small-group discussion.
- An **Advent Practice** that invites participants to embody the theme in daily life.

Groups may use this resource on Sundays, during midweek gatherings, or for personal devotion. Each session is designed to last 60–75 minutes, though individuals may linger longer in prayer or reflection.

Overview of each lesson:

Week	Date	Title	Scripture	Focus Summary
1	Nov. 30	<i>Heaven Breaks Through Despair with Hope</i>	Luke 1:5–25; 57–79	When God seems silent, hope still rises—like light breaking through darkness in Zechariah and Elizabeth's story.
2	Dec. 7	<i>Heaven Breaks Through Turmoil with Peace</i>	Matthew 1:18–25; 2:13–15, 19–23	In Joseph's turmoil, God's presence brings peace that restores and strengthens amid chaos, not apart from it.
3	Dec. 14	<i>Heaven Breaks Through Expectations with Joy</i>	Luke 1:26–38; 46–56	Mary's "yes" reveals joy born of surrender—trusting God's surprising grace beyond our own plans and control.
4	Dec. 21	<i>Heaven Breaks Through Barriers with Love</i>	Matthew 2:1–12; 2:16–18	God's love crosses every boundary, drawing all nations to the light of Christ through the journey of the Magi.

As you journey through these four weeks of Advent, may you discover that the story of Christmas is not confined to the past. Heaven is still breaking through—in quiet faith, in courageous peace, in uncontainable joy, and in boundary-breaking love.

WEEK 1 – NOVEMBER 30: “Heaven Breaks Through Despair with Hope”

Luke 1:5–25; 57–79 (CEB)

CULTURAL CHALLENGE: *Despair*

Despair is often silent but heavy. It shows up in depression, loneliness, and in waiting that feels endless. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, many people quietly carry disappointment and ask: *Has God forgotten me?*

CREATIVE EXPRESSION:

Painting – “The Annunciation” by Henry Ossawa Tanner

Tanner’s painting captures divine light breaking into human stillness. Mary’s posture—part fear, part wonder, mirrors Zechariah and Elizabeth’s trembling hope.



To download image, visit Philadelphia Art Museum website:
<https://www.visitpham.org/objects/104384?utm>

Reflection Prompt:

Imagine the moment light fills the room. How does that mirror what it means for heaven’s hope to break into your darkness?

The Annunciation (1898), Henry Ossawa Tanner. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND:

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth unfolds at a time when God’s people had endured centuries of silence. The prophetic voice that once thundered through Isaiah and Jeremiah had long been still. The people of Israel lived under Roman occupation, clinging to promises of deliverance while enduring foreign rule and internal division.

Into this context, Luke opens his Gospel with a quiet, domestic scene—a priest and his wife, righteous yet childless. In a world that equated fertility with divine favor, Elizabeth’s barrenness brought deep sorrow. Still, they remained faithful.

Zechariah’s priestly service in the Temple was likely the highlight of his life, a once-in-a-lifetime privilege. There, amid incense and prayer, Gabriel appeared with startling news: their prayer had been heard. A son would be born, John, who would prepare the way for the Lord. Zechariah’s doubt was not defiance but weariness; after so many years, hope seemed unreasonable. Yet even in his silence, God was at work.

Months later, Zechariah’s song, the *Benedictus*, erupted in praise: “*The dawn from on high will break upon us.*” His voice, once silenced by unbelief, became a testimony of God’s faithfulness. Advent begins here—with hope that dares to believe light can still rise after long darkness.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY:

Luke's narrative mirrors Old Testament birth announcements, reminding us that God's redemptive work is continuous. The Greek phrase *anatolē ex hypsous* ("the dawn from on high") evokes sunrise and resurrection. Hope in Luke is not optimism, but it's divine initiative. Zechariah's regained speech symbolizes Israel's renewed voice after centuries of silence. Elizabeth's joy, John's birth, and Zechariah's praise together form a symphony of restored faith.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- When have you felt that God was silent?
- How do you define hope in contrast to wishful thinking?
- What does Zechariah's story reveal about God's timing?

DIGGING INTO SCRIPTURE:

(Choose the number of questions that best fits your time and setting.)

