ADVENT

HOPE

LOVE

CHRIST MAS

JOY

PEACE

ADVENT CALENDAR

Sunday November 15th – Pass out Advent Guides
Sunday, November 22nd Agape in GC's/Homes
Monday, November 23rd – Start Wk1 Day 1 Reading
Sunday, November 29th – Sermon 1: Hope
Sunday, December 6th – Sermon 2: Love
Sunday, December 13th – Sermon 3: Joy
Sunday, December 20th – Sermon 4: Peace
Thursday, December 24th – Christmas Eve: Jesus
Friday, December 25th – Merry Christmas!
Sunday, December 27th – Epiphany

ourelement.org/advent

ELEMENT
christian church

What was it
in that natal star
pre-eminent in the night-time sky
that stirred the hearts
and imaginations
of those magi from the east
was it colour
brightness
conjunction
or more
a still small voice
whispering
in the darkness of the world
'This is the sign
that will proceed the birth
of he who fulfills the prophets' words.'
That still small voice
which whispers still
to our conscience
and soul
still leads
if we will but follow
to the stable door.
(Author unknown)

WELCOME TO ADVENT

ADVENT INTRODUCTION

This year at Element we are doing something we have never attempted in our few years of existence; we are celebrating a season of the church calendar called **Advent**. Advent is a time of sober reflection that should (and will, in our case) lead to a time of loud joy.

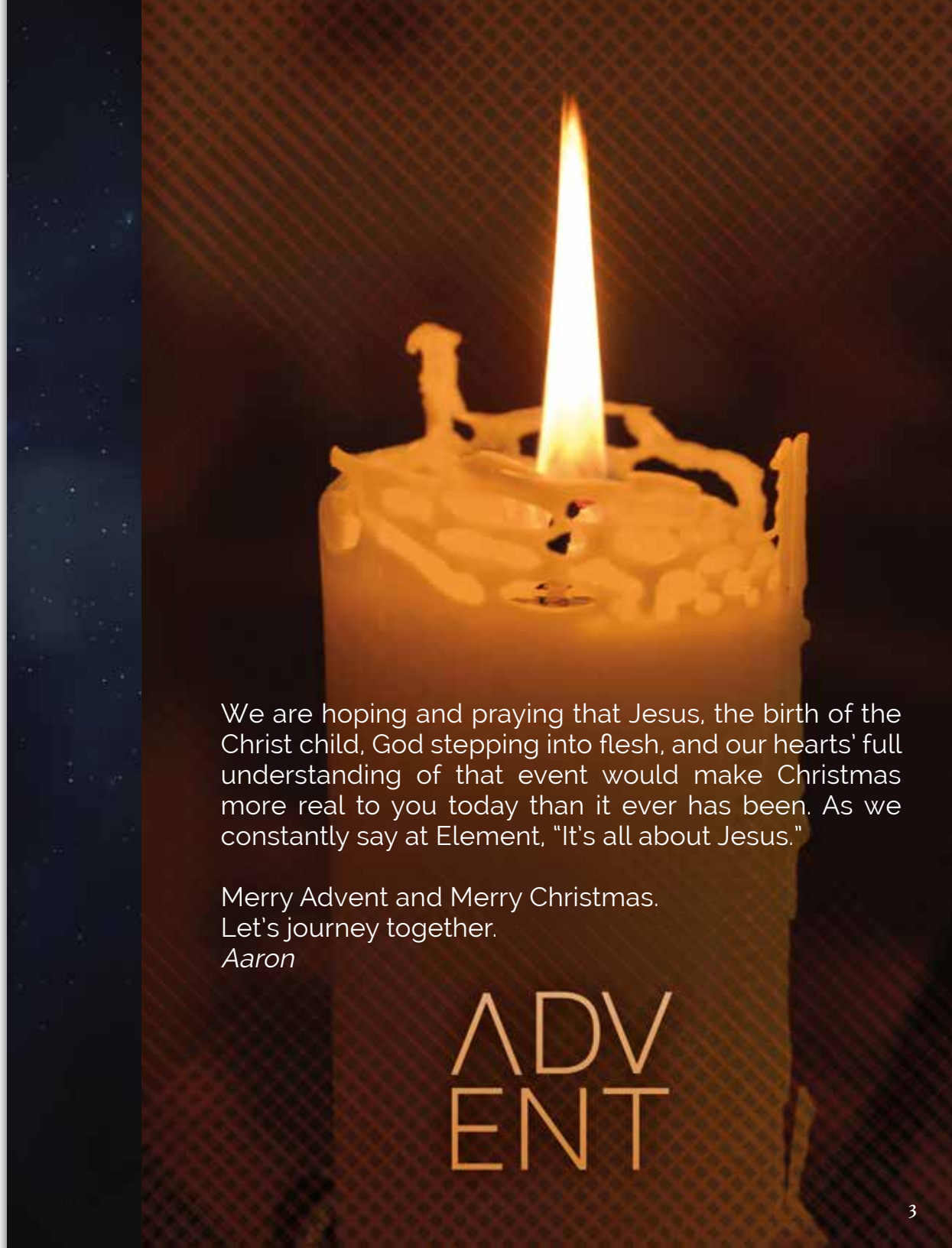
Advent takes place over the four weeks that lead up to Christmas, with each week being a reflection of Christmas (Christ's) fulfillment. Why are we doing Advent this year? I would love to explain.

