TEMPLE

Tidings

Charleston Baptist Temple

Daily devotions for the season of advent

209 Morris Street. Charleston, WV

INTRODUCTION
THE CHARLESTON BAPTIST TEMPLE

Much of Christmas' beauty is in its sameness. The same traditions. The same meals. The same songs. The same story. Yet each Christmas is a little different. Sometimes the change is noticeable and unexpected, at other times a mere matter of flexibility. But each year's celebration somehow speaks its familiar message with a freshness that can only be heard by ears a year older.

So, this Christmas you're invited to look at these same pictures of love and grace from a new vantage point, to spend a few moments each day letting God's comforting sameness reveal His new-every-morning side.

You can use these devotional readings by yourself or with your whole family. We pray, that you discover how these old stories and lessons of Jesus' birth can find a natural link with your new year resolutions. May this gentle journey through the Advent season draw you ever closer to the Christ of Christmas.

Adapted from "The Christ of Christmas-Readings for Advent" by Calvin Miller



THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Cookie Miller

God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

John 1: 6-9

This man, John the Baptist, was the one whom the prophet Isaiah described as "…the voice crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight for the way of the Lord'" (Isaiah 40:3). John was trying to prepare the world for the true light, Jesus Christ. John was God's messenger. How do you think John felt about this important task? Was he desperate to bring as many people as possible to understand that the light was coming soon? The light would give light to everyone! Do you think anyone listened to this man who wore unusual clothing and ate strange food, wandering throughout the region and proclaiming that the Messiah was coming soon? When John was questioned by the Pharisees and others in power, he did not claim to be anyone other than who he was: a witness to the light that would give light to everyone.

I imagine we sometimes feel that we are crying in the wilderness: for justice, for fair treatment, for peace, for people to come to know Christ, the light of the world. Let us persevere when it seems that no one is listening. Let us be witnesses to the light! Jesus will come again, and we must make straight the path to Him.

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending John as a messenger to testify that Christ was coming. Help us to also be witnesses to the light. Help us to make straight the path to our Savior. In Jesus' name, Amen.

MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT
Eddie Bucklen

But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John.

Luke 1:13

This biblical account is a cornerstone of the coming of Christ! It is an example of God's design for His perfect order and timing. First, it reminds us of ***God's Divine Intervention***. The angel Gabriel was sent as the messenger to announce that Elizabeth was with child, her being at an age that was not humanly possible. God's divine intervention was not only bestowed upon Zechariah and Elizabeth, but also for the world. This child in the womb was divinely created and appointed to preach salvation and the coming of Jesus, the Messiah! This scripture also reminds us of ***God's Divine Intercession***. Zechariah's prayers for decades had been finally answered. Most of us would have given up long ago praying year after year for such a miracle. Zechariah knew that God's timing would never be his timing, and his faithfulness was rewarded.

Finally, we are reminded of ***God's Divine Introduction***. Gabriel also brought the message that the child Elizabeth was carrying had already been named John, breaking the tradition that the family would choose the name of their child. In Hebrew, John means "the Lord has shown favor". Indeed, favor was shown to Zechariah and Elizabeth, as well as to all the world!

This Advent season, faithfully pray to God for His intervention, His intercession and His introduction. God is the same yesterday, today and forever - so accept this gift in faith!

Lord, I pray that you would give me faith like Zechariah and joy like Elizabeth. Use me as your vessel to be the hands and feet of Christ in a world that is in need of your love and salvation. Amen.

TUESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT
Trish Treharne

Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 1:19-20

Matthew records two unlikely candidates in the worldly lineage of Christ: Rahab and Ruth. Rahab, a Canaanite harlot in Jericho, believed in our God and risked her life aiding Jewish spies. Ruth, a Moabitess was a native of a land despised by Jews. She moved to Bethlehem with Naomi when Naomi returned to her home.

Salmon and Boaz went against Jewish tradition in their choice of wives. Both showed courage and followed God. Rahab showed faith and courage. Ruth showed loyalty and love. All four were unconventional and not what the Jewish people would expect in the lineage of the Messiah. Yet God chose them to show that Christ is Christ for us all.

Father God, thank you for sending your Son for all who believe in Him. Help us to show the faith, courage, love, and loyalty to You that these four people showed. In the name of our Christ. Amen



WEDNESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT
Bill Barr

Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.