1. Read Luke 1:5–7. How do Zechariah and Elizabeth's faithfulness in barrenness challenge our assumptions about God's timing and favor?
2. In verses 11–13, Gabriel says, "Your prayer has been heard." What do you think they had stopped praying for and what does this teach about God's memory of our forgotten prayers?
3. Zechariah's reaction in verse 18 seems rooted in fatigue rather than disbelief. How does long waiting shape your capacity to trust?
4. Compare Zechariah's temporary silence (1:20) with the centuries of prophetic silence before John's birth. What is God teaching through silence?
5. In Luke 1:57–64, Zechariah obeys by naming the child "John." How does obedience rekindle hope after doubt?
6. Read 1:68–75. What do the verbs in Zechariah's song ("has looked," "has raised up," "has shown mercy") reveal about God's active role in redemption?
7. Verse 78 speaks of "the dawn from on high." How does that image connect to Advent's promise of light breaking through darkness?
8. Looking at your own life, where might God be preparing a "new dawn" that you cannot yet see?

ADVENT PRACTICE:***"Seeds of Hope"***

Choose a small object—a seed, candle, or stone, as a symbol of hope. Each day this week, hold it as you pray: *"God of hope, help me trust that you are working even in silence."*

CLOSING PRAYER:

God of hope, break into our despair with your light. Remind us that you are faithful and near. Strengthen us to carry hope into the lives of others. Amen.

WEEK 2 – DECEMBER 7: “Heaven Breaks Through Turmoil with Peace”

Matthew 1:18–25; 2:13–15, 19–23 (CEB)

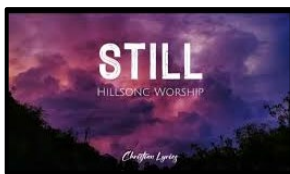
CULTURAL CHALLENGE: *Turmoil*

We live in an anxious age. Conflict fills our headlines, our homes are noisy with distractions, and our inner worlds often mirror the chaos around us. The message of Advent peace is not that life will quiet down, but that God’s presence meets us in the middle of the storm.

CREATIVE EXPRESSION:

Song – “Still” by Hillsong Worship (YouTube, 2015)

Visit YouTube to listen: <https://youtu.be/n6dfB2Z-Ko?si=nWeJSUxcxga9qgZD>



This song gives voice to the kind of peace Joseph experienced amid turmoil. Its lyrics, “*When the oceans rise and thunders roar, I will soar with You above the storm,*” echo the angel’s assurance, “Do not be afraid.”

Reflection Prompt: Listen to “Still.” As you do, breathe deeply and reflect on what it means for God to be with you in your turmoil.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND:

Joseph’s life was upended by Mary’s unexpected pregnancy. In a culture defined by honor and reputation, this was scandalous. Yet Matthew calls Joseph “righteous” not because he followed the letter of the law, but because he chose compassion.

When Gabriel appeared to him in a dream, the message “*Do not be afraid*” reframed everything. God’s peace didn’t erase the problem; it offered purpose within it. Joseph obeyed immediately, taking Mary as his wife and protecting her and Jesus through exile and danger. This story reveals that peace is not the absence of trouble but the courage to follow God amid it. It is relational wholeness, not circumstantial quiet.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY:

Matthew anchors Joseph’s story in prophecy: “A virgin shall conceive... they shall call him Emmanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). The word *eirēnē* (peace) stems from *eirō*, “to join or bind together”—peace as restoration, not withdrawal. Joseph’s obedience mirrors the faith of his namesake in Genesis, who also received dreams and protected life through them. The message is clear: *divine peace involves trustful action.*

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- What kinds of turmoil most often robs you of peace?
- When has obedience to God brought peace in your life?
- How does “God with us” change your understanding of safety?

DIGGING INTO SCRIPTURE:

(Choose the number of questions that best fits your time and setting.)

1. In Matthew 1:18–19, what does Joseph’s quiet righteousness reveal about how peace often looks in human relationships?
2. “Do not be afraid” (1:20): What fears might Joseph have faced—spiritual, social, emotional—and which do you most relate to?
3. Emmanuel means “God with us” (1:23). How does this truth reshape what peace means when life remains unsettled?
4. Read 2:13–15. How do Joseph’s immediate actions reflect a peace rooted in obedience rather than control?
5. Exile in Egypt was both protection and hardship. What does this teach about peace that can coexist with disruption?
6. Compare Joseph’s repeated responsiveness to dreams (1:20–21; 2:13; 2:19). How can attentiveness to God’s voice cultivate peace in chaos?
7. How does Matthew’s use of prophecy remind us that God’s plans for peace extend beyond one person to an entire story of redemption?
8. What steps could you take this week to embody “peace on the move”—peace that travels with you through uncertainty?