As a culture, even in churches, we tend to forget what Christmas truly entails. We buy gifts, run to parties, eat too much, possibly drink too much, and when Christmas is over, we feel the presence of Christ less than when we started. This should never happen, as the point of Christmas is Jesus. The word Christmas even starts with "Christ." We *do* Advent for the following reasons:

- We do Advent to glorify God because everything God does is for His own glory and everything we do should be for *His* glory and not our own.
- We do Advent to refocus on the person of Jesus in a season that tries so hard to pull us away from the truth, the truth that rest is found in Him and Him alone. The more Jesus comes to mind during the Advent season, and throughout our lives, the better off we will be.
- We do Advent to bring families together in ways that speak to the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We want Advent to be a time when even people who do not believe in Jesus will see the goodness of God as displayed and remembered by the actions of Jesus' church.
- We do advent because, in the years to come, we want everyone at Element to be on the same page as to what Christmas means. When Element gets all excited about Christmas and someone asks, "Why?" we want you to be able to answer that question in a way that points back to the goodness of Jesus and the joy we have in Him.

What you hold in your hands is the Advent Journey Guide for you and, if applicable, your family to go through. In this guide you will find various sections:

- **F**requently **A**sked **Q**uestions that will hopefully help to make sense of any questions you may have about **Advent**
- A section with word definitions
- Daily Devotionals for you to meditate on scripture each day
- Weekly Family Devotionals that will allow you to spend time with your kids by discussing the ideas about Advent. We want you to share together what *you* are learning and what they are hearing.
- Weekly Gospel Community Discussions that dive deeper into what is happening during this Advent Season. We want our Gospel Communities to be a safe place to discuss joy, fears, hurts, and hopes that have been experienced in the Christmas season. We want the journey that God is taking you through to be one you can take with others.
- A weekly reflection that serves to deepen your understanding of Jesus as our Redeemer
- A Prayer Section that focuses on the ideas of redemption that will help you learn to speak with God during Advent in (hopefully) a new and deeper way
- A section that goes over this year's kickoff event of Agape meals in homes



We are hoping and praying that Jesus, the birth of the Christ child, God stepping into flesh, and our hearts' full understanding of that event would make Christmas more real to you today than it ever has been. As we constantly say at Element, "It's all about Jesus."

Merry Advent and Merry Christmas.
Let's journey together.
Aaron

ADVENT FAQ

What does the word "Advent" mean?

The word "Advent" is from the Latin word "adventus," which means "arrival" or "approach," but with the connotation "to wait."

Why is the Advent season celebrated?

Advent is meant to be a time when we prepare to celebrate and remember Christ's first coming in the Incarnation. Advent is about devout and joyful expectation that looks to both the future and the past. Advent is meant to be a time of hope (because of the first coming), conversion (as we live and proclaim the Gospel), and waiting (for the ultimate second coming of Jesus).

Where and when did Advent originate?

There is evidence of some preparation for the Christmas-Epiphany celebration as early as the mid-4th century (Fourth Canon of the Council of Saragosa in 380AD). At that time in France, the preparation for Christmas began on the Feast of St. Martin (November 11) and lasted through Christmas to Epiphany, which was originally one of the main days to celebrate baptisms by adults.

In the 6th century, many Irish missionaries started to emphasize the last judgment; and then, Advent became a season to humble yourself, and included fasting and prayer.

- 567, the Synod of Tours established a December fast
- 581 the Council of Macon ordered an Advent fast for the laity (church members) from the Feast of St. Martin to Christmas (November 11-December 25). This fast took the name of "St. Martin's Lent."

