



2020 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



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ADVENT 2020

Advent is a Latin word that means “arrival,” and Christmas is all about celebrating Jesus’ arrival in our world and our lives. Advent is a time to reflect on the magnitude of God’s faithfulness to people everywhere, past, present and future. It’s also a time to reflect on the **hope, peace, joy** and **love** that Jesus invites us all to experience. As the global pandemic continues, so do our challenges and unknowns, yet we still have cause to respond with hope and gratitude. Over 2,000 years ago, our Savior was born in a messy manger, the one we call Immanu-el, Hebrew for “God is with us.” We encourage you to spend 10-15 minutes each day with God, the One who always meets us right where we are.

(Cover art: © Kelly Latimore. *The Good Shepherd*.)

HOPE

Sunday, Nov 29

Read: Psalm 23

Reflect: In Southern California, the Antelope Valley is considered a high desert, sitting at 2,100—3,000 ft. above sea level and receiving just seven inches of rain each year. Yet beneath the parched earth lies a stunning surprise. When the valley receives unusually heavy rain, the hills become blanketed by thousands of wildflowers, an event that's called a super bloom. Thanks to the rain, dormant life is awakened. Even in the harsh climate of the desert, new life and blessings are possible.

Respond: Over the last nine months, COVID-19 has significantly changed almost every category of our lives. How we celebrate and mourn looks different, and so do the ways we work and play. It's easy for us to adopt an attitude of scarcity when change or loss is constant. Yet Psalm 23 reminds us that even in the midst of hard times, God desires to bless us. God's love is personal and often surprising; it refreshes our souls like a cool drink of water. What brings you hope during hard times? Call a trusted mentor or friend this week and share your answer with them. Remember, God is with you, even in times of scarcity.

Monday, Nov 30

Read: Luke 1:5-22

Reflect: In Luke 1, we meet Zechariah, a faithful Jewish priest at the end of his life. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth know what pain is, personally and publically. They've been unable to have children, which could make or break your social status back then. When Zechariah receives the shocking news that he'll become a father in the final years of his life, he questions the angel's announcement. His hopes have been dashed for decades. Why should things be any different now?



© Meli Calkins. *California High Desert Bloom.*

Respond: When we meet Zechariah, he's actively serving God in the temple. He's a man of great faith, one who's committed to God, his community and family. Yet it's difficult for Zechariah to trust this good news now that it's arrived; he's skeptical. How has God showed up in your life in an unexpected and life-giving way? How did this event affect you short-term? Long-term? How can you show up for someone today who needs an extra dose of hope?

HOPE

Tuesday, Dec 1

Read: Luke 1:26-38

Reflect: The angel Gabriel sure is busy! First he delivered incredible news to Zechariah and Elizabeth about their future son, John the Baptist. Now Gabriel heads to Nazareth to visit Mary, Elizabeth's cousin, and announces that she will give birth to a son named Jesus. Like her cousins, Mary also worships at her local synagogue, observes the Sabbath, follows the Torah, and embraces Jewish customs. Yet her response to the angel's news differs from Zechariah's. Look closely at the exchange between Gabriel and Zechariah from yesterday, then at today's text. What differences do you notice? Why do you think Mary and Zechariah reacted differently?

Respond: This scene highlights that faith requires courage. It's not about going through the motions but being in an active and dynamic relationship with God, for whom nothing is impossible. Mary gets this. Jesuit scholar Elizabeth A. Johnson observes that "the Annunciation scene is nothing less than a prophetic vocation story on the model of the call to Moses at the burning bush. After questioning, [Mary] gives her free assent, launching her life on an adventure whose outcome is unknown." Think about a time when you took a great risk without knowing the outcome. How did it affect your relationship with God? What about close friends or family? Take the next 5 minutes to talk to God about a current situation with an unknown ending.

Wednesday, Dec 2

Read: Psalm 27

Reflect: Psalm 27 is a declaration of hope in the midst of chaos. Imagine how Elizabeth or Mary must have felt, knowing their lives would never be the same as their bellies swelled with the promise of new life. Like these women embarking on an

unpredictable journey, the psalmist describes life in the same way, assuring us that even when troubles come, and they will, God will not let go of us. Divine love and help are closer than we may dare to imagine.

