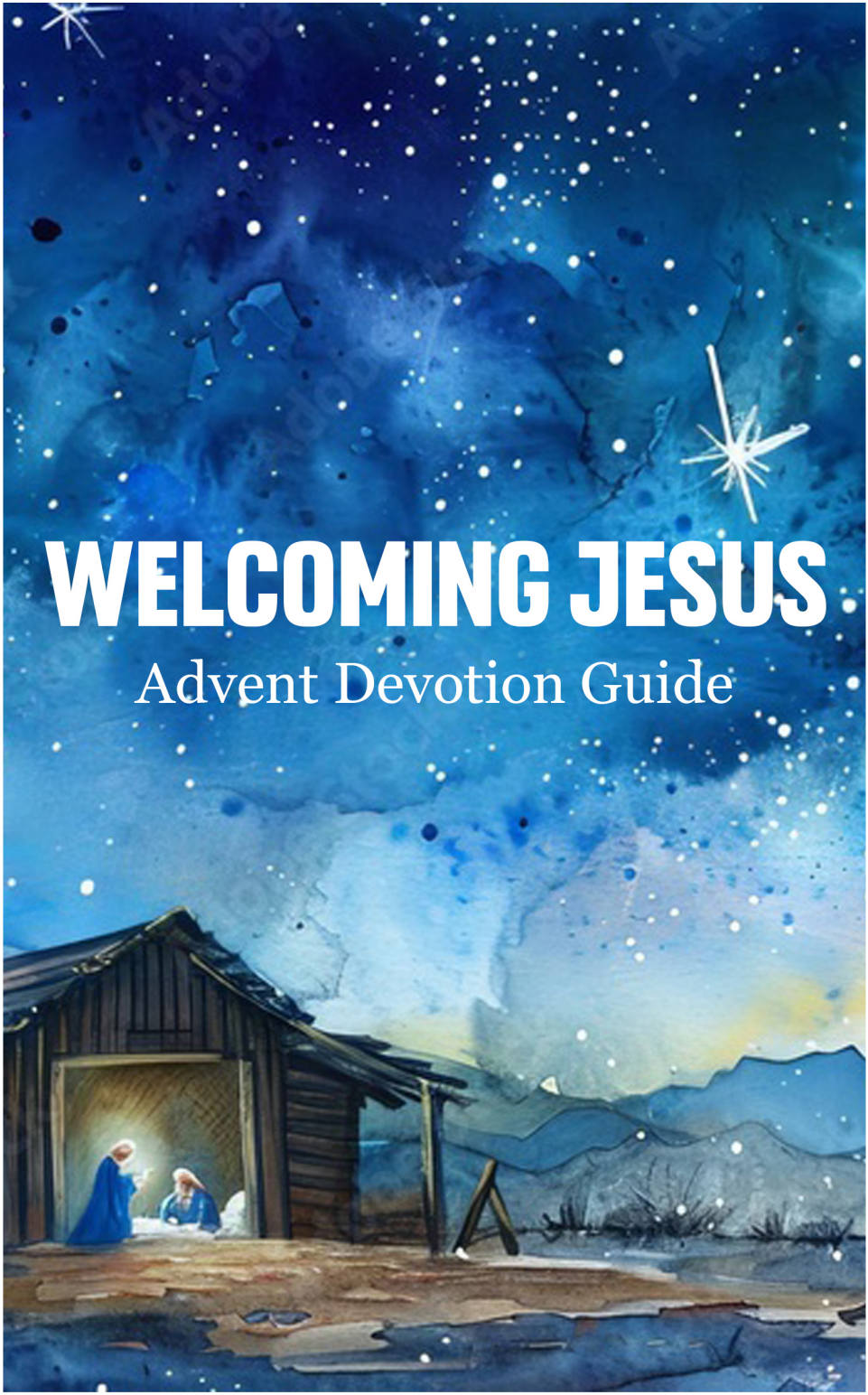
WELCOMING JESUS
Advent Devotion Guide

DECEMBER 1 Mike Bellanti

The Story Jesus Entered

Matthew 1:1-17

The first verses of Matthew's Gospel contain a long genealogy. Most people reading the Gospels probably skip over genealogies because they seem to be a "boring" list of names. However, when you consider the picture Matthew is painting with these names, the result is nothing less than remarkable.

The Old Testament speaks of Jesus coming from the line of David, which is, in part, an important aspect of what Matthew is attempting to establish theologically. However, Matthew also includes some unlikely characters – people others might have chosen to leave out. His genealogy includes gentiles and women. In an age when patriarchy was the dominant cultural reality, women were intentionally named, some of whom had complicated or scandalous stories. Gentiles such as Rahab and Ruth are included as well, along with a cast of unlikely characters.