The current four-week Advent season developed in the 6th century under Pope Gregory the Great and included prayers focused on the Incarnation of Christ.

The Roman liturgy began taking shape in the 11th century; it was codified by the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

When does Advent begin and end?

Advent always begins with evening prayer on the Sunday which falls on or closest to November 30, but never earlier than November 27 or later than December 3. In the newer revised liturgical calendars, the fourth Sunday of Advent must be celebrated, even when it falls on December 24. We will celebrate a fifth week during Christmas Eve that focuses on Christ.

When are the real 12 days of Christmas?

The 12 days of Christmas begin on Christmas Day (December 25) and end on January 5.

If my grandma gets run over by a reindeer, what should I do?

Dial 911 and then animal control. If the reindeer is pulling a sleigh, try to get a license plate number for future reference.

I've seen Advent celebrations and they are full of purple colors, why?

Violet, by tradition, is supposed to be the shade of repentance, the color of kings and royalty, and the color of sorrow and mourning. To differentiate between Advent and Lent, in most traditions the Advent purple is bluer and the Lenten purple is redder. This helps emphasize the fact the seasons are unique and different.

What are Advent wreaths and why do they have four candles?

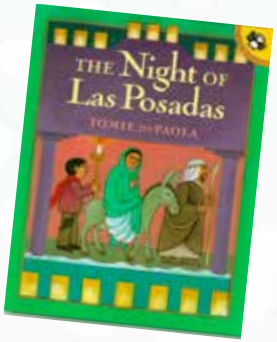
The origins of the Advent wreath can be traced to 16th-century Germany. The custom originated in the home because, at that time, you needed candles to light a room, which became even more necessary during the shorter daykight hours of Advent.

The round wreath is a symbol to remind us of the eternality of God, as it has no beginning and no end. The four candles mark the four weeks of Advent. The candles are usually various shades of violet, all white, or three are violet and one is rose, representing the third week of Advent which is called "Gaudete Sunday." The candles' flames are to remind us that Jesus is the light of the world. The light from the wreath gets brighter with the lighting of each additional candle as we draw closer to Christmas, representing our growing expectation and hope.

You just said Gaudete Sunday...what in the world is that?

"Gaudete" is Latin and simply means "rejoice"; it is used on the third Sunday of Advent. This day is regarded as a day of particular joy with Advent half over and Christmas soon to follow. The term Gaudete is taken from Philippians 4:4-7.

What are "posadas"?



The word posada means "shelter" or "lodging." This is an Advent custom that is popular throughout the Spanish-speaking world. It reenacts Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem and their search for lodging along the way. The ritual lasts for nine days (December 16-24), representing the months of Mary's pregnancy. A group of people travel from house to house on their route, taking the role of pilgrims seeking lodging. Those inside the homes are innkeepers who refuse them. At the last home all are invited in for prayer and refreshments. Pick up a copy of the book, and participate as a family!

What do I do if I see a large man dressed in a red suit in my house after we have all gone to bed on Christmas Eve?

Call the police. If you do not know who he is, let the cops sort it out.

What things do most people get wrong about Christmas?

The Bible doesn't tell us that Mary rode a donkey, that an innkeeper turned away Mary and Joseph (only that there was no room at the inn), that Mary gave birth to Jesus the day she arrived in Bethlehem (only that it happened "while they were there"), that there were three wise men (no number is specified), or that the Magi arrived the day/night of Jesus' birth.

When was Jesus actually born?

December 25th is when we celebrate Christmas because the early church wanted to make Christianity and its most precious holy days (Holy Days) accessible to the most people. Many pagans already celebrated a holiday on December 25th and the church used that day as a way to welcome in many new converts. Originally it wasn't trying to destroy a culture's holiday (as some insist); it was a way to be "missional" to their communities.

We do not know when Jesus was actually born. Clement of Alexandria (an early Church Father) picked November 18. Hippolytus said Jesus was born on a Wednesday. There is an early anonymous document from North Africa written in 243 AD that says Jesus was born on March 28th. Most scholars believe he was born in September due to certain details shared in the Bible (the shepherds kept watch on their flocks not in December but summer and fall, a Roman Census would have been conducted when roads were passable, not during winter).

Who should I buy gifts for?

Giving gifts should be a privilege and not a burden. Gifts should be given out of love and joy. Having said that, you can give anyone on staff at Element cookies.

Was Jesus born in a stable?