Luke 1:28-31

Wow, what a greeting! We don't know how Gabriel appeared nor what his appearance was. His name meant "hero of God" and no doubt Mary had heard of him through the Hebrew teachings and to hear she had "found favor with God" was great comfort. I'm sure she had heard how Moses, God being his helper, led the Jews out of Egypt passing through the Red Sea on dry ground. She had good reason to be troubled, because she was an unmarried pregnant woman and that brought serious life ending consequences. She potentially could be stoned to death, but she had "favor with God" and was advised the Lord was with her. Knowing she had found favor with God and knowing the Lord was with her should provide tremendous emotional support to press on with hope. Gabriel filled her in on upcoming events that she would give birth to a son and she was to name him Jesus.

How amazing was this prophecy! Jesus, how would we react if an angel of the Lord, you yourself, or your Father God spoke directly to us about our future? You told Mary she was highly favored and even as a virgin she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Practicing Christians know you are with us wherever we go and your mighty works are proclaimed in the Bible. May we humbly accept the challenges and directions you may give us as we proclaim the wonders of your work to those in whom we come in contact each day, throughout the year, and throughout the time you give us on earth.

Jesus, how would we react if an angel of the Lord, you yourself, or your Father God spoke directly to us about our future? You told Mary she was highly favored and even as a virgin she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Practicing Christians know you are with us wherever we go and your mighty works are proclaimed in the Bible. May we humbly accept the challenges and directions you may give us as we proclaim the wonders of your work to those in whom we come in contact each day, throughout the year, and throughout the time you give us on earth. Amen.



THURSDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Carolyn Saul

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

Luke 1:34-35

I wasn't a virgin, but I was barren for 7 years when one of my sisters-in-law introduced me to a friend of hers by telling her I couldn't have children. I was terribly hurt, because no one had ever said I couldn't get pregnant. I told a Roman Catholic acquaintance at work about it and she told me she would say a rosary for me. I was so surprised, because not only was she someone who wasn't a close friend, but no one had ever offered to pray for me before, plus I knew it took quite a bit of time to say a whole rosary. I was very grateful, but didn't have much confidence that it would work. I hadn't even prayed for the baby I said I wanted. At that point in my life, prayer wasn't something I ever did.

Much to my surprise, I soon found out I was pregnant! Mary couldn't understand how something could happen to her that had never happened before. I, on the other hand, didn't even believe a prayer could be answered. But God showed both of us that He is in control. Since that time, I found out how important prayer is. What I pray for most often is to know what God's will is for me and for the power to carry it out.

Dear God, thank you for answered prayer. Help us to discern your will for us in our lives and please give us the strength to carry it out for your honor and glory. Amen.

FRIDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT
Monique Bucklen

Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 1:19-20

We rarely hear much preached about Joseph's role in the Christmas story, but what a powerful impact he had. He is a central character, but a frequently forgotten participant. He was, according to the scripture, a "just" man. The meaning implied by this term is critical in identifying his character and the way he would father the Savior, Jesus Christ.

He was fair and kind with regards to his wife, refusing revenge as the law allowed, and instead choosing grace. Joseph was obedient. When the angel pronounced that he was to take Mary as his wife he understood that under Mosaic law this situation was treated as adultery, which carried severe social shame and grave risks, including the penalty of death. He trusted God with his life and faithfully chose to do as commanded.

Lastly, Joseph was a provider and protector for his family, foreshadowing Christ as the protector and provider for humanity. Very early in his paternal life Joseph had to guard his young family, not once, not twice but three times, by divine intervention to keep them safe. He provided all they needed, not succumbing to a lavish lifestyle, just humbly accepting what God provided on a daily basis.

Father God, may we, like Joseph, choose to be obedient, gracious, fair and humble in all we do and in the way we treat others. May we be willing to risk our very lives as we faithfully entrust ourselves to your service, knowing that you will provide ALL we need. In the precious name of our Lord and Savior. Amen.

SATURDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT
Bryce Staton

And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

"Look! The virgin will conceive a child!
She will give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel,
which means 'God is with us.'"

Matthew 1:21-23

In this scripture, we are reminded of God's promise for a Messiah in Isaiah 7:14. He promises Isaiah that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. God always stays true and keeps his promises even if it's not how we think He will.

I'm sure the people of Isaiah's time did not think that the Messiah would be born in a manger around farm animals. I'm sure when the promise was made they envisioned this King on high would come down with luxuries and their lives would be easier. Jesus would come down and all troubles would be forgotten. This was not God's plan though.

God promises salvation but doesn't guarantee it will be an easy life. His love will shelter us always through the good and the hard times as he always promised.

