

ADVENT REFLECTION GUIDE

LAKELIGHT INSTITUTE



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About the Artwork
The Census at Bethlehem by Pieter Bruegel the Elder c. 1566

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Introduction

Advent is a time to pray and ponder the arrival of Christ Jesus. We celebrate that God came to dwell with us; the promised king is born; eternity steps into time. God the Son enters the very world he created by the power of his word–Jesus takes on flesh in the very world he is holding together. These truths invite us to marvel that our Messiah left heaven to condescend and make a way for us to find peace with God.

The Advent season is an invitation for us to come and see - true power, true humility, and true love.

The hope and longings of the past for a ruler to save God's people is finally fulfilled in Mary and Joseph's child, whose name shall be called Jesus. Still, the season of Advent is also characterized by future hope. We await another arrival. This season of looking back also calls us to look ahead to the second coming of Christ - not as a child, but as the final ruler of history. Jesus promises to return to judge the living and the dead.

Christ's past and future arrival call us to sing. We can't help but sing with the angels, "HARK! The Herald Angels sing - Glory to the new-born King! Peace on Earth, and Mercy mild, God and Sinners reconcil'd."

When Jesus was on earth, he made the Father known to us. The apostle John records Jesus' interaction with Phillip, which concludes with Jesus explaining, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.… I am in the Father, and the Father is in me. The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work."



This reflection guide seeks to make the Father known through the Son. Each day includes a Scripture reading accompanied by a short meditation and a prayer. There are six Scripture readings and you will return to the same passages of Scripture each day of the week along with a guided time of prayer each Saturday.

Sunday | **Knowing God**

Monday | **Calling**

Tuesday | **Waiting**

Wednesday | **A Child is Born**

Thursday | **All Things New**

Friday | **Shepherd**

Saturday | **Pray and Ponder**

The daily prayers are short - intended to jump start your personal prayer. They reflect a truth about God and describe our need for forgiveness. Daily prayers also include small moments of thanksgiving intended to spark larger segments of thanksgiving to God.

"Come, Thou long expected Jesus. Born to set Thy people free. From our fears and sins release us. Let us find our rest in Thee"





WEEK 1



Knowing God

HEBREWS 1:1–12

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" ? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son" ? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire." But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy." He also says, "In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

GOD'S TIMETABLE

We celebrate a baby boy! Israel waited for centuries for a deliverer and, 'in these last days' (v. 2), God spoke through his Son, starting in Bethlehem. We are on God's timetable. We often want God to be on our timetable, but his ways are higher than our ways. As we enter the Advent season, reflect on Hebrews 1:1-12 and ask God to meet you today, showing you who Jesus is, and aligning your life with his all-wise timing.

PRAYER

God, we confess we want you to conform to our calendar and our clock. We don't want to wait or live without control. Forgive us. Allow our hearts to believe that your ways are above our ways and your thoughts above our thoughts. May we hold loosely to our plans and slow down to read your Scriptures. Amen

Calling

MATTHEW 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about : His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

IMPOSSIBLE

Mary was asked to do the impossible. We sing and celebrate the virgin expecting a child – it can become so familiar during this season that we don't feel the impossibility. In Mary's life, God acted in this miraculous way outside the natural means of conception. Mary received a unique calling as a teenage girl and the Holy Spirit allowed Mary to conceive of a son. She was called to be the Messiah's mother. It was a calling God had spoken through the prophet Isaiah (7:14) hundreds of years earlier. Isaiah said the impossible would come to pass – and it did. Advent allows a time of waiting to see that nothing is impossible with God.

PRAYER

Lord, you alone give life. Give us fresh eyes to see the miraculous nature of your Son coming to earth to be with us. May Mary's obedience inspire us to live by faith and receive whatever calling you have in our life. Amen

Waiting

PSALM 40:1-4

I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.

He lifted me out of the slimy pit; out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.

ACTIVE WAITING

Psalm 40 begins with an affirmation that God met the writer as they cried out and waited. Advent is all about waiting. Nobody likes to wait but do you think about waiting as part of the way God is forming you? Mark Vroegep suggests waiting is an active step, not a passive one. He explains, "Waiting on God is living on what I know to be true about God when I don't know what is true about my life." Actively fill in the gaps of knowledge and the gaps of time in your life with true affirmations of who God is. Cry out. Be honest. Wait. The goal is not to get an answer or get beyond the circumstance, but to be with God in the waiting.