Christian History Institute details how Jesus was most likely born in a cave or a shelter built into a hillside. The hills around Bethlehem were dotted with small caves for feeding and boarding livestock.

Was Saint Nicholas real?

Yes, though there is much legend that surrounds him. We did a sermon on Saint Nick a few years ago. You can listen to it here: http://www.ourelement.org/media/messages/sermon/10260-saints-03-saint-nick.

From all accounts, Nicolas was a man who loved Jesus, the truth of the Gospel, and defended it rigorously. In living out his love for God, he became a servant and voice for those who could not speak for themselves. He did many acts of charity because Jesus first showed Nicolas charity by saving him.

Are there other holidays I could look at that take place during Advent/Epiphany?

In addition to Advent some traditions celebrate:

- The Feast of the Holy Family honors Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as a family. It is celebrated on the Sunday after Christmas (or on December 30). When Christmas falls on Sunday, it is celebrated December 31.
- The Epiphany, the oldest of the Christmas feasts, is also known as Three Kings Day for the three magi who found the Christ Child after following a star to Bethlehem. It is celebrated on Jan. 6 and is the major holiday of the Christmas period in the Eastern Church.

Does six geese a laying have anything to do with Advent?

The song The 12 Days of Christmas was written in 1780 as a chant. Though some people have said that the days to the song were written by persecuted Catholics as a way to remember liturgy (hence six geese a laying would refer to the 6 days of creation or the six precepts of the Catholic Church), the truth is that it was originally a children's memory game. In this game, a song leader would recite a new verse that everyone would have to repeat; and then add all the previous verses until someone made a mistake and would be "out." There's a hair on the wart on the frog on the bump on the log in the hole of the bottom of the sea....

Fake Tree or Real Christmas Tree, which is godlier?

We believe this is matter of God's leading, which we know seems sacrilegious to some. We believe the greater question is what type of cookies should you have during the Christmas season; our answer is ALL OF THEM (except Fig Newtons because they are evil).

TERMS/ DEFINITIONS

Mission – We exist to glorify God by teaching and living out the scriptures, transforming community into Gospel community, and planting churches. This happens by orienting life around making disciples who make disciples—these disciples become a blessing to the earth. Mission is simply our purpose.

Gospel – The Gospel is the good news that Jesus has defeated sin, death, and evil through His own death and resurrection, and is making all things new, even us (*Called Together, Dodson & Watson*). The Gospel in our lives means living in the reality of salvation and redemption through Jesus.

Gospel Community – Gospel community grows up around a people serving on mission with Gospel-centered relationships. Everyone is at a different stage on the path, but we are all growing together, in both worship of Jesus and intimacy with each other, as the Gospel calls us forward (sanctification).

Literally – This means something in its strictest sense, without exaggeration or inaccuracy. The literalist takes words at their own meanings. If I said, "The movie blew my socks off," a literalist would think the movie somehow caused my socks to come off. Although it was probably a great movie, your feet are more than likely still clad in foot wear.

Cookie – Divine blessing from the heavenly realms made of sugar, spice, and everything nice.

Salvation – Salvation is technically defined as being saved by God from God and His wrath against sin. Nothing could take away (expiate) our sin except for the sacrifice of the perfect son of God. Jesus fulfilled the requirements of righteousness that we could never attain, so that He could bestow that righteousness to us.

Conversion – Conversion is a misunderstood word in a Christian context. People become converted to religions by following certain decrees; people become converted to Christianity through a relationship with Jesus

Second Coming – Advent celebrates the first coming of Jesus, in the flesh, to this world. As believers, we look forward to when Jesus returns again, in the flesh, as promised.

Trinity – The Old and New Testaments speak (of) the oneness of God. The word "trinity" is not in the Bible, though the concept is clearly taught. The word trinity was coined in the late 2nd century as a way to explain that we have a God who is one God in three persons. Tertullian, who coined the term, said, "Divinity is shared by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is only one divinity, only one God, just as there is only one empire," (referring to the Roman Empire he was part of). Tertullian spoke of God as three "persons," Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet of "one substance" of which the three partake in such a way that each has its fullness.

Christ – "Christos" is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew word "Messiah." Christ is not Jesus' last name or a 1st century swear word. Christ is the title of God's promised Redeemer and Savior of mankind. Not until Jesus was born did anyone realize the Messiah would be God in the flesh.

Holy Spirit – The third member of the Godhead, He is fully God along with Jesus and the Father.