Thank you for the triumphs and the trials for they both mold us to better serve you. Thank you for fulfilling your promise with the birth of our Messiah. May every day I act more like him. Amen.

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Michael Kawash

"And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God."

Luke 1:36-37

We sometimes face difficult situations that leave us feeling discouraged, uncertain or afraid because no resolution seems possible. Maybe it's a health concern, a financial crisis or estrangement in a relationship with a loved one. We pray for a breakthrough, wait for an answer and wonder how even God could possibly work things out. In the depths of our heart, the seeming impossibility of the problem challenges our faith and gives rise to doubt.

Like Mary, we are invited to trust God even when we cannot see the full picture. Elizabeth's advanced-age pregnancy is a reminder that God was already at work fulfilling His promises in His perfect timing. What seems impossible to us is never impossible for God. His power is not limited by our circumstances, our understanding or what the world considers possible. God, who is outside of time and space, sees beyond our limitations and works in ways that we may not expect or fully understand. So when we feel overwhelmed by the impossible, we can hold on to the truth that God is faithful, His word is trustworthy and His plans are greater than our own.

Today, allow these verses to encourage you to surrender your worries and doubts to the Lord. Instead of focusing on the impossibility and enormity of the challenge surrounding you, focus on the greatness of our God. Nothing is too difficult for Him. No circumstance is beyond His reach. Even when the answer to prayer takes longer than expected, we can remain hopeful, knowing that God is working according to His will. We need not figure everything out but trust the One who holds everything in His hands, the One for whom nothing is impossible.

Father, thank You for reminding me that nothing is impossible for You and that your word never fails. Help me to trust your promises, remain faithful in this Advent season of waiting and believe that You are working things out even when I cannot see it. Strengthen my faith and give me peace as I surrender my worries and circumstances into your loving hands. In Jesus' name, Amen.



MONDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT
Melinda Adamson

At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed.

Luke 1:41-42

The angel Gabriel predicted two miraculous births. The first, a son to be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Their child will be known as John the Baptist, a powerful herald of the Messiah. The Promised One, whom John will proclaim, is the second birth predicted by Gabriel. He tells an engaged virgin, Mary, that God will miraculously conceive His Son in her. The two women meet and rejoice over their blessings.

Even before birth, John fulfills his lifelong mission predicted by the angel Gabriel – to go before the Messiah and point Him out. Elizabeth's sudden proclamation of prophecy is driven by the Holy Spirit, shifting the focus from two expectant mothers to the miraculous work of God.

Lord, let us leap for joy when we hear your voice calling us (for service) and show us how to point you out to the lost and hurting. Help us to not forget these two wonderful miracles and to be on the lookout for your daily miracles. In the powerful name of Jesus. Amen.



TUESDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

Jennie Keener

Mary responded,
"Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.
How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!
For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,
and from now on all generations will call me blessed.
For the Mighty One is holy,
and he has done great things for me.

Luke 1:46-49

When Mary spoke these words, she was a young woman without wealth, power, or any particular standing in the world. She was not somebody the powerful would have stopped to listen to. Yet God chose her to carry the greatest promise humanity had ever known. I think about that often, especially here in Appalachia, where I have known people, whose lives are filled with extraordinary love and sacrifice, yet whose names will never appear in history books. Women who stretch a pot of beans to feed another hungry mouth. Grandmothers raising children when their own hands have grown tired. People who give from what little they have because they know what it feels like to go without. Mary reminds us that God has always seen the worth in people the world overlooks.

There is something beautiful and revolutionary about Mary's song. She praises a God who notices the humble, who sees beyond what a person owns or what the world believes they are worth. I believe Advent asks us to do the same. We cannot celebrate the coming of Christ while turning away from the people He came to love. We cannot admire the manger without remembering that a mother gave birth far from the comfort and security every mother deserves. The Christmas story has always belonged to the poor, the displaced, the weary, and those holding on to hope when hope is about all they have left.

And perhaps that is what I love most about Mary's words. She does not wait until her circumstances are easy to rejoice. She trusts that something holy is happening right in the middle of an uncertain life. This Advent, I hope we remember that God is still doing extraordinary things through ordinary people, in small houses tucked into mountain hollows, in food pantries, in hospital rooms, and around kitchen tables where families are trying to make enough out of too little. The holy has never needed a grand place to live. Sometimes it comes quietly, through the love we offer one another.