ADVENT PRACTICE:***“Silent Prayer of Peace”***

Spend ten minutes in silence each day this week. As you breathe, repeat:

“God is with us... Christ brings peace.”

CLOSING PRAYER:

Prince of Peace, quiet our restless hearts and calm our fears. Teach us to trust your presence in turmoil and make us instruments of your peace. Amen.

WEEK 3 – DECEMBER 14: “Heaven Breaks Through Expectations with Joy”

Luke 1:26–38; 46–56 (CEB)

CULTURAL CHALLENGE: *Expectations*

Our culture is built on expectations. We live by calendars, goals, and five-year plans. We expect progress to be measurable, success to be visible, and happiness to be achievable. Even Christmas can fall under the weight of expectation—perfect meals, perfect pictures, perfect families, perfect peace.

But the joy that breaks into Mary’s story is of a different kind. It is not predictable or polished; it comes wrapped in surprise. When the angel greets her, she is not in a palace or even a place of influence—she’s in a quiet village, living an ordinary life. Yet in that very ordinariness, heaven interrupts.

Joy is not the fulfillment of our plans, but it’s the freedom found when we release our grip on them. When we stop managing every outcome, we create space for God’s grace to do something new. Mary’s joy was not born of certainty but of trust. It was not the product of control but the fruit of surrender. And that is where heaven still breaks through—when we let go and make room for something greater than we imagined.

CREATIVE EXPRESSION:

Poem – “Magnificat”

To magnify is to make big —
and what do we do with God,
when we make God small,
in our prayers,
trimming holiness, shortening wings,
pressing worship into rooms
we can tolerate.

Mary believed the universe
would bend to carry hope.
She said yes to the mystery.

Magnificat —
my soul magnifies what is expansive,
my spirit rejoices in the God who surprises.

The child in me
leaps for joy
because the star will rise
in the deepest midnight.

I will not shrink love
into something manageable —
I will not make mercy
fit inside my boxes.

What is lifted in me
will lift creation.
What is opened in me
opens heaven.

Let this small life become
the wide road of God's possibility.

—Lynn Ungar

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Reflection Prompt: Read this poem slowly, allowing each phrase to unfold.

- What happens when we try to “make God small”?
- What might it look like for *your* soul to “magnify what is expansive”?
- Where might God be inviting you to open space for divine possibility and joy this Advent?

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND:

Mary's “yes” stands as one of the most courageous acts in Scripture. She does not fully understand what Gabriel's words mean, but she opens herself to God's mysterious work. Her surrender is not passive acceptance, but it's active faith. It's the decision to trust God's promise more than her own understanding.

In the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–56), Mary sings not of comfort but of revolution. God's mercy overturns human hierarchies: the proud are scattered, the powerful are brought low, and the humble are lifted up. Her joy is prophetic and it celebrates God's justice breaking into the world.

This is not sentimental joy. It is the deep gladness that arises when heaven disrupts earth's expectations. Joy, for Mary, is not escape but engagement. It is the realization that God is doing something new, even in her own body. As St. Augustine once wrote, “She conceived first in her heart, then in her womb” (*Sermon 215, On the Words of the Lord*). Her faith precedes her understanding, and her joy becomes the echo of that faith.

Mary reminds us that joy is not naive optimism; it is the spiritual confidence that God's promises are already being fulfilled, even when the evidence is incomplete. Joy does not wait for perfection—it begins in trust.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY:

Luke's Gospel uses the word *chaire*—"rejoice"—in Gabriel's greeting, which shares its root with *charis*—"grace." In other words, joy is the natural overflow of grace received. Mary's joy is not manufactured; it's born out of the grace she receives and the God she trusts.

The Magnificat also echoes the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, connecting Mary to the long line of faithful women who proclaimed God's faithfulness across generations. Hannah's joy was birthed in gratitude; Mary's is birthed in participation. Both reveal that joy is not found in circumstances but in partnership with God's redemptive purpose.