PRAYER

God, we confess we want you to conform to our calendar and our clock. We don't want to wait or live without control. Forgive us. Allow our hearts to believe that your ways are above our ways and your thoughts above our thoughts. May we hold loosely to our plans and slow down to read your Scriptures. Amen

A Child is Born

ISAIAH 9:6–9

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

WONDERFUL COUNSELOR

Isaiah gives four 'dual names' that represent God's character and roles: Wonderful Couselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah is giving hope to his reader in hopeless times of war. It is easy for us to read the first name in the list, Wonderful Counselor, more like a strong review for a therapy clinic. Five stars. However, this ancient language is not intended to conjure up images of a couch and an exploration into your inner life. Instead, it's a recognition that God shares wisdom with us in general (Prov 2:6) and specifically when we ask in faith (James 1:5). In this way, God counsels us toward godly decision-making. Jesus, the very wisdom of God made flesh, is the advisor we need in every trial. You will have four weeks to read this passage in Isaiah, so spend time slowly making observations.

PRAYER

God, thank you for the hope we find in knowing you by your names. Reassure us when we doubt. Send us light when we live in darkness. Direct us in our confusion. Heal us in our pain. You are a counselor like no other - thank you for sending the Holy Spirit to be our advocate and counsel. Give us ears to hear as He shines the light on Jesus Christ. Amen

All Things New

REVELATION 21:1-5

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' [b] or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

LOOK!

One of the distinctives of the season is the retelling of God's breaking into our world. Revelation 21 records a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them." What does it mean that God would dwell with us? Eugene Peterson paraphrases John 1:14, "The Word (Jesus) became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes." Allow yourself to slowly consider God moving into the neighborhood. Look! Behold, God dwells with us.

PRAYER

Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for coming to us. Thank you for dwelling with us instead of casting us off as we deserve. One day, all the kings of the earth will see your glory. Thank you for this vision of a beautiful new heaven and new earth - allow us to catch a glimpse of this so that the sufferings we know in this world will feel light and momentary in light of the coming glory. Amen

Shepherd

MICAH 5:1-4

Marshal your troops now, city of troops, for a siege is laid against us.
They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son,
and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

BETHLEHEM

God is not predictable. His salvation story doesn't align with expectations. When we consider what place God will send the ultimate hero of the story, it wasn't a thriving metropolis or academic tower of a town. Bethlehem is a small among the clans of Judah. The Message translates this phrase as, "the runt of the litter." Small and unexpected proves to be a theme in the Bible. Abraham is not expected to have a child. Jacob is born after Esau. Israel is small among the nations. David is the last of his brothers. The disciples weren't taking the AP classes, possessing neither religious nor political clout. In God's strange world, the poor and the meek are called "blessed." That is why two thousand years later we still sing, "Oh, come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant - Oh, come ye - oh, come ye to Bethlehem" – the runt of the litter.

PRAYER

Lord, it is easy to see the world entirely from our human perspective. We assume you will employ the gifted and strong. We can write off people and even parts of our own story that we think are too fragile or weak for you. Forgive us. We read that our weakness is your strength – give us faith to believe that our inadequacies can be the ideal conditions for you to work. Amen

Saturday Reflection

PRAY & PONDER

We will spend Saturdays in prayer and pondering. Luke 2:19 gives us a small insight into Mary's mind. We read, "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." We will follow Mary's example each Saturday.

THANKS

Take a moment to thank God for his mercy that is new today.

THINK

Think back on your week and thank God for his presence with you, his goodness to you, and the gift of Jesus.

CONFESS

Take a moment to confess your sins.

READ, CATCH UP, PRAY

Read back through the reflections of Week 1. Catch up on a day you were not able to spend in reflection and/or write out a prayer to God based on this week's Scripture passages.



WEEK 2



Knowing God

HEBREWS 1:1–12

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" ? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son" ? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire." But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy." He also says, "In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH JESUS

The one we celebrate in a manger made the universe (vs 3). When you look out the window, walk the block or drive down the street, Jesus is sustaining all things – seen and unseen. For our second time reading Hebrews 1:1-12, consider what it means that God speaks. Consider that you are reading God's "word." His definitive speech to us is a rescue story, where His son Jesus becomes a man, fulfills His Father's will, and makes purification for our sins. May his voice, that Word, drown out all the other noise in your life today.