All of this is intentional because it points us toward the mission of Christ. **Jesus came for all people.** He was born in the most humble of circumstances because God "loved the world." Advent points us toward the mission of Christ in the world. His simple beginnings and his parents – ordinary Jewish people – became tools in the hands of God to redeem the world.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 2 Scott Dahlke

In the Beginning Was the Word

John 1:1-5

The apostle John gets right to the point in his introductory statements to his readers; Jesus is fully God and he is also fully distinct within the trinity and in his role in creation. Specifically, the text lays out Jesus' direct work in our creation. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind."

Imagine the love and care it took to painstakingly knit our unique DNA strands together one nucleotide at a time, keeping in mind that each adult carries between 9 to 62 billion miles of DNA strands if stacked from end to end. There was perfection in His creation, and yet it needed something more… Jesus gave us free will. C.S. Lewis eloquently observed in his book *Mere Christianity*, "Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having."

Yes, we were given free will and yes, the darkness moved quickly to try and overcome us.

That is what is so beautiful about the advent season. It was through love that Jesus formed us. It was for love we were given a choice. And it was again that perfect love for which Jesus returned as a humble baby to redeem His creation, and call us home. The light continues to shine, as it will forevermore. Our original design has been restored through Jesus' coming to Earth to rescue us.

Jesus knew what he would have to go through even before creating us, and yet he chose to do it anyway. Let us celebrate together Jesus' coming this Advent season. How can we not be in awe of His amazing love that redeems, and transforms, and restores us to Himself forevermore.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 3 Tara Tess

The Promise of His Presence

Isaiah 7:14

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, God spoke a promise through the prophet Isaiah. A child would come, and His name would be Immanuel – God with us. At a time when God's people faced fear and uncertainty, God spoke through Isaiah, reminding them that He was still at work. His promises were still true, and His plan was still unfolding, even when they couldn't see or understand what He was doing.

The Christmas story is more than the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. It's the fulfillment of God's promises revealed throughout Scripture. He didn't simply send a message of hope from heaven. He came Himself. Through Jesus, God entered the brokenness of our world, experienced the realities of human life, and ultimately made a way for us to be reconciled to Him. Immanuel is more than a name. It's the assurance that God desires to be in relationship with us.

Even when we know God is with us, there are times when His presence feels distant. When life becomes difficult or circumstances don't make sense, we may struggle to see how He is working. We look for evidence of God in answered prayers, changed circumstances, or moments when life feels peaceful. But the promise of Immanuel reminds us that God's presence isn't dependent on our circumstances. He is just as present in the waiting as He is in the answered prayer, just as faithful in uncertainty as He is when the path ahead is clear.

During Advent, it's easy to become consumed with preparing for Christmas while overlooking the deeper invitation of the season. We're not simply remembering that God came to be with us. We're invited to live each day in the reality of His presence, allowing that truth to shape how we live.

May we trust Him even when we don't understand His plans, confident that His faithful presence is always with us.

Prayer:

Gracious God, thank You for sending Jesus, Immanuel – God with us. What a beautiful reminder of Your love and desire for a relationship with us. Draw us closer to You this Advent season. Open our hearts to know You more deeply, and help us reflect Your love to those around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Insignificant

Micah 5:2

The Christmas story is filled with seemingly insignificant people and places: a teenage girl named Mary, a carpenter named Joseph, dirty, smelly shepherds, and a small town called Bethlehem. God could have chosen for His Son to be born in a large city, to a prince and princess, with the most powerful people in the world among the first to meet Him. Instead, He did almost the opposite.

If you've read the rest of the Bible, this should come as no surprise. Over and over again, God takes what seems small, ordinary, or insignificant and uses it for something significant. Maybe that's part of the point. Maybe the Christmas story is a reminder that we should be careful about who or what we consider insignificant.

There have been times in my life when I've felt insignificant. Maybe you have too. But my significance isn't determined by how I feel or by what the world says about me. God calls me His beloved child. I am someone He knows, loves, and values so deeply that Christ came for me.

I am significant in God's eyes. I am dearly loved. I am a child of the King. How incredible is that? I imagine the shepherds must have felt something similar as they knelt before the God of the universe in human form. These ordinary men, overlooked by much of society, were invited into one of the most extraordinary moments in human history.

You matter to God. And that is very good news.

But the Christmas story doesn't stop there. It also reminds me that just as I am significant in God's eyes, so is everyone else. And that order matters. When we begin to understand how deeply loved and valued we are by God, it changes the way we see the people around us. As I go about my day, there are people I might normally overlook, rush past, or ignore. But every person I encounter is someone made in the image of God and worthy of dignity, kindness, time, and attention.