Pickle – The unholy infusion of evil into a cucumber.

Christmas – The season we celebrate the Creator, King, and Lord of the universe becoming a human being to seek and save a lost and broken people.

Presents – Presents are gifts we give to one another—not to earn favor or make people like us more—but to express the joy in the great gift God has first given to us in Jesus, the focus of Christmas.

Christmas Eve – This is the most wonderful night of year. A time when we reflect, worship, and anticipate God becoming flesh to save the world.

Advent – Advent comes from the Latin word for "arrival" or "coming." Advent is a time of joyous anticipation, but also of repentance and preparation for Christmas; it is when we celebrate Jesus' birth into the world. Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas and is the start of the Christmas season. The first Sunday of Advent also marks the beginning of many church liturgical calendars.

Liturgical – Liturgy is a form of public worship, a particular arrangement of services. Liturgical simply means it relates to, in services, this liturgy. Hence a liturgical calendar is there to enable the body of Christ to come together and worship with a concentrated focus.

Redemption – Redemption is our freedom from enslavement to Satan, sin, and death, secured for us through Jesus' death and resurrection. In this redemption, we find freedom from the pain and suffering of our enslavement to sin (typically called "bondage"), caused by our own sin as well as the sins of others – freedom afforded to us out of God's great love and grace.

Incarnation – The Incarnation refers to the birth of Jesus in which God took on human flesh. The word "incarnate" means "to make into flesh," and reminds us that Jesus came as a man to save mankind. God Himself paid the penalty we owed to Him with Jesus' death on the cross.

HOW TO

DAILY DEVOTIONALS

Because the idea of consistent devotional time may be new for some, here are some tips that may be helpful:

1. **Be flexible.** Feel free to start this part of the journey guide whenever you'd like. If you want to "skip ahead," that's fine—it may give you some leeway if you get behind a day or two. If you are in a GC, you will want to make sure you have gone through the weekly notes before your Notes Night. Other than that, remember that most importantly, this is special time set aside for you to be with God.

2. **Keep it simple.** This isn't a race, and no one will grade your work! The goal is for you to spend some consistent, quality time communicating with God. Feel free to use the journal to track your thoughts.

3. **Follow through.** Give thought to the action steps, prayer guidelines, and verses for memorization.

4. **Share.** One of the most beautiful things that can result from time spent with God is how revelation is shared with others. Don't be afraid to share what you learn in your devotional time with family, friends, etc., and encourage those around you to share!

ACTION STEPS

On day seven, you will also get a list of action items to do. These are things you can do by yourself, with your family, or with your community. Write out your plan, and talk it through with others, to help you think of ideas and follow through!

GOSPEL COMMUNITY NOTES

Before Your GC's Notes Night:

1. **SERMON**—Discussions will flow out of the week's sermon. If you are not able to attend service and hear the sermon there, you can listen to/watch it online at: www.ourelement.org/advent.

2. **DEVOTIONAL**—You'll find weekly notes broken down by day in your journey guide this is designed to supplement the sermon. We encourage you to read through the notes and reflect on the discussion questions that are included prior to your GC's Notes Night. Because some of the same questions will be discussed in your GCs, you may want to write down any thoughts that come to mind during your reflection and be ready to share them with your group.

During Your GC's Notes Night:

3. **PRAYER**—As a group, pray that God will open your hearts and minds as He reveals Himself.

4. **RECAP**—Was everyone able to listen to/watch the sermon? It may be helpful to have someone offer a "recap" of the message, even if everyone was able to hear it.

5. **READING**—Read this week's verse together.

6. **DISCUSSION**—Leaders, refer to the GC Leader Notes in the journey guide for guidelines on facilitating discussion within your GC. Please remember that these are only guidelines—we encourage you to be open to the Holy Spirit's leading, and recognize that conversations may take a different turn!

7. **PRAYER**—Close your time together as a group with prayer.

HOW TO FAMILY DEVOTIONALS

God our Father longs to give us good gifts, and as parents, we long to give our children good gifts (Matthew 7:11), especially around this time of the year. Our Father in Heaven gave us the ultimate gift when He gave us His son, Jesus, and we can give our children an amazing gift by seeking God and understanding His Word as a family. It is our privilege to share the Gospel message with our families and those around us.

In the following pages you will find, at the end of your own personal devotion week, several suggestions/questions for discussion with your children and teens (in black for younger children, and in color for teens). Take some time each week to go through these as a family, as a time of fun and discovery. Most importantly, go through these with a heart and mind being open to where the Holy Spirit leads.