Lord, open our eyes to the holiness in ordinary lives and remind us that no person is too poor, too forgotten, or too weary to be worthy of Your love. Give us Mary's courage to believe in Your promises and the compassion to make that love visible through our own hands. This Advent, let our lives magnify You, not only in what we say, but in how we care for one another. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT
Marjorie & Matthew Stephenson

And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child. 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 2:4-7

In our modern world, we often find the Christmas season hectic. Travel, expenses, and family concerns usually add up to a lot of holiday stress. Joseph and Mary must have experienced this as well. Compelled to travel away from home to honor financial obligations beyond their control, at precisely the moment that their new family was on the verge of expanding, couldn't have been easy. The greatest bundle of joy ever was on the way! Imagine, new parents being drawn away from their home at such a crucial moment?

While scripture doesn't answer that question directly, it shows us that Joseph and Mary had a deep, abiding trust in God, His plan and His promises for their lives. Both accepted their role in the birth of the long-promised Christ with the hearts of humble servants. Though they could not yet imagine what wonders would come in the earthly ministry of the Messiah, they never hesitated to be led in paths of righteousness whose end only their Heavenly Father could know.

God asks us to put our faith in Him. His plan for us isn't the same as it was for those trusted to raise His precious Son, but we also have the advantage of the example of His life, sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit, to guide and direct us. These gifts He has given us bring a greater assurance that we should put all of our faith and trust in the Lord.

Lord, help us to be better servants for you, with a greater awareness of opportunities to witness and serve that can exist even in unusual circumstances. As we celebrate the birth of Christ, let us always seek to be truly humble and accepting, putting You and Your plans above all. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

THURSDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT
Mike Sims

So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

John 1:14

When I consider the glory of God, I am utterly overwhelmed with humility. I cannot understand the depth of love He felt for us to send Christ to die for our sins. Our flesh will decay and is drawn to evil while we are alive. It is only through Christ's saving grace that we can eternally enter God's holy presence.

Christ came to earth to redeem those who would be willing to accept Him. He did not force Himself upon us. He knew from the start what awaited Him at the end of His earthly life, yet God's will, not Christ's own, was done in the final hours of His life. What love!! What an example for us all.

Holy Father, as I approach the birthday of Jesus, I give thanks for His willing sacrifice and your sharing your magnificent love for me. May my thoughts, words and deeds be pleasing in your sight and be of a benefit to my family and my brothers and sisters in Christ. In the Holy name of Jesus, I pray. Amen



FRIDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT
Brenda Knighton

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!

Luke 2: 8-11

As I reflect on this scripture, I have often wondered why God chose the shepherds, a group considered to be the lowly, homeless outcasts of society, to receive the first announcement by the angel of the Savior's birth. Wow! That must have been a profound moment for the shepherds to be faced with a messenger from God and witness the awesome glory of God – His holiness and perfection! No wonder the shepherds were in awe and afraid. However, the angel dispelled the shepherds' fear and uncertainty with the announcement of the birth of a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

God's greatest gift often comes in unexpected ways to unexpected people. The announcement of the Savior's birth to the shepherds shows that God's divine message of hope and salvation is available to everyone, regardless of background or social status. God invites all of us to embrace the good news of the Savior's birth and the joy of salvation!

God, help us to embrace the message of joy and hope, just like the shepherds did when they received the good news of our Savior's birth. Provide opportunities for us to share the love of Jesus with everyone. Equip us to be the messengers to promote peace and goodwill in a world that so desperately needs it. Amen.

SATURDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT
Gary Knighton

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

Luke 2:13–15

Jesus Christ, our Savior, is born! Praise be to God! What an awe-inspiring sight it must have been for the shepherds to witness a sudden appearance of a multitude of angels celebrating and praising God in the highest at the birth of Jesus, the Savior. It was a joyous occasion reflecting hope, peace, and goodwill that the Savior's birth brings to mankind. The shepherds responded quickly to the angels' message with anticipation and traveled in faith to Bethlehem to encounter God's revelation.

Reflecting on these scripture verses reminds me of the divine celebration surrounding the birth of the Savior and the manifestation of God's love and salvation for all mankind. Like the shepherds, may we possess a fervent desire in our hearts to revere God and declare His greatness by lifting our voices in praise and adoration for the arrival of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

God, we thank you for the gift of your Savior. May we embrace the message of hope, peace, and goodwill and seek to share these with a world yearning for these traits. Thank you for using the shepherds to spread the good news of the Savior's birth. Equip us to share the message of God's love and salvation with those around us. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Janet Kawash

They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.