PRAYER

Our father in heaven, blessed be your name. Thank you for speaking to us in your Son. Forgive us for not listening. Forgive us for not even trying to listen. Help us to hear your word and receive the love and wisdom you give in your word. Amen

Calling

MATTHEW 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about : His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

IMPOSSIBLE

The first time we looked at Matthew 1, we saw Mary was asked to do the impossible. Joseph was not asked to do the impossible, but was asked to believe his fiancé and trust what God spoke to him in a dream. Joseph received a unique calling to serve as the father of Jesus. He fades from the story, which might be uniquely encouraging to those of us who feel like our calling is more in the background. Joseph's calling started with a dilemma–and again–this might be encouraging to you. It was not easy and he knew he would be misunderstood. Matthew tells us, "Joseph got up from sleeping, and did as the Lord's angel commanded him." Many times, we're called to confront difficult situations and occasionally it might require us being in the background. God's calling on each person is unique, but it always entails trust and obedience.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you that while no earthly father lives up to the calling, you care for all of us. Thank you for meeting our needs. Help us to follow where you lead and trust that you will keep your promises - especially when our circumstances appear like you are distant or have forgotten us. Amen

Waiting

PSALM 40:1-4

I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.

He lifted me out of the slimy pit; out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.

WAITING AND WAITING AND WAITING

Last week we saw Psalm 40 opens with good news that God turns his face to the one who waits. The Hebrew of verse one can be hard to express in English so Eugene Peterson says, "I waited and waited and waited for GOD. At last he looked, finally he listened." The reason I love this rendering is because he captures a common human experience. We wait - then wait - then wait some more. The personal name, Yahweh, is employed in verse one. This is the God who met Moses, who split the Sea, who fed with daily manna, who protected and judged. God is not distant and without a history – He is personal and known and has a track record. The Psalmist cries out to this God whose character is known. He describes his experience as 'at last' and 'finally' hearing a response from all his cries to Yahweh. The response lifted him from despair and gave him a new song. You might be on round one of waiting - don't give up. Cry out. God turns his face while we wait.

PRAYER

God, we confess there are days and seasons it seems like you don't hear us. Our prayers feel empty. Progress in our spiritual lives is going slower than we expected–our struggles are not changing. Give us courage to keep praying. Give us faith to wait until 'at last' you look our way. As we wait, send our minds to the long story of your loving actions to your people and renew our hearts as we chronicle your faithfulness. Amen

A Child is Born

ISAIAH 9:6–9

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

MIGHTY GOD

It feels like a shaky ground to talk about Jesus of Nazareth as the mighty God. Nazareth has all the characteristics of a real small town, with gossip and sickness, restaurants and water stations. The child that is born can come from Nazareth, but can he also be Mighty God? Isn't God wholly other? Isn't he outside of time and space - not wrapped in flesh nor able to be spotted at the local diner around 5pm? Christ's incarnation is a mystery. Charles Wesley captured this in song, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity. Pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel." You don't have to fully understand a mystery before you worship. Awe and wonder are enough. Let your heart sing of our Mighty God.

PRAYER

Thank you, heavenly father, that the child foretold by Isaiah is not only Wonderful Counselor, but Mighty God. We pray that your names would come alive in our hearts and that we might live in light of your might. Thank you that you neither slumber nor sleep - that you are not intimidated by any enemy. We rest this day in your might over and above all power and authority. Amen

All Things New

REVELATION 21:1-5

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

TWO WORLDS

We can live in the constant reality of God's grace – He is always with us and his goodness and mercy are following us. As the hymn describes, "Amazing love, how can it be!" That's one world. We also live in regular suffering and futility, even despair. The Bible gives us realistic expectations of both worlds, the one to come, and the one that is. God is gracious to give us such realistic expectations. We don't just have tears and darkness. We have a hope of tears wiped away. We don't just experience dark nights of the soul. We know that God will bring a kingdom of everlasting light. Indeed, he is making all things new and he will complete this project in a new heaven and new earth. We live in two worlds even as we wait on a new one.