How do I lead this conversation with my family?
Think through, and then talk about, all you have learned during a given week as you have spent time with Jesus. Be an example of how exciting it can be to open yourself up to what God would have you discover. Your kids will catch that excitement, too!

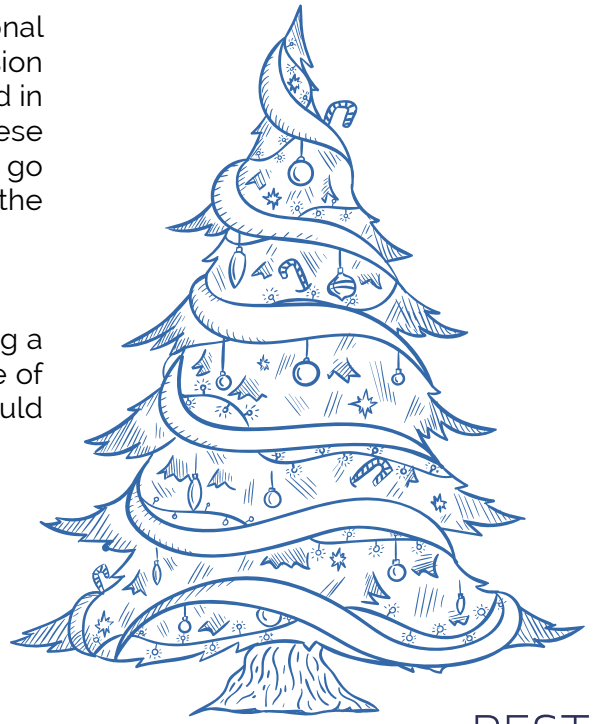
Why is it important to set this time aside with my family?

- You will be showing your family how important it is to spend time listening to and learning from God.
- You will be showing your family that sharing/spending time with THEM is important.
- You are setting yourself up as a person they can come to when they have OTHER questions regarding their faith.

But what if I don't know the answers to the questions they ask?
It's good to show your kids that you don't have all the answers. A good response in those scenarios is to suggest that you find the answer together. If it is an unanswerable question, pray about it together and talk about how we don't always immediately get answers from God. We trust that God is always working for His glory, which means He works things out for our good.

When you see the word **STUDENTS**, those questions are for your teenagers and have a slightly different focus.

We hope this time as a family will become something that you treasure, something that will make you stronger as a family, and a time that will draw you closer to Jesus individually, as well as corporately.



REDEMPTION & RESTORATION READINGS

While we specifically celebrate Christmas during the Advent season, the truth of God's rescue and redemption of His people is just as relevant this time of year. Therefore, you'll also find a weekly reflection in this guide that serves to deepen your understanding of Jesus as our Redeemer.

LET'S GET STARTED >>

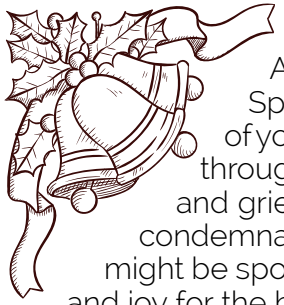
PRAYER GUIDE

During this Advent season, we will gather to worship and celebrate, party, and enjoy family and friends, but we want to add an intentional focus on the incarnation: Jesus, God the Son, entering into history to live among us. As we reflect and focus on Jesus coming to live the life we could not live, and dying the death we deserved, we should turn our attention to what He has secured for us by His grace and mercy—hope, love, joy, and peace. As we focus on Jesus and His coming, our view of life and our world should be forever changed, affecting how we live and pray.

With our Western mindset, we sometimes find prayer at the bottom of our actual to-do list. While we may consider prayer valuable, we may also find it difficult to stop, be still, and know that HE is God (Psalm 46:19). We are so used to doing, performing, and accomplishing, that praying often doesn't happen; when it does, it oftentimes does not meet our expectation or our perception of what constitutes an "appropriate" amount. Praying the way we do can leave us feeling guilty and ashamed, serving to further discourage and inhibit coming to God.

As we begin this season of Advent, we would like you to simply put aside your guilt, sense of obligation, and perceived expectations, and approach God afresh. We desire for all of Element to learn to engage in conversation with God whenever/however, individually/collectively, and trust that He will faithfully meet us.

Participating and using these Advent Guides will help each of us grow closer to God, better understand His mission in our lives and world, more clearly hear His voice, and obediently follow Him where He leads. We want to make disciples who live for Jesus in their families, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods.