If God made a point of including shepherds at the birth of His Son and choosing Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah, perhaps we should learn to look differently at the people and places the world tends to overlook. No one is insignificant in God's eyes. And as His representatives here on earth, that changes the way we live.

This Christmas season, how can you allow the truth of how deeply God values you to sink in? And as that truth takes root, how might it change the way you see and treat the people around you?

DECEMBER 5 Taylor Klopatek

Zechariah's Song
Luke 1:68-70

Since the Fall in Genesis chapter 3, suffering has been an unfortunate part of the human experience. While each person's story is unique, one thing remains true: we all know what it is like to have an intimate relationship with pain and suffering. For some of us, this shows up in the form of loss. Yet for others, it is in the form of lack.

For many years, Zechariah and Elizabeth lived with the painful reality of childlessness. One of the things they had longed for was the very thing they lacked: a child. Year after year passed without an answer to their prayers, until they reached an age when the possibility of becoming parents seemed beyond reach.

Until one day, God told Zechariah that his wife would have a son. After so many years, the promise seemed almost impossible to believe. Yet despite Zechariah's doubts, God's plan unfolded, and Elizabeth gave birth to John, the one who would prepare the way for Jesus.

It is here that we find the song of a father. A man who had known years of disappointment now burst forth in praise. But Zechariah's praise was about something far greater than the birth of his son. He recognized that God was fulfilling his promises to Israel, bringing redemption to his people through the coming Messiah.

God had met Zechariah in the midst of his pain, but his faithfulness extended far beyond one family's story. The same God who was faithful to his promises then remains faithful today, even when our circumstances remain unresolved.

In this Advent season, what would it look like to trust God with our most sacred wounds? May God transform the pains of our hearts into praise from our lips.

Prayer:
Praise be to God the Father, whose wisdom far exceeds our own.

Praise be to Jesus Christ, who emptied himself on our behalf.

Praise be to Holy Spirit, who dwells within us now.

May our lives be ever pleasing to you O God,
the One worthy of all our praise.

Amen

DECEMBER 6 Taylor Klopatek

Through the Holy Spirit

Matthew 1:18-19

We often think of the birth of Jesus as a moment of peace, joy, and celebration. But we have the benefit of hindsight. Before there was a manger, shepherds, or wise men, there was a young couple whose lives were about to be turned upside down.

Joseph was a seemingly ordinary Jewish man, living in the small town of Nazareth, preparing for his coming marriage. Imagine his surprise then to find his soon to be wife was already pregnant with a child that was not his own. Not only did this have emotional implications, but social and economic as well. This by all accounts was a major disruption to Joseph's life.

Every single one of us knows what it is like to have our lives disrupted by unexpected events. Some of these are small things that impact our days. Yet others are major disruptions that, like Joseph, turn our entire worlds upside down. What would it look like to stop seeing these disruptions as obstacles to be avoided, and instead see them as opportunities to put our faith into action?

This is by no means an attempt to minimize the pain that disruptions often cause in our lives. Joseph's first response was to attempt to control the situation by planning to end his engagement to Mary. But ultimately, it was Joseph's willingness to obey the voice of God in his life that changed everything. This advent season when disruptions arise, no matter how big or small, may we turn our attention to God, the author of our stories.

Prayer:
O Holy God,
Our minds cannot even fully comprehend the vastness of your wisdom.

As we remember the birth of Christ this advent season, may we be reminded that your ways are far greater than our own.

When disruptions arise in our own lives, give us the faith to trust you, the courage to follow you, and the peace to rest in you.

Amen

DECEMBER 7 Jenny Heckman

Joseph's Dream
Matthew 1:20

He was confused, ashamed and afraid. Given the circumstances and the incredulity of it all, one cannot blame Joseph for this whirlwind of emotion and his decision to quietly divorce Mary, avoiding public disgrace.

In the midst of fear, confusion and shame, God comes to Joseph in a dream. In the ancient world, dreams were considered a legitimate channel for divine communication; how beautiful that God would use an unmistakable and credible vehicle through which to speak.

What was spoken to Joseph was full of tender-loving mercy. "Do not be afraid…". Oh how confused, ashamed, scared hearts and minds need these words, then and now. This Advent season, would you let God speak the words "Do not be afraid" into any fear, confusion and shame? As you do, may God's love empower you to trust that his purposes always prevail. Then, and now.

Prayer:
O Lord, speak tenderly to me today. May you find me in my places of darkness and bring me out and into the light of your presence and wisdom. I praise you that you are a God who draws near. Amen.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 8 Mattie Kahn

Give Him the Name Jesus

Matthew 1:21

Our youngest son, Charlie, was born at home… and not on purpose. Labor came on quickly, and my wife had no choice but to deliver the baby herself in our small two bedroom apartment. Thankfully, there were no complications, and we were soon wrapping our premature baby boy in one of our clean(ish) dish towels and waiting for the ambulance to arrive. I can confidently say that I will never forget that morning. It was terrifying and amazing, messy and beautiful, all at the same time.