When Mary sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord," she is not making God bigger—she is enlarging her own capacity to perceive God's greatness. The soul that magnifies God becomes a vessel of grace, widening its borders to hold divine mystery. Her joy anticipates the Beatitudes Jesus will later proclaim: blessed are the poor, the meek, the merciful. Through her song, Mary becomes the first preacher of the Gospel, announcing that God's kingdom has come near.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- How do you experience joy differently from happiness?
- When have your expectations blinded you to the possibility of grace?
- What does Mary's example teach you about trusting God with what you cannot control?
- How might joy itself be an act of resistance, an act of faith that refuses to let despair have the final word?

DIGGING INTO SCRIPTURE:

(Choose the number of questions that best fits your time and setting.)

1. In Luke 1:26–29, Mary is described as "perplexed." How do confusion and faith coexist, and how can uncertainty become the soil of joy?
2. Read 1:30–33. What promises does Gabriel make, and which one most stretches your imagination of God's power?
3. In 1:34–38, Mary's "yes" reveals courage and surrender. How is joy connected to trust that releases control?
4. Read 1:39–45. How does Elizabeth's recognition of Mary's calling affirm the communal nature of joy? Who affirms God's work in you?
5. In the Magnificat (1:46–55), identify at least three reversals—what do they tell you about how joy transforms injustice?
6. The word *rejoice* (*chaire*) shares a root with *grace* (*charis*). How does that linguistic link deepen your understanding of joy as divine overflow?
7. Mary's song recalls God's faithfulness "to Abraham and his descendants" (1:55). How does remembering the past renew joy in the present?
8. What is one area in your life where you sense God calling you to exchange control for joy?

ADVENT PRACTICE:**Magnificat Journal**

Each evening this week, note one reversal or surprise where you glimpse God's grace—a kindness, an unexpected opportunity, a moment of laughter, or a quiet peace that broke through the noise. Name these moments as *holy disruptions*. Then close your reflection by praying Mary's words:

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

As you do, let the words remind you that joy is not something you chase, but something you choose when you trust that God is already at work.

CLOSING PRAYER:

God of Joy,
You break through our expectations with grace.
When we try to shrink you to our own size,
You remind us that your mercy is wider than our imagination.
Free us from the grip of control.
Open our hearts to your surprises.
Let the joy that filled Mary rise in us today—
joy that is deep enough to endure,
strong enough to lift,
and bold enough to sing.
Through Jesus Christ, the joy of the world.
Amen.

WEEK 4 – DECEMBER 21: “Heaven Breaks Through Barriers with Love”

Matthew 2:1–12; 2:16–18 (CEB)

CULTURAL CHALLENGE: *Barriers*

Our world is fragmented—divided by politics, race, wealth, and ideology. Even in church communities, unseen walls separate “us” from “them.” Yet Christmas proclaims a love that crosses every boundary.

CREATIVE EXPRESSION:

Poem – “Love Came Down at Christmas”

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, love divine;
Worship we our Jesus:
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
Love shall be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and to all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

This poem was published in *Verses* (E. & J. B. Young, 1893).

This poem is in the public domain.

Reflection Prompt: Read this aloud. Which phrase most resonates with you—“love divine” or “love was born”? How does that truth meet our divided world today?

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND:

The visit of the Magi reveals that God’s love transcends every human boundary. These wise men were “foreigners” (Gentiles from the East) drawn not by religion or tradition, but by divine revelation in creation itself. Guided by a star, they crossed mountains, deserts, and empires to find the One born King of the Jews. Their journey is a declaration that God’s saving work is for *all nations*, not just a chosen few.

The Magi’s arrival at the manger marks the widening of the Gospel’s circle. They represent cultures, languages, and faith traditions far beyond Israel’s borders. Yet their hearts recognize truth when they encounter it. Their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh symbolize Jesus’ kingship, divinity, and sacrificial purpose. Through them, we see that love moves outward and it always seeks to include rather than exclude.

Herod, by contrast, personifies fear—the fear of losing control, privilege, or power. His violent response exposes the insecurity that breeds division. Yet even in tragedy, God’s love continues its work. The flight of the holy family into Egypt fulfills ancient prophecy, reminding us that God’s redemptive plan weaves even through pain.