As you pray during this season, invite the Holy Spirit to bring a fresh and deeper understanding of your redemption and restoration made possible through Jesus' coming. Ask for a heart of sorrow and grief for your sins and the sins of others without condemnation and judgment, that the gospel of grace might be spoken boldly. Ask for a heart of gratitude, hope, and joy for the hope of the world made flesh.

It is also important that we, as a community of faith, also pray for others. This type of praying is known as intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer can be defined as follows:

- Going to God on behalf of another; advocating (encouraging, promoting, backing) for others (John 17:20, I John 2:1-2)
- Praying for those who cannot, or will not, pray for themselves (Acts 26:29, I Timothy 2:1-2)

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR LEARNING TO PRAY

- Find a place that is free of distractions.
- Focus on who God is – *His character and nature: He is good, righteous, just, loving, merciful, gracious, holy, and is the perfect representation of a father.*
- Talk to Jesus honestly – *He knows and understands you and your struggles better than you even know yourself.*
- Listen to what God is saying – *through Scripture, the teachings, your Gospel Community, and your heart. It is of utmost importance to listen to God's promptings.*

Here are some prayer points that we want to be praying in this season as individuals, Gospel Communities, gatherings of friends, and as a church:

THE MISSION AND VISION OF ELEMENT

- That God would continue to use all of us to proclaim the Gospel through how we touch and transform lost and hurting people in our communities.
- That we rely on God's Spirit to increasingly create opportunities to speak the truth and relevance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people so that they might turn to Him and be healed.
- That God would continue to instill within us a passion for His name and a compassion for people.
- That we would be ever engaged in making disciples of Jesus, teaching the Scriptures, offering grace and forgiveness, and encouraging others to do the same.

THE UNITY OF OUR CHURCH

Romans 15:5: "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

- That there would be no room for our enemy, Satan, to bring dissension, confusion, or division.
- That fear, discouragement, apathy, distractions, illness, and/or pride would not have any place in us.
- That we would live as described in *Ephesians 4:3: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."*

THOSE FAR FROM GOD

There are thousands of people in our community that are hostile toward, and alienated from God our Father, and need to hear the truth about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

- Pray that the lost encounter God through our church community, that we would be salt and light, that we would offer the hope of the Gospel, and that we would exemplify God's goodness and love to those around us.
- Pray that those without a Gospel-centered community would be drawn to Element, and that they would feel embraced, loved, and cared for. Pray that these people would hear and live in the love and redemption found in Jesus.

ANTICIPATION OF A SEASON

Agape Thanksgiving Meal

AGAPE INTRODUCTION

We are kicking off this season of Advent with Agape meals in people's homes. Agape is a Greek word for love; this word agape was used to translate a Hebrew word for love that was only ascribed to God in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we are first given love by God in order to love like God loves. Agape dinners are designed to encourage people to see that a dinner in, and surrounded by, community is not a one-time yearly event, but a symbol of Jesus in our daily lives as we are united and growing as His disciples in grace and love.

We want to invite you to join us at one of our Agape Dinners. An Agape dinner is hosted by one of our many Gospel Communities as a way to not only serve and welcome the rest of the church body, but also to serve our friends and neighbors as well. If you are not comfortable joining one of our Gospel Communities for a meal, we would encourage you, at the start of Advent, to plan a meal with people you are in relationship with. Invite your family and/or neighbors over for a meal and spend time with them, getting to know them better.

To start this season we want to offer you the following short devotional to read and meditate on. Lead people into conversation around a meal. To get the layout of an Agape meal, and to make your preparation easier, go to www.ourelement.org/agape and download the PDFs that are available as a way of instructing you on how to have an Agape Meal.

Here is the short devotional with sample questions to ask while participating during this meal on the Sunday we start Advent.

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 22nd

ANTICIPATION OF A SEASON

The word "Advent" means "coming" or "arrival." It is the four weeks of the year leading up to Christmas when Christians all over the world look back to the first coming of Jesus and look forward to his second coming. The four weeks are about Hope, Love, Joy and Peace, centering on the celebration of Jesus.

(Ask those at the table)
What are your favorite Christmas memories?

Have you ever taken the time to think about the nature of anticipation? Tullian Tchividjian says there are three things in particular that he looks forward to:

- The wedding of a friend
- A football game
- The arrival of out-of-town guests

What type of things do you anticipate?