God's plan was that Jesus would enter this world in much the same way. It didn't have to be like this. Jesus could have arrived on a chariot, surrounded by an army of angels, announcing his arrival in all the glory and majesty that rightfully belonged to him. And yet, he chose to enter the world in a way that was so ordinary, so human, so messy.

And I wonder if this is our first glimpse of the extraordinary solidarity of Jesus with humanity. That he has come not just as king, not just as master, but as brother and friend. He has entered into the vulnerability, the weakness, and the messiness of human existence. And this is the wonder of the incarnation: Jesus came to be with us that he might lead us into life with God.

Prayer:
Jesus, thank you for entering into the messiness and vulnerability of our humanity, choosing to be with us rather than remaining distant from us. Help us to find comfort in your presence and to trust that the One who entered into our brokenness is also the One who leads us into the fullness of life with you. Amen.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 9 Josh Kilde

To Fulfill the Prophecy

Matthew 1:22-23

Nearly 700 years before the birth of Jesus, the people of Judah found themselves facing a terrible threat. In the middle of their fear and uncertainty, God sent the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz with a sign: "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us')." (Isaiah 7:14, NLT). This was a reminder to God's people that He had not forgotten them.

Centuries later, Matthew tells us that Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of this prophecy. But consider how God chose to enter our world. The Creator of heaven and earth, the One who was there from the very beginning, came into His own creation as a vulnerable baby. Fully God and fully man, Jesus experienced the very humanity He created. The One who holds the universe together allowed Himself to be held in His mother's arms. God could have revealed Himself in countless ways, yet He chose to humble Himself, taking on human flesh to dwell among us. Immanuel was more than a reminder that God was watching over His people. Through Jesus, it became the incredible reality that God Himself had come to dwell among them.

As we celebrate Advent, we are reminded that God's faithfulness doesn't always look the way we expect. Generations waited for the promised Messiah, unaware of all that God was preparing for the moment of His arrival. And when He came, it wasn't as a conquering king as many had expected, but as a vulnerable baby. Perhaps you find yourself in a season of uncertainty or waiting, wondering where God is at work. Remember, the God who entered our broken world has not abandoned you. Christmas reminds us that God keeps His promises, that He knows what it means to be human, and that He desires to be near us. He is Immanuel. He is God with us.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 10 Ingrid Goranson

Faith That Follows: Trusting God Through Obedience

Matthew 1:24-25

In Matthew 1:24-25, Joseph demonstrates what it means to trust God through obedience. After the angel of the Lord revealed God's plan to him in a dream, Joseph did exactly as he was instructed and took Mary home as his wife. Although the situation was unexpected and may have been difficult to understand, Joseph chose to believe God's message and follow His direction. His response reminds us that faith is more than believing God's Word, it is putting that belief into action, even when we don't fully understand His plan.

Joseph's obedience played an important part in God's plan for the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world. He did not allow fear, uncertainty, or the opinions of others to prevent him from doing what God had called him to do. We too, will face moments when God's direction challenges our plans or takes us down an unfamiliar path. In those moments, we must remember that God sees the bigger picture, even when we cannot. We may not have all the answers, but we can trust His wisdom, His timing, and His faithfulness.

Prayer:
Heavenly Father, help me to have a heart like Joseph's, willing to trust You and obey Your Word even when I don't understand everything You are doing. Give me courage to follow Your direction and faith to believe that Your plans are greater than my own. Remove my fears and doubts, and help me to honor You through my choices and actions. Thank you for the gift of Jesus and for reminding me that obedience is an expression of my love and trust in You. In Jesus name, Amen.

Reflection questions:
- Have you ever felt God leading you in a direction that was unexpected or difficult to understand? How did you respond, and what did that experience teach you about trusting Him?
- What fears, uncertainties, or concerns about the opinions of others sometimes prevent us from obeying God's direction? How can we overcome those obstacles?
- How can we move beyond simply believing God's Word to putting it into action in our daily lives?
- How can remembering that God sees the bigger picture help us trust Him when our circumstances don't make sense?
- What is one area of your life where God may be calling you to trust Him more fully and respond with obedience? What step of faith can you take today?

Faith is not always having all the answers, it is trusting the One who does. Like Joseph, we are called to obey God even when the path ahead is unclear, knowing that His plans are always greater than our own.