PRAYER

O wise God, grant us grace to live in two worlds at the same time. Forgive us for not seeing your goodness or care in the dark days. Forgive us for not loving our neighbors when they are suffering and in tears. We pray that your will, not ours, will be done. May we love others as you have loved us by pointing them to the day when all tears will be wiped away. Amen

Shepherd

MICAH 5:1-4

Marshal your troops now, city of troops, for a siege is laid against us.
They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son,
and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

SHEPHERD HIS FLOCK

Micah writes that the one who is coming will stand and shepherd his flock and they will live securely. It is easy to believe that if we just have enough faith, we will be secure. The New Testament says that God is the vine and we are the branches. You might ask, will God hold on to us if (and when) we lack faith? Andrew Murray explains, "Abiding is nothing but the acceptance of my position, the consent to be kept there, the surrender of faith to the strong Vine still to hold the feeble branch." The strength of the Lord (vine), not our strength, is what holds us close to God.

PRAYER

Lord, remind me you are holding me – when I am weary and faint. I don't have to be my own shepherd. I have a strong one who knows what I need better than I do. Help me to accept my position as a sheep who is cared for. Help me to find my security in what you have done for me in Jesus. Amen

Saturday Reflection

PRAY & PONDER

We will spend Saturdays in prayer and pondering. Luke 2:19 gives us a small insight into Mary's mind. We read, "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." We will follow Mary's example each Saturday.

THANKS

Take a moment to thank God for his mercy that is new today.

THINK

Think back on your week and thank God for his presence with you, his goodness to you, and the gift of Jesus.

CONFESS

Take a moment to confess your sins.

READ, CATCH UP, PRAY

Read back through the reflections of Week 2 . Catch up on a day you were not able to spend in reflection and/or write out a prayer to God based on this week's Scripture passages.



WEEK 3



Knowing God

HEBREWS 1:1–12

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" ? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son" ? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire." But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy." He also says, "In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

A NEVER-ENDING THRONE

"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever." (v. 8). This is our third time through the Hebrews 1:1-12 and you will likely see several new insights as you read it today. Draw your attention to the never-ending nature of God's rule. All created things live for a season. Even the earth, "the works of God's hands," (v. 10) will perish. God will remain. Sometimes, you need to zoom out as far as your imagination will allow – even beyond time. Reflecting on Jesus as king forever allows us to see our failures and celebrations in a better light. Suffering and injustice are temporary. They will wear out like clothing (vs 11). Beyond them lies a God from everlasting to everlasting, who sent His Son to draw us into a glory far exceeding all that we experience on earth.

PRAYER

We pray with the Psalmist, God, you are my God - earnestly I seek you. Thank you that when we seek you, you are not far. You do not wear out or fade away. We praise you that you are eternal and your throne knows no end. Amen

Calling

MATTHEW 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about : His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

THE ANGEL

Two brief thoughts today. One of the ways Westerners misread Christmas is by missing the elements of mystery. Modern materialism banishes the world of the unseen. We skip the dreams, skip the angels. Since we don't really have a good scientific bucket to place these elements of the narrative, we focus on other things. Yet, mystery pervades the birth narrative of Jesus. Second, one of the mysteries in this passage is that God's messenger speaks to Joseph (in a dream) in his distress. We learn the same in Luke 2, when the angel Gabriel visits Mary in her lowly state. Remember that God is often heard by those in lowly places, those in distress. If that is you or someone you know, God is near.

PRAYER

Father, forgive me for seeing those on the top of society as being on top of life. True life, eternal life, is knowing you - not having power or wealth. Reorient my desires to match what you love. Thank you for speaking to us in difficulty and distress. Give us ears to hear. Amen

Waiting

PSALM 40:1-4

I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.

He lifted me out of the slimy pit; out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.

TRUST

Advent invites us to wait on the arrival of Jesus. The first two weeks in Psalm 40 focused on waiting (v 1). Today, let's look at the invitation to trust in the Lord. The psalmist assumes we will trust in something: either God who will give us a firm place to stand or anything else which will put us on shifting sand. As you look into today's challenges and anxieties, who or what is the basis of your security? One of the alternatives is your own pride – your gifts, powers, resources, and strength, Allow Psalm 40 to point you away from self-dependent pride – even if it promises safety. Allow Psalm 40 to point you away from false gods – even if they can deliver pleasure or security in a moment. Instead, fear and trust in God.