Respond: This psalm ends with an interesting invitation. Look at verse 14: “Wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord.” After nine months of waiting for the pandemic to subside, *wait* is probably the last word you want to hear. Waiting is uncomfortable. Yet these times of waiting are also helpful moments when we can slow down and gain critical perspective. This week, silence your cell phones and go for a nature walk. Soak in the scenery and animal activity around you. Chances are high that you’ll “see the Lord’s goodness in the land of the living.”



© Henry Ossawa Tanner. *The Annunciation*, 1897.

HOPE

Thursday, Dec 3

Read: Luke 1:39-45

Reflect: Mary was a young woman who was going about her daily life when the Holy Spirit completely shifted her role in human history. Think about this. The Bible is saturated with ordinary, overlooked people being called by God to take on extraordinary roles in their families, communities and the world. It's sobering stuff—God wants to partner with YOU to bring truth, love and healing into the world. Do you believe this for *your* life?

Respond: When Mary retreats to her cousin Elizabeth's home, she's not trying to escape reality. She's simply trying to process the enormity of what's to come. When have you embraced a new role or identity in your life? Did you try to get by alone, or did you seek the support of a trusted friend or family member like Mary? Write down the names of 2-3 people who support you unconditionally, and the names of 2-3 people you support unconditionally. Take 5 minutes to talk to God, giving thanks for each name.

Friday, Dec 4

Read: Luke 1:46-56

Reflect: The artist who painted "A Dream Confirmed" contemplates the powerful bond between Mary and Elizabeth as they cross the unknown threshold of parenthood together. She writes, "as soon as [Mary] falls into Elizabeth's arms, Elizabeth knows and feels it to be true. *Yes, I feel it too. We are pregnant with promise. We carry this together.* This is not a dream deferred. It is a dream confirmed, a dream shared. A dream that will birth joy."

Respond: Mary's song is a bold testimony about God's activity in our personal and communal lives. Tables are radically turned, like in verses 51-53. How does Mary's understanding of God's grace and justice give you hope? Think about a family member, co-worker or friend who needs a word of hope this week. How can you be hope for that person, whether in word or through a simple action this week?



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HOPE

Saturday, Dec 5

Read: 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Reflect: If today's passage sounded familiar, that's because Mary's song is inspired by Hannah's song in the Old Testament. For years, Hannah's outlook on life was bleak. Unlike her neighbors and extended family members, she couldn't have a family of her own and was bullied because of it. In Hannah's song, we see similar themes of oppression being swallowed up and people being set free. God arrives to give hope to the hopeless, belonging to the lonely, and sustenance to the hungry. The weak are made strong.

Respond: How does Hannah's song challenge our modern attitude toward success and achievement? It mentions nothing about popularity, getting rich fast, receiving a promotion, or accomplishing your goals alone. Do you tend to focus your hopes on your personal success and comfort, or do you focus them outward for the love and liberation of others? Why?

PEACE

Sunday, Dec 6

Read: 2 Corinthians 3:3-6, 17-18

Reflect: Mahalia Jackson, The Queen of Gospel, received 3 Grammys and a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1972. When asked why she sang gospel music, Mahalia replied, "I sing God's music because it makes me feel free." And she used her gift to help others experience freedom, too. At the March on Washington in 1963, Mahalia sang "How I Got Over" and "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned" in front of 250,000 people.

Respond: As disciples, God calls us to be Christ's representatives, inspiring us to speak up and act out against injustice through the Holy Spirit. Our job isn't to worry what people may think; our task is to be committed to the mission of God as passionately as Jesus was. 2 Cor. 3:17 says, "wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." How does freedom in the Spirit lead you to peace and ultimately action? Listen to "How I Got Over" or "His Eye Is On the Sparrow" by Mahalia Jackson.