DECEMBER 11 Mattie Kahn

Mary Visits Elizabeth
Luke 1:39-45

In today's reading, we witness the first encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist. Remarkably, it happens while they are both still in the womb! As soon as Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, baby John leaps for joy at the presence of Jesus.

Much like Mary, God has asked each one of us to faithfully carry the presence of Jesus into our world. If only everyone responded like baby John did! But this is where we can learn from Mary's example. Elizabeth called Mary blessed because she believed that God would fulfill his promises. Mary didn't know how everything would turn out, but she trusted the One who had called her.

Perhaps this is what faithfulness looks like for us as well. We can't control how people will respond to Jesus, nor can we change their hearts. Our task is simply to be faithful to his presence in our lives, and to carry this presence wherever we go - our workplaces, our families, our communities. In so doing, we trust that God will accomplish what only he can do.

Prayer:
Jesus, help us to faithfully carry your presence into the places and relationships you have entrusted to us, trusting that you are already at work in ways we cannot see. Give us the faith of Mary, believing in your promises and remembering that it is your power, not ours, that transforms hearts and brings new life. Amen.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 12 Ingrid Goranson

A Heart of Praise: Trusting God in Every Season

Luke 1:46-56

In Luke 1:46-56, Mary responds to God's plan for her life with a beautiful song of praise, declaring, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47). Although Mary did not know everything that lay ahead, she chose to praise God for His goodness, mercy, power, and faithfulness. Her example reminds us that we don't have to understand everything God is doing to trust Him. We can praise Him even when our circumstances are uncertain because He remains faithful.

Mary's song teaches us to focus more on who God is than what we are facing. Sometimes we magnify our problems, fears, and disappointments until they seem bigger than our faith. But when we remember God's promises and reflect on His goodness, our hearts are renewed with hope. God sees the humble, shows mercy, and fulfills His promises in His perfect timing. Like Mary, we can choose to worship Him before we see the full outcome of His plan.

Prayer:
Heavenly Father, help me to magnify You in every season of my life. Forgive me for focusing more on my problems than on Your faithfulness. Give me a humble heart like Mary's, one that trusts Your promises and praises You even while waiting for answers. Remind me of Your goodness, strengthen my faith, and help my words and actions bring glory to Your name. May my soul rejoice in You, my Savior, today and always. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Reflection Questions:
- What does Mary's song of praise reveal about her relationship with God?
- Mary chose to praise God even though she did not know everything that lay ahead. How can we learn to praise God when our circumstances are uncertain or difficult?
- What does it mean to glorify God with our lives? How can we make praise a daily part of our relationship with Him?
- Mary praised God for His goodness, mercy, power, and faithfulness. Which of these attributes of God do you need to be reminded of most in your life right now, and why?
- Have you ever experienced a season when you couldn't understand what God was doing, but later recognized His faithfulness? How did that experience strengthen your faith?

Praise is not dependent on our circumstances; it is rooted in who God is. Like Mary, we can rejoice in the Lord even when we cannot see what lies ahead, knowing that His goodness, mercy, and faithfulness never change.

DECEMBER 13 Vikie VanDerLinden

The Word Became Flesh

John 1:14

Every December, my living room turns into a maze of tangled lights and half-unpacked boxes. Year after year, I catch myself getting so caught up in setting the stage for Christmas by arranging the ornaments just right, hunting down the perfect gifts, and double-checking my busy schedule that I almost miss the stillness the season promises. We put so much effort into creating a welcoming atmosphere in our homes, yet our inner lives often feel cluttered, hurried, and distracted. It is so easy to fall into the trap of believing that peace arrives only when everything on our Christmas to-do list is neatly crossed off.

John 1:14 breaks right through that seasonal exhaustion with a staggering truth: *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."* God didn't wait for us to tidy up our lives, clear our calendars, or get our messy hearts in order before drawing near to us. Jesus stepped directly into our imperfect, chaotic world, choosing to anchor His presence in the middle of our everyday reality.

Christmas isn't about us striving to reach up to a distant heaven; it's about Love coming down to dwell right where we are. The light of His glory doesn't require a flawless setting. It simply asks for an open heart ready to receive Him. How can you invite Jesus to dwell with you in the middle of that mess today?

Prayer:
Lord, thank you for stepping into our messy, fast-paced world and choosing to make your home among us. Forgive me for the times I get so caught up in the preparations of the season that I lose sight of Your presence. Soften my heart this Advent, clear away my distractions, and teach me to rest in the beauty of Your grace and truth. Help me to experience Your glory today, right where I am. Amen.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 14 Tara Tess

What Are You Seeking?

Matthew 2:1-2

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem searching for the newborn King. They had seen His star and came to worship Him.

The Magi didn't have all the answers. They didn't know exactly where their journey would lead or what they would find when they arrived. But they knew someone worth seeking had come into the world.