PRAYER

God, you invite us to trust in you with all of our heart and lean not on our own understanding. You tell us to acknowledge you in all of our ways and you will direct our paths. Thank you that we can rely on you. Guard us from turning to the left or right and ignoring your path that leads to life. Amen

A Child is Born

ISAIAH 9:6–9

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

EVERLASTING FATHER

A child is born and we get another name he will be called, Everlasting Father. Jesus does not have an expiration date. You cannot out-live God. As we read, "He is, and He was, and He is to come." Unlike God, we have a beginning. But like God, we don't have an end. C.S. Lewis reminds us that "Christianity asserts that every individual human being is going to live for ever, and this must be either true or false." He goes on to say, "Now there are a good many things which would not be worth bothering about if I were going to live only seventy years, but which I had better bother about very seriously if I am going to live forever." Nations and states will come and go. We will live forever. When you consider who God is today, slowly read back through Isaiah 9:6-9.

PRAYER

Everlasting Father, you condescended to us in the form of a child. This is hard to understand and even harder to fathom why you would make yourself low. We praise you that while you are everlasting, you became like us. We want to live today like we will live forever only because we know you are the Everlasting Father who we will be with forever. Prompt our hearts to pray for those who do not know your everlasting love and help us to point them to Jesus. Amen

All Things New

REVELATION 21:1-5

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

TWO WORLDS

Fleming Rutledge says the adventus glorificamus (Christ's coming in glory) is the chief focus of Advent throughout church history. Why would she point us back to this latin phrase? Because we are still waiting for God to finally set all things right. Abraham waited. David waited. Mary waited. Peter waited. Early church leaders waited on God to make all things new. We continue to wait for Christ's coming in glory. Even now, we pray come Lord Jesus! We do not wait like the Old Testament prophets did, for a messiah yet be known. Rather, we wait for that messiah to return in all his glory. As you consider the return of Christ, remember the words of the Nicene Creed, "(Christ) will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end."

PRAYER

Our savior and our king, meet us this hour. It is easy to live with shame and grief over past sins even though we know you forgive us through Christ. We wait for his return and pray, 'come Lord Jesus.' We declare glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Shepherd

MICAH 5:1-4

Marshal your troops now, city of troops, for a siege is laid against us.
They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son,
and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

RULER OVER ISRAEL

Micah depicts a child from Bethlehem who will rule Israel. We want captive Israel to be freed by the coming Emanuel. We also want our rulers to have power and glory. Yet we sing, "Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth." Jesus becomes the kind of ruler who trades the strength, majesty, and security (v. 4) of heaven for the frailty, vulgarity, and brokenness of earth. He takes the ultimate frailty - death on a cross - to achieve our second birth. Because of His trade, we leave the vulgarity and brokenness of sin for the majesty and security under God's ultimate reign.

PRAYER

I confess it can be easier to look to the state or the business community to find a secure living. While I know you used both of these institutions in your plan to care and provide for your people, help me not to miss your divine hand in the normal activities of life. Lord, you are the good and ultimate ruler. I submit my will and my way to you again today. Amen

Saturday Reflection

PRAY & PONDER

We will spend Saturdays in prayer and pondering. Luke 2:19 gives us a small insight into Mary's mind. We read, "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." We will follow Mary's example each Saturday.

THANKS

Take a moment to thank God for his mercy that is new today.

THINK

Think back on your week and thank God for his presence with you, his goodness to you, and the gift of Jesus.

CONFESS

Take a moment to confess your sins.

READ, CATCH UP, PRAY

Read back through the reflections of Week 3. Catch up on a day you were not able to spend in reflection and/or write out a prayer to God based on this week's Scripture passages.



WEEK 4



Knowing God

HEBREWS 1:1–12

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" ? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son" ? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire." But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy." He also says, "In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

FIXATED ON JESUS

Tim Chester describes the opening verses of Hebrews like an overture to a musical. The preview contains melodies and tunes repeated later in the performance. When Hebrews chapter twelve says,"to fix your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of faith" – it is returning to the familiar melody of Hebrews 1 where God spoke through his Son, who He has appointed heir of all things and made all things. Fix your eyes on Jesus this final week of Advent. The familiar songs are coming. The candle-lighting will be here soon. Your schedule might be full and it will be easy to fix your eyes on a long to-do list. Remember to stay fixated on the gift of Jesus in the middle of your tasks and events leading up to Christmas. If time allows, try reading all of Hebrews this week to hear the full song and repeated melodies alluded to in Hebrews 1.