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PEACE

Monday, Dec 7

Read: Psalm 34:4-10

Reflect: The famed Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh had a short but prolific career as an Impressionist painter from 1880-1890. He wrestled with exhaustion and depression for most of his adult life, choosing to stay at an asylum for a year in hopes of recovering. Even though his confinement at Saint-Rémy was profoundly hard, Van Gogh didn't stop painting. Next to the hospital walls, he found inspiration in an overgrown garden, a kind of peace in the midst of the storm.

Respond: When you find yourself in a situation or season of anguish, to whom or what do you turn? Do you stay busy and distract yourself from your pain, or do you take time to acknowledge it? No matter what you may be going through, God is eager to fill you with his peace, to "free you from all your fears" (Psalm 34:4). Take a moment to offer your whole self to God today, naming any source of pain or fear in your life.

Tuesday, Dec 8

Read: Psalm 34:17-22

Reflect: Psalm 34 assures us that peace is possible even when our circumstances tell us otherwise. God doesn't look down on us when we get laid off, fail an exam, have an anxiety attack, struggle with our faith, or when a relationship breaks down. God knows that being human is complex and tiring. He simply wants you to know that "no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned" (Psalm 34:22).

Respond: Look at all the active verbs in verses 17-22, like "watch," "hears," and "rescues." Write them all down. Next to each verb, write down a memory when God performed such

actions in your life. For example, when did God hear or answer your prayer? When did he protect you or those you love?



© Vincent Van Gogh. *The garden at the asylum of Saint-Rémy*, 1889.

PEACE

Wednesday, Dec 9

Read: Matthew 1:18-19

Reflect: In Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, we get a unique glimpse into Joseph's mind and heart. When Joseph learns that his fiancé Mary is suddenly pregnant, "he decided to break the engagement quietly" because he "was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly." Joseph's understanding of peace was to put a morally ambiguous situation in his rearview mirror.

Respond: What's your default response when you find yourself in an uncomfortable situation? Do you seek out creative solutions, or do you leave the work to others? Commit to being a source of peace and compassion for a friend or family member going through a difficult situation. What does it look like to show up for them today or this week?

Thursday, Dec 10

Read: Matthew 1:20-25

Reflect: Look at the expression on Joseph's face. It's one of sadness and intensity. He didn't see another solution to his problem except to break things off with Mary. However, God's ways are far more imaginative, redemptive and life-giving than anything we can dream up. God intervenes and offers Joseph an alternative ending to his story. *Don't be afraid. I gave Mary this child. Trust in my plan.*

Respond: The phrase "do not be afraid" is one of the most repeated commands in the Bible. Do you find this challenging or easy to follow? What do you spend the most time worrying about? This week, reach out to a pastor, mentor or trusted friend. Share your troubles with them.



Statue of St. Joseph. Chapel of St. Joseph, Nazareth, Israel.

PEACE

Friday, Dec 11

Read: Matthew 2:13-15

Reflect: For people who possess power and privilege, peace comes at little or no cost. For people who are dispossessed of power and privilege, peace either comes at an extremely high cost or is unattainable. The artist Kelly Latimore depicts Mary, Joseph and a young Jesus as modern-day refugees fleeing danger, death and oppression... which isn't far from the truth. After all, King Herod ordered his soldiers to kill boys two-years-old and under. Today, violence, cruelty and fear are still used by leaders around the world.

Respond: In this scene, we see two major characters in Jesus' life, his mother and father, ignoring a royal mandate so they can survive. This isn't the first time the Bible records faithful people subverting power structures because of their love for God and belief in justice, and it isn't the last. Over a meal this week, ask your family what peace looks like in our current world. When does peace require personal risk?

Saturday, Dec 12

Read: Isaiah 9:2-7

Reflect: In their book *Living Gently In a Violent World*, theologians Jean Vanier and Stanley Hauerwas discuss the gift of God coming to us as the person of Jesus. "Jesus entered into this world to love people as they are. The heart of the vision of Jesus is to bring people together, to meet, to engage in dialogue, to love each other. Jesus wants to break down the walls that separate people and groups. How will he do this? He will do it by saying to each one, 'You are important. You are precious.'"