So they followed the star.

Their journey required faith, patience, and a willingness to leave what was familiar. They weren't simply looking for a king. They were coming to worship Him.

Advent invites us to do the same.

In the busyness of Christmas preparations and traditions, it's easy to lose sight of the One we're celebrating. The Magi came seeking Jesus. What are we seeking? Are we simply going through the motions of the season, or are we intentionally drawing closer to Him?

The Magi remind us that Christmas isn't just about celebrating that Jesus came. It's about responding to Him with hearts of worship.

May we be intentional about seeking Jesus, just as the Magi did. They didn't know every detail of the journey ahead, but they recognized that Jesus was worth pursuing. Their desire to worship Him moved them beyond simply knowing about His birth to personally seeking Him.

This Advent season, may we do more than remember the story of His coming. May we make room for Him in our hearts, allow His presence to shape our priorities, and respond to Him with lives of genuine worship.

Prayer:
Jesus, thank You for coming into our world. Help us look beyond the busyness of this season and focus on what matters most – You. Draw our hearts closer to You and guide our steps as we seek You. May our worship be more than words or traditions, but a reflection of our love for You. Amen.

DECEMBER 15 Jenny Heckman

King Herod Was Disturbed

Matthew 2:3-6

Power is always disturbed by competition. Herod had been appointed "King of the Jews" by Rome in 40 BC. Sources say he clawed his way into this title and was known to be both paranoid and violent. To hear a king had been born who shared the title he clawed his way into, would be disturbing, indeed, for fragile-egoed Herod.

Advent is a season of waiting. From these verses, might Advent also extend an invitation to let paradigms of power be disturbed? Jesus, the true "King of the Jews" would reign through being a shepherd of His people. Shepherds love. Shepherds protect the vulnerable of the flock. Shepherds sacrifice sleep and comfort to assure their flocks flourish. Good shepherds do not use force or brutality to get sheep to listen and obey. What would change if we evaluated leadership of churches, cities and nations through this paradigm of shepherding?

From his first breath and newborn cries, Shepherd-King Jesus disrupts and disturbs corrupt systems of power and individuals who act within these systems. This was just the beginning of the sacred and powerful disruption Jesus was bringing into a world that was weary of dehumanizing systems of power. Could we let His newborn cries and arrival disrupt the places in our hearts that need renewal, and reframe our prayers for the nation and the world?

Prayer:
Oh Good Shepherd-King Jesus, please disrupt us with your upside-down way of ruling your people. Disrupt not only our hearts, but current systems of power that work against your ways and purposes. We offer ourselves as vessels of your Shepherd-King ways. Amen.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 16 Scott Dahlke

Herod Called the Magi Secretly
Matthew 2:7

Who of us has not at one time asked God to give us a clear sign for direction in our life? In Matthew 2:7 we see just that, a sign coming as a new "star" lighting up the night sky. A sign significant enough to cause Magi to leave the comforts of their home and embark on a great journey to find the one who was to be the Savior of the world.

What is most intriguing to me about this sign though, is the timing... appearing brilliantly at the coming of Jesus' birth.

There are a few things we know about the light emanating from stars. We know that light travels through space at 671 million miles/hr, that the light from the nearest star to Earth takes about 4.2 years to get to us, and that the light from the farthest known star from us has taken possibly billions of years to reach its destination.

For the light of a star to suddenly appear in the night sky would infer that the light had to travel a great period of time from that star before it finally showed up for the Magi to see it. The timing was perfect; awe-inspiringly perfect. God had a plan from the beginning of time, to create me and you. He knew by giving us free will we would reject Him through sin, and yet he made us anyway. The events of the sign of the star were intentionally set in motion possibly many thousands of years before humanity even existed. How amazing is our God that nothing can separate us from His love. His plans never fail, and what comfort it is to know that each of us is a part of His plan. We are not worthy of His concern, and yet Jesus came willingly and lovingly to complete the process of creating each of us, and setting us apart to be with Him forever through redemption for our sins on the cross.

No one knows for sure what the "star" truly was; a lingering comet, a conjunction of planets, a phenomenon born of a miracle? Personally, I'd like to think of it as having been a perfectly timed Supernova – a celestial fireworks display fit to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Is there some area of your life, where you need to trust in God's perfect timing?

DECEMBER 17 Jon Mahlstedt

Overjoyed
Matthew 2:9-11

"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."

"Overjoyed."
That's a word we don't hear much these days. When was the last time someone told you they were overjoyed?

The psalmist writes in Psalm 16:11, *"You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy."*

"Fullness of joy."
In the busyness of life, it's so easy to lose awareness of the presence of God and His fullness of joy and settle instead for fullness of stress. Joy becomes an emotion we long for and hope we'll find on the next vacation or during a long weekend. It can feel as elusive as finding the perfect gift for the person in your family who already has everything.