PRAYER

Forgive us for fixing our eyes on alternative sources of joy. We confess we are easily distracted and allured by temporary things. We want to be like Jesus so help us to fix our eyes on Jesus in the middle of our busy or boring days leading up to Christmas. Amen

Calling

MATTHEW 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about : His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

MARY AND JOSEPH

We read at the end of this section in Matthew that Joseph marries Mary. In addition to the call to be the mother and father of Jesus, they have a new calling, husband and wife. In the following chapters, we will see Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt for safety, talk with wise men who worshipped their infant, lose track of their son on a long walk to worship in Jerusalem, and then watch him enter a public ministry of preaching and healing. Marriage and parenting are difficult as such, but imagine raising God's Son. God sent Jesus into the world to be raised by his father (last mentioned working alongside Jesus on a jobsite) and his mother (last seen weeping at his crucifixion then praying after his ascension). One of the quiet callings in this story is God's work through the family. We ask for help to be faithful in whatever family situation you have called us to during this season.

PRAYER

O Lord, you and you alone are to be worshipped. You are always faithful and true to your word. We confess it can be hard to be thankful for our families, especially during all the Christmas activities. We confess it can be hard to honor our parents or even love our children. Renew our calling and compassion to extend grace and forgiveness to those in our family. Amen

Waiting

PSALM 40:1-4

I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.

He lifted me out of the slimy pit; out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.

CONFRONTS OUR CONTROL

As we have reflected on Psalm 40, we considered Mark Vroegep's words, "Waiting on God is living on what I know to be true about God when I don't know what is true about my life." He adds that waiting confronts our desire to control outcomes, timing, and circumstances. Waiting exposes our limits – demonstrates we can't rush the slow work of God. Try to pick a tomato early; try to cut the delivery time of a child in half. You have to wait. You can't control it. Your limits are gifts, if you will embrace your role and trust God to be God. The way out of the slimy pit and the way to find a new song is not through seizing control, but through trusting God's timing.

PRAYER

We recognize that our lives don't always make sense. We ask for grace to live on what we know to be true about you, O God, even as we don't know what is true about our own lives. During this Christmas season, may our limits be reminders that you are God and we are not - that you are in control so we don't have to act like we are. Fill our hearts with your peace. Amen

A Child is Born

ISAIAH 9:6–9

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

PRINCE OF PEACE

The prophet Isaiah loads these memorable names of God back to back. When you consider these different dimensions of God so closely together, it bursts with meaning. God is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and now we consider what it means that he is Prince of Peace. So much of the language has to do with the government. The ruler creates peace in the land. His reign is righteous. People living under this ruler know justice will not be escaped, lies won't win, evil will not get the last word. When Jesus was delivered in Bethlehem, the prince of peace went largely unrecognized, but his kingdom had arrived. His rule was inaugurated and we pray daily that the peace of Christ would characterize our hearts in a way that our small kingdoms (work and home and neighborhood) would be known for doing what is right and fair, resulting in peace for others.

PRAYER

God, when we read the news or scroll through our media, we see anything but peace and righteousness. It can even feel like there is no one running the world. We can get anxious. Meet us in our doubt and lack of understanding. May the peace with God that Christ accomplished on the cross form us into the kind of people filled with peace. Amen

All Things New

REVELATION 21:1-5

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

TRUSTWORTHY AND TRUE

"Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true" (v. 5). This is our fourth time through Revelation 21, and today is Christmas Eve. For centuries God's people held on to promises that seemed slow in coming. Then, in a small town, God kept His word, and a baby was laid in a manger. Bethlehem is proof that God does what He says. In Jesus, the One who says, "I am making everything new," began that work quietly, among ordinary people. If God kept His promise to send a Savior, He will keep His promise of a new heaven and a new earth. Before the celebrations begin, read verse 5 slowly and let it settle your heart.

PRAYER

Faithful God, you have never broken a promise. Thank you for keeping your word in Bethlehem and sending your Son. Forgive us for doubting you when your promises seem slow. As we wait for Christmas morning, help us also wait with hope for the day when you will make all things new and wipe every tear from our eyes. Amen

Christmas Day Reflection

LUKE 2:1–21

*1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the
entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was
governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.*

*4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the
town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to
register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.*

*6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her
firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there
was no guest room available for them.*

*8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their
flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone
around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid.
I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of
David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign
to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

*13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God
and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom
his favor rests." 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds
said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which
the Lord has told us about."*

*16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the
manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told
them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to
them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The
shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and
seen, which were just as they had been told.*

*21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the
name the angel had given him before he was conceived.*

PRAYER

Thank you for Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Thank you for the gifts of this day. Amen


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