Luke 2:16-19

The third Sunday of Advent is known as "Gaudete Sunday." Gaudete is the Latin word for rejoice. Gaudete Sunday is a time for us to stop and shift our prior focus of preparation to anticipation – the anticipation of the birth of Jesus. Gaudete Sunday is the day that we light the pink candle, the candle of joy, in our advent wreath in joyful anticipation.

God chose the shepherds on an ancient hillside to be the first earthly messengers of Jesus' arrival. They hurried to the manger where they found the Holy Family – just as the angels had declared. They were amazed at what they saw – a baby who was the Savior of the world. They spread the word that the Messiah is here – God's promises are true and can be believed! Their message was filled with joy and rejoicing in the Great News!

Where the shepherds were active and resounding with their joyful message, Mary was quiet and still. She let all of these amazing events settle in her heart where she could quietly reflect on them again and again. When Mary said "Yes" to God after the angel first appeared to her to call her to be Jesus' mother, she could have hardly imagined where her obedience would lead. Mary's joy was evident in her faithfulness to God and trust in His divine plan.

God calls us to be messengers of joy like the shepherds and Mary – whether it is a quiet joy in the way we follow God in daily obedience to His teachings and sharing His love with others or whether we are shouting from the mountaintops proclaiming the message of the Savior.

On this third Sunday of Advent, let us reflect like Mary. Let us listen quietly for the voice of God and joyfully ponder where He is leading us. Let us be open to the opportunities God provides for us to share the Good News with joy and rejoicing. During this Advent Season, let us rejoice and seek God in all we do, whether it is in the sharing of the Great News or in the quiet stillness of our hearts reflecting on the promises of God.

Lord, we thank you for the examples of the Shepherds and Mary who show us how to rejoice and live with joy. Open our ears to listen for Your voice as You direct our steps. Keep our hearts tuned to You. Give us courage to boldly proclaim as the Shepherds did so long ago. Let us praise you with rejoicing and joy today and every day. Amen.



MONDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT
Charlie Raines

That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace,
as you have promised.
I have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared for all people.
He is a light to reveal God to the nations,
and he is the glory of your people Israel!"

Luke 2:27-32

God put many prophecies in place concerning His son, Jesus. This prophecy was fulfilled just 8 days after He was born. God promised Simeon that he would not die until he had held the Messiah in his arms. Mary and Joseph brought baby Jesus to the temple for their purification and offerings, and His circumcision; Simeon got to hold Jesus in his arms. He realized who Jesus was and that the prophecy had been fulfilled. He was overwhelmed and wrote a description of the event recorded in the Holy Scriptures.

God kept His promise to Simeon. God has always kept His promises and always will. Praise His holy name.

Great God in Heaven, thank you for being just what you are. Thank you for your promises, that you always keep. Just as you promised devout and righteous Simeon he would see the Messiah, you promised to show us the way to abundant life today and eternal life for tomorrow. Thank you and we praise your Holy Name. In Jesus name. Amen.

TUESDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT
Jim Roncaglione

Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul."

Luke 2: 33-35

The blessing of God's precious gift of life, given by and held in the palm of Jesus' loving hand, includes Jesus' love to and for all, sinner and saint alike in God's kingdom, His Will be done. Prophesied at birth to Jesus' mother and father and by His life and death, Jesus' love lifted up the sinner and at the same time, was destined to cause the fall of the "blind guides," false prophets, hypocrites and unholy leaders in Jerusalem and Israel.

This passage teaches to us as parents, "mothers and fathers," as part of the gift of life bestowed upon us, to love our children and to shed God's grace. That Heavenly, Divine prophecy at Jesus' birth is alive today – infused in our hearts and souls, sealed in our faith – as we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, this Advent season, as it will forever in the future, God's Kingdom Come and His Will be done, on earth as it is, in Heaven.

Heavenly, precious Lord Jesus Christ, humble me to that place where you can then lift me up. Teach me not to rely upon my own wisdom or current status, but let me surrender all these things as "mother and father," and parent, as part of my gift of life, and by my faith through your heavenly grace, so that I might live genuinely as a child of God and a member of God's household. Let your kingdom continue to grow upon earth as you draw all people to yourself, strengthening them through their abiding faith in our Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT
Jonnie Downing

Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.