Love in Scripture is not weak or sentimental, but courageous, costly, and active. It confronts evil with compassion, challenges injustice with mercy, and restores what fear has broken. The story of the Magi teaches us that love’s journey is rarely convenient, but it is always worth the risk.

At Christmas, we remember that God crossed the greatest barrier imaginable—the divide between heaven and earth. Through the incarnation, divine love takes on human skin. In Jesus, God becomes vulnerable so that humanity might be healed. Love, then, is the true miracle of Christmas: a love strong enough to span every distance and tender enough to meet every heart.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY:

Matthew’s Gospel situates this story within the great sweep of Israel’s history, echoing the prophets who foretold the Messiah’s coming. Quoting Micah 5:2, Matthew identifies Bethlehem, the smallest of towns, as the birthplace of the greatest hope. Through Hosea 11:1 (“Out of Egypt I called my son”) and Jeremiah 31:15 (“Rachel weeping for her children”), he frames Jesus’ birth as both fulfillment and new beginning – a sign that God’s faithfulness endures even amid suffering.

The contrast between the Magi and Herod captures two responses to God’s activity in the world. The Magi embody faith—curious, open, and obedient to divine prompting. They follow the light wherever it leads, even into unfamiliar lands. Herod, however, embodies fear—closed, defensive, and consumed with self-preservation. One kneels in worship; the other schemes in violence.

Matthew’s narrative also foreshadows the global reach of the Gospel. The outsiders are the first to kneel before Jesus, revealing that God’s love does not begin at the center and move outward—it begins at the margins and draws the center in. The star, shining across borders, is more than a celestial event; it is a symbol of God’s mission to gather the nations under the light of love.

Theologically, this moment anticipates the end of Matthew’s Gospel, where the risen Christ commands, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” The story that began with strangers bowing in Bethlehem ends with disciples sent to every corner of the earth. The same light that drew the Magi now calls us to become bearers of that light, crossing barriers with love.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- What barriers—*social, political, or spiritual*—still divide people today?
- When have you witnessed love “cross a line” that others said couldn’t be crossed?

- How does the story of the Magi challenge our assumptions about who belongs in God's story?
- What step could you take this week to embody love that risks crossing boundaries?

DIGGING INTO SCRIPTURE:

(Choose the number of questions that best fits your time and setting.)

1. Read Matthew 2:1–2. How does the Magi's journey illustrate love that seeks, risks, and crosses boundaries?
2. In verse 3, Herod's fear spreads to "all Jerusalem." What does this reveal about how fear multiplies, and how might love break that cycle?
3. The chief priests and scribes quote Scripture (2:4–6) but never act. How can religious knowledge without love become its own barrier?
4. Read 2:9–10. What does it mean to be "overwhelmed with joy"? How does joy affirm love's direction when following God's guidance?
5. In verse 11, the Magi offer gifts that symbolize kingship, divinity, and sacrifice. What "gift" might love be asking you to offer to Christ?
6. Compare the Magi's obedience in 2:12 with Herod's manipulation. What distinguishes love-led discernment from fear-driven control?
7. In 2:13–15, God leads the Holy Family into Egypt. How does love protect and redirect, even through hardship or displacement?
8. How does this story challenge the boundaries you've built—cultural, relational, or spiritual—and what one step might you take toward boundary-breaking love this week?

ADVENT PRACTICE:

"Crossing a Barrier"

This week, take one intentional step of love across a boundary. Invite conversation with someone of another background, reconcile with someone you've grown distant from, or volunteer in a place that challenges your comfort zone.

At day's end, reflect on where you saw love at work. Write down one instance where grace "crossed a line"—perhaps through a word of kindness, an act of forgiveness, or a moment of understanding. Pray that God would continue to widen your heart in love.

CLOSING PRAYER:

God of Love,
 You crossed every distance to draw near to us in Christ.
 You broke through sin, fear, and pride to reveal Your heart of mercy.
 Tear down the walls we build—within our communities, our churches, and our souls.
 Give us the courage to follow the light of Your love wherever it leads,
 even when the journey takes us beyond what is familiar.
 Unite all people beneath the star of Your peace,
 that every heart may find its home in You.
 Amen.