Respond: Isaiah 9 introduces us to Jesus who's called Immanu-el, Hebrew for "God is with us." Even though we insist on building walls with bricks of indifference, fear, and selfishness to keep God or others at bay, Isaiah reminds us that God *still* chose us. And God continues to choose *you* each and every day. Think of someone who's difficult to love in your life. How can you show them dignity, compassion and unconditional love, even from afar?



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JOY

Sunday, Dec 13

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Reflect: After a long journey to Bethlehem, the wise men found Jesus lying in a manger under a bright star. Matthew tells us they were filled “with great joy.” For the wise men, this joy motivated a response. They responded with gratitude, offering fine gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—to the infant king resting in his mother’s arms. In what ways do you respond to your experiences of joy?

Respond: Think of an experience that brings you great joy. In what ways might you consider responding in gratitude to this gift?

Monday, Dec 14

Read: John 16:20-22

Reflect: With everything happening in our world, does joy feel like something you don’t have the luxury of experiencing right now? It’s easy to feel this way, yet in scripture, joy is far more powerful and complex than a feeling of happiness. It is a sense of deep connection to God, who loves us more than we can imagine. It’s not dependent on whether or not our lives are worry-free. As we wait for Christ’s promise of joy when we are reunited with him, God desires to give us joy and hope now, even in the midst of life’s storms.

Respond: Trusting God’s promises isn’t always easy, but God never leaves us, even during the times when he feels far away. What can you do this week to embrace God’s joy, even in the midst of life’s challenges?



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JOY

Tuesday, Dec 15

Read: Psalm 16:11

Reflect: The Psalmist writes, “in your presence, there is fullness of joy.” Joy isn’t something that only happens when our life is going smoothly. We encounter joy when we experience God’s presence. It is God who shows us which path to take, and walks alongside us through all life’s challenges.

Respond: Where do you most feel connected to God’s presence? Is there a walk near your home? A certain song you listen to that reminds you of God’s faithfulness? As you seek to embrace joy this week, think also of how you might encourage those around you to embrace joy in their lives.

Wednesday, Dec 16

Read: Luke 2:1-7

Reflect: When God became human, he chose to enter our world *not* in royal luxury and splendor, but in a simple stable. His young mother gave birth in dust and straw. Just a few chapters later, Jesus will say, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh” (Luke 6:20-21). Jesus rejected wealth and prestige and chose to focus on those our world sees as insignificant.

Respond: Jesus’ birth flips everything on its head, deeply valuing the poor and proclaiming the great strength of what our world sees as weakness. How does reflecting on God’s counter-cultural economy inspire you to live differently this week? How might it shift your priorities?



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JOY

Thursday, Dec 17

Read: Luke 2:8-14

Reflect: “Fear not.” These words are much easier said than done! Imagine if you were working the graveyard shift one night and encountered the angels as the shepherds did. Luke tells us they were “filled with great fear” at the sight of the angel and all of God’s glory. Before the wise men and kings heard of Jesus’ birth, God chose to announce it a field of shepherds: not the highest or most prestigious role in society.

Respond: In Jesus’ day, shepherding was not the most prestigious job. Shepherds worked long hours and didn’t always smell too great. Who are the equivalent of shepherds in today’s world? After you’ve thought of a few ideas, commit to praying for them this week. You could also think of a way to support or encourage people who society often overlooks.

Friday, Dec 18

Read: Luke 2:15-20

Reflect: Imagine you are sitting in the stable when the shepherds arrive. How would Mary and Joseph be feeling in the moments before the shepherds arrive? What would it be like to hear the shepherds’ story of the angel’s proclamation? You could also imagine what it would be like to be one of the shepherds: filled with joy, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Respond: Set aside time this week to contemplate God’s presence and love. You might sit in silence or listen to a favorite song. Let the peace and power of God wash over you. Reflect on who God is in the Christmas story and what God might be saying to you about himself, your life, and our world in this season.