At Christmastime, ironically, one of the busiest times of the year for many of us, we are reminded that Christ came to earth to show us that God is with us and to invite us into an abundant life, a life marked by fullness of joy.

Joy begins to bubble up when we realize that we are deeply connected to our Heavenly Father. We have nothing to prove and nothing to earn. We simply have an invitation to say "yes" to abiding with Him.

Trials will come, and we will experience seasons of lament and sadness. But beneath those changing circumstances, we can discover a deep joy and a peace that passes understanding as we learn to live each day in the presence of God.

I heard it once said, "Joy is the engine of the universe." What would it look like to slow down and look for moments to be overjoyed this Christmas season? What if you became more aware of the Father's presence, Immanuel, God with us, and, from that place, began to notice joy and delight in your everyday life?

Maybe it's the laughter of a child, the aroma of coffee in the morning, or a walk in nature.

What would it look like to live with such joy that others notice something different about your life and wonder where it comes from?

Today, take some time to contemplate this simple but extraordinary truth: **God is with you.**

God Sent His Son
Galatians 4:4-5

"In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1, NLT). From the very beginning, Jesus was there. Yet when the right time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, to dwell among us. Think about that for a moment. The Creator of heaven and earth willingly entered His own creation, fully God and fully man. He experienced hunger, exhaustion, temptation, and pain. The One who existed before time stepped into time, experiencing the very humanity He created. God didn't simply observe our struggles from a distance. He came to dwell among us.

But why? Galatians 4:4–5 tells us that God sent His Son, born under the law, to purchase freedom for those who were slaves to the law. Humanity could never earn its way back to God through perfect obedience. Sin had separated us from Him, and no amount of good works could restore what was broken. Yet Jesus came to accomplish what we could not. He lived in perfect obedience to the Father and willingly gave His life to redeem us. But here's what amazes me: Jesus didn't come simply to set us free from something. He came to bring us into something: the family of God. Through Christ, we are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father.

As we celebrate Advent, consider the incredible love of a God who would willingly enter our broken world, experience the hardships of humanity, and give Himself so that we could be called His children. We often think of Christmas as the story of a baby born in a manger, but it's also the beginning of the fulfillment of God's plan to redeem and adopt us into His family. The God who created us came to rescue us, not because we had earned His love, but because of His great love for us. Jesus became one of us so that, through Him, we could become children of God. What an incredible gift, and what a wonderful Savior we celebrate this Advent season.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 19 Nicole Smith

To Us a Child Is Born
Isaiah 9:6

If you have ever been in a room that is pitch black, you know how intense it is when light first enters. Your eyes can hardly take it in, but over time you begin to see more clearly.

The people of Israel had been living in that kind of darkness: misery and uncertainty brought on by their own idolatry, unfaithfulness, and injustice toward their poor and marginalized. God allowed it, but they had made it. And in the midst of that darkness, the prophet Isaiah speaks of a different future, one where people who walked in darkness have seen a great light *(verse 2)*.

That light is a child. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given." Not only will this child be born, but he will be given. It is easy to overlook that small word and rush ahead to the titles, but in it we see the depth of God's love, for Isaiah's original audience and for us. This hope would not arrive immediately. God's people would have to endure the darkness, yet Isaiah offers a sign of hope to a weary nation: a ruler from David's line, with the government resting on his shoulders.

And notice what this child is called. To a people in uncertainty, he is Wonderful Counselor. To a people who had exhausted their own strength, he is Mighty God. To a people who felt abandoned, he is Everlasting Father, a Father who does not leave. And to a people divided and weary of conflict, he is Prince of Peace. Every name answers a kind of darkness.

As 21st-century Christians, we live in the "now and not yet." We did not have to wait the hundreds of years Israel did to see this prophecy fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, but we still look ahead to the peace that has yet to come in full.

Many of us still find ourselves in rooms that feel pitch black: a diagnosis, a broken relationship, a world that seems more divided every day. But the light has already come. Christ has entered the darkness, and he does not leave. Our eyes are still adjusting, and we do not yet see everything clearly, but we are no longer groping in the dark. This child, this Christ, is the light that dispels all darkness, and he is bringing us home to a day when we will see everything clearly.

Prayer:
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace: in a world that often feels dark, may we remember your promise and faithfulness as we fix our eyes on you, the light of the world. Amen.

DECEMBER 20 Vikie VanDerLinden

Escape to Egypt
Matthew 2:13-18

In the quiet haze of early motherhood, life often feels like a wild, uncharted expedition. I remember those middle-of-the-night moments – holding my helpless baby boy, Clayton, in the dark, overwhelmed by a fierce, protective love and wondering how to shield this fragile new life from a harsh and unpredictable world.