Luke 2:36-38

As I journey through Advent, I find myself thinking about Anna and all the years she spent waiting, praying, and trusting God. I wonder what those years were really like for her. Were there days when she grew tired of waiting? Did she ever wonder when – or if – God would answer? I can relate to that kind of waiting. There are things I have prayed about, hoped for, and carried in my heart that have not unfolded the way I expected. Sometimes waiting can feel like standing still, but Anna reminds me that God is still at work in those seasons. Perhaps the waiting itself is shaping me – teaching me to trust more deeply, to hold onto hope, and to believe that God is present even when I cannot yet see what He is doing.

Anna also makes me wonder how often God has been present in my life and I have simply been too distracted to notice. When Mary and Joseph walked into the Temple carrying Jesus, they probably looked like any other young family. Yet Anna recognized that something holy was happening right in front of her. During Advent, I want to become more attentive like Anna. I want to slow down enough to notice God in the ordinary moments – in a conversation, an unexpected kindness, time spent with someone I love, or even a quiet moment when I finally allow myself to be still. Maybe God does not always come into my life in the ways I expect. Maybe sometimes I am looking for something dramatic while He is quietly asking me simply to pay attention.

What touches me most about Anna is what she did once she recognized Jesus. She gave thanks, and then she shared her hope with others. Her waiting had prepared her for that moment. As Christmas approaches, I want that to be my journey too: to wait with hope, to watch with an open heart, to recognize Christ in the unexpected, and then to carry His hope to someone else. Perhaps that is one of the gifts of Advent. It reminds me that I do not have to have everything figured out or every prayer answered to know that God is near. I simply need to keep watching, keep trusting, and keep my heart open to the ways Christ may already be appearing in my life.

Gracious God, as I walk through this season of Advent, help me to wait with the faithfulness of Anna. Give me a heart that watches with hope, trusts while waiting, and gives thanks when I glimpse the holy moments. Let the love I have received from You become something I freely share with others. This Advent, prepare my heart once again to receive Christ—not only in the familiar story of Bethlehem, but in the unexpected places where He is already meeting me. Amen



THURSDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT
Archie Snedegar

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

Matthew 2:1-4

Heavenly Father…, in the quietness of this moment 1 humbly ask you to help me understand the potential of this passage for my life. Amen

The Maji were aware that something extremely significant was in the process of taking place in the sky, the likes of which they had never experienced before. "We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." They were following the star. This celestial sign was leading them to witness the birth of a Jewish King.

How many times has God placed before you a star that could have led you to experience a far reaching personal religious encounter. Perhaps God is placing before you a star that could change your life and the lives of others. How sensitive and aware of God's sign are you? Are you willing to follow the star? My friend arise and go!

God, I come to you today just as1 am. I don't want to remain the same. Show me today where you want me to go, and what you want me to do: and I will follow. Amen

FRIDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT
Mary Lee Dunn

Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared.
Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!"

Matthew 2:7-8

I was 80 years old when I realized this verse, which seemed so lovely and kind, really masked a deceit that could have changed the path of the world. The gifts of the Magi, were on the surface honorable and heartfelt, but Herod's real intent was to locate the baby and destroy Him – not to honor or worship Him.

The true gift of the Magi was their response to the dream that they were not to tell Herod the location of the child. They obeyed the dream! They quietly disobeyed man's will and obeyed God's will.

Dear Lord, give us wisdom to find the true meaning of your gifts to us. Help us discern the difference between superficial treasures and the underlying importance of those treasures. Make us wise like the Magi by obeying your instructions to follow Jesus and protect his teachings. In Christ's name we pray. Amen



SATURDAY, THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT
Carolyn Saul

After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was.

Matthew 2:9

Isn't it interesting that God used a star to guide the wise men to find the Messiah? In Genesis the Lord told Abram, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!" His descendants included Gentiles, because earlier the Lord had told him, "All the families on earth will be blessed through you." These families included the wise men who would follow a single star to Bethlehem.

In Revelation, Christ says, "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this message for the churches. I am both the source of David and the heir to his throne. I am the bright morning star." Through that star, in the Christ of Christmas, born for all mankind, we can see the light of our salvation.

Loving Father, thank you for the stars in the sky, too numerous to count, and most especially for that bright morning star, who shines on us and makes us your own beloved children. Help us to walk in the light, as He is in the light. It is in His name that we pray. Amen.



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Mary Jane Leech

When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:10-11

"They were overwhelmed with joy." When was the last time you were overwhelmed with joy? As I was looking through some pictures of my daughter when she was a toddler, I saw on her face what can only be described as sheer joy. Her arms were outstretched, her eyes were beaming, and a smile spread all the way across her face.