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JOY

Saturday, Dec 19

Read: Psalm 100

Reflect: The psalmist calls for the whole earth to “make a joyful noise” to the Lord, and sing with joy in God’s presence. The God who created us—who knit us together in our mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13-14) and knows every hair on our head (Luke 12:7)—loves us unconditionally. God’s steadfast and unchanging love endures forever. God is our shepherd and guide. His love will never leave us.

Respond: What is something you can praise God for today? Make a list of things you are thankful for and things that bring you joy.

LOVE

Sunday, Dec 20

Read: Isaiah 61:1-4

Reflect: This Scripture—which Jesus quotes in Luke 4:16-20—was a favorite of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, who was fired from her job for attempting to register to vote. The daughter of a preacher and granddaughter of a former slave, Hamer loved leading crowds in singing Gospel music. Unlike other leaders, she didn’t have a PhD or impressive credentials. Part of what made her voice so powerful is that Hamer was an everyday person: she spoke with conviction and authenticity, and people took notice.

Respond: Read Isaiah 61:1-4 write what words or phrases jump out to you. Pray and ask God to show you something new. Read the passage again, taking time to dwell on the words and phrases that stood out to you earlier. Read it one last time and write a short reflection.



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LOVE

Monday, Dec 21

Read: John 3:16-17

Reflect: For many people, this passage is so familiar, it can be easy to gloss over it. This artwork by Kelly Latimore is titled “MAMA,” a reference to the words that George Floyd cried out before his death. Floyd’s story stirs up many emotions. It reminds us of the brokenness, pain, and complex challenges facing our world today. Do the familiar words of John 3:16 ring differently when you read them in light of our nation’s current struggles?

Respond: God’s new creation is a future promise, but it doesn’t only exist in the future. Theologian N.T. Wright says, “What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells...loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God’s future... They are part of what we may call building for God’s kingdom.” Motivated by John 3:16, what practical action can you take to help join in God’s work of healing and redemption?

Tuesday, Dec 22

Read: John 19:17-27

Reflect: Jesus willingly experienced the most painful suffering imaginable so that we—each and every one of us—have the opportunity to receive his gift of freedom, redemption, and eternal life. Love that deep and powerful is hard to imagine. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “You can hide nothing from God. The mask you wear before men will do you no good before God. He wants to see you just as you are. He wants to be gracious to you.” That deep love extends to all: “God loves human beings. God loves the world. Not an ideal human, but human beings as they are; not an ideal world, but the real world.”

Respond: In a world where it can feel like more things are going wrong than right, what does it mean to you that Jesus chose to suffer and die for us *as we are*—as flawed and imperfect human beings?



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LOVE

Wednesday, Dec 23

Read: Luke 10:27-37

Reflect: More than anything else, disciples are called to love God and love our neighbors. But who is our neighbor? In Jesus' time, people looked at Samaritans with deep distrust, their perception clouded by stereotypes. Yet in this parable, only the Samaritan is willing to help the traveler bleeding on the side of the road. God's love isn't confined by our human boundaries and assumptions. It challenges our preconceived notions about how the world works, inviting us to see ourselves, and each other, differently.

Respond: What specific communities might be a modern-day equivalent to the Samaritans of Jesus' day? Commit to praying for three people or communities who come to mind. How might God be prompting you to challenge your assumptions and see others through his eyes?

Thursday, Dec 24

Read: Psalm 59:16-17

Reflect: Tonight, as we prepare for our Saviors' birth, think back on all that God has done in your life. Reflect on what it means that God is our fortress and refuge. For the Psalmist, thinking of God's steadfast love makes him sing for joy. We can *talk* about God's steadfast love, but what is it like to feel unconditionally loved and valued, to sense it deep in the core of our being?

Respond: If the reality of God's love feels more intellectual to you—something you say, but not something you feel deeply—ask God to help you better understand and experience his radical love for you. And may God's **hope, peace, joy, and love** guide and strengthen you this Christmas.



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NOTES & REFLECTIONS



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GOD BLESS YOU THIS CHRISTMAS
AND IN THE NEW YEAR!