Matthew 2 shows us that the very first chapter of Jesus' earthly story was an emergency escape into the night. Threatened by a ruthless king Herod, Mary and Joseph fled into the unknown wilderness of Egypt. I can't even imagine what that must have been like. Yet right beside this terrifying flight stands the reality that God is, and continues, to walk alongside us giving us wisdom, comfort and peace.

Jesus did not enter our world from a safe, comfortable distance. He stepped straight into our mess, our fear, and our vulnerability. As mothers, we often fight desperately to control every variable to keep our children safe. But the greatest adventure of faith is discovering that God is already there with us in the challenging places. He doesn't just watch over our families; He walks the dusty roads right beside us. In what area of your life or parenting are you currently being called to trust God in the midst of the unknown? Stepping forward in faith means letting go of the need to control the outcome and choosing instead to rest in His unfailing care.

Prayer:
Lord, when the road ahead feels uncertain, quiet my heart and strengthen my faith. Help me to surrender my worries and fears and trust that you are faithfully guiding me every step of the way. Amen.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 21 Mike Bellanti

Out of Egypt I Called My Son
Hosea 11:1

Hosea 11:1 is a passage of Scripture that Matthew quotes in chapter two in reference to Jesus. Originally, Hosea 11:1 is centered on Israel and God's redemptive work as he delivers them from slavery in Egypt. Matthew uses this text to point to Jesus because Jesus becomes the embodiment of Israel. Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the Old Testament Law, but to fulfill it.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise God made to Israel that he would send a Savior, a Messiah. But Jesus also becomes a grand invitation to the Gentiles and, ultimately, the Redeemer of the whole world. Throughout Scripture, God is revealed as one who keeps his promises, though he often fulfills them in unexpected ways.

Jesus is God's fulfillment of his promise to us today. The Bible never promises that life will be easy or without challenges. It does, however, promise the presence of God. **God is with us.** That is at the heart of the Advent story.

In Jesus, we encounter a God who knows what it is like to live as a human—to experience the joys and sufferings of life in a body. In this season of Advent, let us live with grateful hearts, remembering that our God is a God who keeps his promises.

Notes/Reflection:

DECEMBER 22 Nicole Smith

Return to Nazareth
Matthew 2:19-23

From the beginning, the people of God have been on the move. Adam and Eve were banished from Eden, Abraham left home for an unknown land, Moses led Israel through the wilderness, and the exiles were carried off to Babylon. Migration has played a large role in God's story of redemption, and in each story, we see God's faithfulness on full display!

The Christmas story is no different. Mary travels to visit Elizabeth. Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem for the census. After Jesus' birth they flee to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous rage over his threatened power. In this short passage from Matthew, the family learns they can safely return to their land, though the circumstances are far from what they would have hoped for.

I can only imagine how Mary and Joseph felt, returning to a land where every child their son's age had been murdered. Jesus was the only one spared. I wonder how often, during their stay in Egypt, they asked whether it would ever be safe to go home. Then the Lord gives Joseph another dream: Herod is dead, and they can return. What relief! But when Joseph learns that Herod's son Archelaus, said to be just as violent, is now in charge, he becomes afraid. Once again, God speaks in a dream and leads the family safely to Nazareth.

Nazareth was not a respected town. Neither Joseph nor Mary had roots there, and they had no support system. They were utterly dependent on God alone. I imagine there was tension, confusion, frustration, and sadness throughout the long journey, yet Joseph keeps stepping out in obedience, over and over again.

I also imagine there was hope. One of the greatest mysteries of God I've ever experienced is the peace that comes from true surrender. It's often in those moments of deepest dependence that lead to "the peace of God that surpasses understanding" (Phil. 4:7). What a beautiful reminder that the God of Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Joseph is the same God leading us today; He is trustworthy and faithful!

While you may not be physically migrating, if this Advent you feel unsure of where God has you or where He is leading you, be encouraged: the story is not over. God is often doing a great work in the most trying times of our lives. May this season be one of surrender as we wait with hopeful anticipation for the story of our lives to continue to unfold.

Prayer:
Lord, may I trust you fully in every season of my life, knowing that no circumstance can separate me from your love. Amen.


You are invited to celebrate
CHRISTMAS at NORTHBROOK
1 SANCTUARY
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23 at 3:00 & 4:30PM
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24 at 9:00 & 10:30AM,
12:30, 2:30 & 4:30PM
2 CHAPEL - live acoustic music
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24 at 2:30 & 4:30pm
with live-streamed message
3 ONLINE
ALL SERVICES live-streamed
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