Unfortunately, as we grow older those moments of joy seem fewer and farther between. And sadder still is the fact that our response to that joy is rarely noteworthy. So, let's look at the wise men and see how they responded to their joy. First of all, their joy was the result of finding what they had been seeking for a long time. It wasn't accidental or happenstance. They had been planning for this and their joy culminated in worship.

Their worship expressed itself in giving of their most valuable treasures. They gave gold, signifying that they were in the presence of the King. They offered frankincense, which is used by priests in temple worship. And they brought him myrrh, foreshadowing the sacrifice he would make on the cross.

Joy is sacrificial, not just an internal feeling, but an external, tangible expression. Is our joy intentional, sacrificial and symbolic? How does our joy manifest itself in giving of time, talent, and resources? Our challenge is to let our deep spiritual joy be the engine that drives our worship and our generosity. Let's be extravagantly joyful givers for the King.

Heavenly Father, we are overwhelmed by the gift of your Son, our Savior. Thank you for the exceedingly great joy of finding Him. Help us to willingly open our treasures and present to you our gifts that honor his kingship, his priesthood, and his ultimate sacrifice of love. Amen.

MONDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT
Pat Cadle

There the child grew up healthy and strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him.

Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people.

Luke 2:40,52

Even though Jesus was the Son of God, and was God born as a man, he still had to go through the same childhood growth that we all do. This serves as both an example to us and as a comfort. We should strive to grow in God's favor and in wisdom, which is the fear of God, as He did. We know that when we fail, because He experienced our difficulties personally. He understands and forgives us when we fall short.

Likewise, as Jesus tells us to love both God and our neighbors, we have his example that he increased in the favor of both God and man. As our love for God grows, so too does our love of our neighbor. That is true Wisdom.

Dear Lord, help us to follow the example of our Savior and to grow in the wisdom that comes from You. Help us also to act upon this wisdom and show in our lives our love for You and our fellows. Amen



TUESDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT
Micah Blanks

Come quickly, LORD, and answer me, for my depression deepens. Don't turn away from me, or I will die. Let me hear of your unfailing love each morning, for I am trusting you. Show me where to walk, for I give myself to you. Psalm 143:7–8

On December 21st, during the Winter Solstice, the Northern Hemisphere experiences its shortest day and longest night. As the Earth tilts at 23.5 degrees, the North Pole reaches its furthest point from the sun. For thousands of years, astronomers have studied this orbital phenomenon, tracking the mechanics behind our deepest darkness.

Yet while science can explain the physical dark, human social science gives us a vocabulary for the darkness within. The study of *proxemics* – how humans use spatial closeness to communicate – reminds us how deeply we are wired for proximity. In this season, many experience Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) alongside a poignant, relational grief. Even when surrounded by yuletide cheer, holiday music, and familiar films, the weight of winter weather, the empty chairs left by lost loved ones and a subtle sense of isolation can create a quiet longing for true connection.

Writing from a place of raw desperation, the Psalmist speaks directly into this dark night of the soul. His prayer reminds us that feeling overwhelmed is nothing new under the sun, nor before the Son. Yet even as he cries out in distress, his heart reaches immediately for hope, trusting that light and unfailing love will return with the dawn.

As we walk through the longest night, let us look to Jesus, who mastered the ultimate act of proxemics – closing the distance between God and humanity to draw near to the brokenhearted.

Lord, let the morning bring us word of Your unfailing love, for in You we put our trust. Show us the way we should go, for to You we entrust our lives. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT
Sarah Turner

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. When Jesus was twelve years old, they attended the festival as usual. After the celebration was over, they started home to Nazareth, but Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't miss him at first, because they assumed he was among the other travelers. But when he didn't show up that evening, they started looking for him among their relatives and friends.

Luke 2:41-44

This season is all about traditions. Everyone has their own unique and special way of spending the holidays. Some spend time with family, traveling, hosting parties, relaxing, or working; the list goes on and on. Traditions were always so important to me growing up and they still are today. As a child, every Christmas Eve my family and I would go to a late-night Christmas Eve Mass, listen to my Grandpa sing in the choir, and afterwards go to my Gigi's house after for food and good company. Year after year, generation after generation, we still find a way to carry on this tradition.

Mary and Joseph had their own tradition during this time of year – journeying to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. In this scripture, Jesus gets "lost" and finds His way to a temple while Mary and Joseph continue on their journey. When they finally realize He is no longer with them and they find Him in the temple, He is shocked that they didn't expect him to be in his father's house. Like Mary and Joseph, we can often find ourselves going through the motions of traditions instead of being fully present. However, Jesus made sure his loyalty to and faith in the Lord took precedence over everything.

During this busy season of traditions and celebrations, it's important that we find a way to stay present and prioritize God over our earthly comforts and duties. Finding a balance in the midst of this season of life can be difficult, but staying centered on Christ keeps the true reason for the holidays alive.

Dear Lord, we pray that You keep our hearts and minds turned to You during this holiday season. Help us to stay present and be more like You; help us to keep You at the center of our lives; help us remember the real reason that we have traditions – to honor and love You and our neighbors in the best way that we can. Amen.



THURSDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT
Micah Blanks

When they couldn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem to search for him there. Three days later they finally discovered him in the Temple, sitting among the religious teachers, listening to them and asking questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. Luke 2:45–47

Growing up, three of my favorite things were fresh sneakers, watching *Lost in Space*, and reading this passage about a young Jesus staying behind in Jerusalem. At first glance, you might wonder what those three could possibly have in common. Imagine a young Micah every December filled with the hope of Christmas break.

Mom and Dad had a very different plan. Our family had a heavy slate of Advent events for a kid who just wanted to stay home and play. There were just enough to make me want to run away and find rest. When I read Jesus was found in the temple courts, intentionally staying behind, I thought I'd found a way to live vicariously through Him. I misread His actions as a relatable act of youthful rebellion.

One Christmas, right in the middle of hearing the iconic line *"Danger, Will Robinson!"* on TV, I learned I wasn't getting the Nike Huaraches I wanted so desperately. It wasn't because of Santa, and it wasn't a lack of funds – it was because my behavior had fallen short. I was stuck in my own frustration when my mother reframed everything for me: *"Danger, Micah!"* Mom reminded me that what I had perceived as Jesus "running away," wasn't irreverence at all. It was the deepest form of reverence. Jesus wasn't escaping His parents; He was drawn directly to His Father's house to learn, listen, and seek wisdom. What I thought was a story about running away was actually a call to run toward God's presence. That is my challenge; to seek the ways we can find home in God.

Dear Lord, help us to be found in Your grace and not lost in the distractions and drama of the season. Draw our hearts to Your house and keep our minds fixed on You. Amen

FRIDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT
Mary Lee Dunn

For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us.
The government will rest on his shoulders.
And he will be called:
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

On Christmas Eve we go to church and recite the prophecy of Christ using Isaiah's words. Then we may read the message in Luke's words when the angels come to Mary and describe her newborn who will be called Jesus. Imagine the joy and fear she had for her little boy. Her strength during that night before he was delivered and her strength when he was ultimately delivered to God.

What a gift - to be chosen for that job - the sweetness of birthing our Savior. We all enjoy presents and surprises but that is the ultimate!!! Maybe this Christmas we will see Christ as our best ever package delivered by his mother Mary.

Dear God, as we enjoy the Christmas season, remind us of the fulfillment of prophecy, seraphs and angels, messages, challenges, Mary's courage and obedience. Help us share this amazing time of belief and truth. Amen



SATURDAY, THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT
Mary Jane Leech

For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

My mother, Maguerite Leech, taught an international Sunday School class here at the Baptist Temple years ago. She had refugees from Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Cuba. One Christmas morning we were sitting around the Christmas tree opening our presents when she got a call from one of the Laotian women in her class. Her husband was beating her and threatening her and two little boys with a gun. He had been drinking that morning but it was a recurring issue for her.

Mother told her to grab what she needed and to take the boys to a safe location. Mother took some unopened presents from under our Christmas tree and packed up some food we were going to have for our Christmas dinner. While we all waited at home, she and my father met the young mother and her sons and took them to a motel in the next town. They stayed with them until they got settled and then celebrated Christmas with them. As I remember, the family stayed in that motel for nearly a week. In the meantime, Mother called them each day to see what they needed, in addition to taking them food. They got the police involved and had the father removed from the home.

Years later, when I was teaching at Capital High, I had the cousin of those little boys in my class. When I recognized the last name, I asked her about the family. I told her about my mother and the class she taught. When I told her my mother's name, she got very excited and told me her family still tells stories about the angel Marguerite, who saved the lives of that young family.

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it unto me. Matthew 25:40

Heavenly Father, on this Christmas day, we thank you for the wonderful gift you have given to us. May we, as recipients of that gift, pass it on to those around us who are in need.
In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, Amen.

NOTES:

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