Tchividjian writes, "*The capacity to anticipate is a gift from God–God designed us to anticipate…but…anticipations are never meant to serve as ends in themselves. They are intended to nurture and expand our God-given anticipatory capacities so that we will anticipate something greater: secondary anticipations are designed by God to point to the primary anticipation.*" John Piper says, "*The weakness of our anticipation for Christ's return is not because it is uneventful or unimportant. It's because we keep ourselves stuffed with smaller anticipations.*" As C.S. Lewis is so famously quoted as saying in A Grief Observed, "*We are far too easily pleased.*"

What type of things are you too easily pleased with?

The Scriptures speak about the Old Testament being a shadow of the true substance of Jesus' arrival and salvation. Our anticipation is like puddle in comparison to Jesus as the ocean; our anticipation is like a flashlight and Jesus is the sun. We sing a song at Christmas time that goes, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel." These were words at one point of anticipation, but now they are reminders of God's faithfulness to bring an end to injustice, pain, sin, and fear. Our anticipation, when fully realized, exposes how small our hopes seem to be when the fulfillment takes place.

Have you ever had a great anticipation that turned out to be too small when it was fully realized?

I was reading an article recently (that didn't have an author ascribed to it), but the author said that if we ignore the lessons of Advent, we may no longer be anticipating and expecting God to reconcile all things to Himself and create a new heaven and a new earth. If this happens in us we will have:

- **No Passion for Evangelism or Mission** because if we practically live as if this present world will roll on forever exactly as it is now, there is not a hope of the future Kingdom.
- **The tendency to fall for false teaching** in which Christianity is reduced to a set of healthy, rational principles for feeling good about yourself, staying in shape, balancing your checkbook and doing good deeds.
- **Those who believe the celebration of Christmas is not a big deal** because the "Christmas season" is often marked by greed, gluttony, and (if you're lucky) a few warm fuzzy feelings as you stand under the mistletoe or drink hot cocoa by the fire.

What has been your worst Christmas memory?
How could hope in Jesus redeem that memory?

Advent is meant to stir our hearts for the return of the Eternal King who has always been and will always be. This is what Advent does: it teaches us to see how Jesus fulfills all of our anticipation. Only Jesus can cleanse our conscience and make all things new. Advent is meant to fill us with hope because we realize that Christ's first coming was His pledge that He will one day return to "make all things new." Jesus repeatedly told his followers to watch and pray for His return. The season of Advent is an opportunity for us to orient our thinking and to corporately express our fervent hope in the Second Coming of Christ, to be an *expectant* people.

Pray now, giving God thanks for His goodness. Ask him to make everyone more expectant this season.

Reminder: Start your daily devotionals tomorrow!

SERMON NOTES:

SERMON VERSES:

Matthew 1:18
Genesis 1:14
Genesis 2:3
Galatians 4:4-5
Genesis 3:15
Genesis 12:1-3
Matthew 28:9
Genesis 18:18
Genesis 22:18
Genesis 26: 4
Genesis 28:14
Genesis 1:20-22
Galatians 3:29

DAY ONE (November 23rd)

Matthew 1:18-21 "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."

There have always been rhythms to what we would call the "church seasons." Throughout history, those who love God have tried, in various ways, to help people remember Jesus in every waking moment of life. The church seasons essentially followed Jesus' life.

- **Advent is:** Four weeks of preparation for the coming birth of Jesus. The Roman church loved Christmas and, because of its major historical influence, most westernized Christians love Christmas as well.
- **Christmas is:** celebrated because Jesus, the Christ, God's own son is taking on human flesh in order to save lost and broken humanity.

What about the Christmas season seems special to you?

What are your earliest memories of Christmas?

Did your family focus more on Jesus or on Santa Claus?

DAY TWO

Matthew 1:19 "And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly."

The church seasons didn't end with Christmas, Christmas was like the mid-way point and then moved into Epiphany. Epiphany means manifestation (some have called epiphany the "showing forth"); it commemorates the wise men coming to worship the baby Jesus. While the Roman church loved Christmas, the Eastern Church loved the epiphany because it symbolized the proclaiming of Christ's identity.

As we travel through the advent season, we would hope that all the days of the Church seasons take on new importance for you and your family. The manifestation of Jesus in the flesh also means that we become His hands and feet to our family, friends, neighbors and coworkers.

In what ways is Jesus "showing forth" in your life today?

If people based Christ's identity on how you live for Him, who would they say that He was?

DAY THREE

Matthew 1:20 "But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'"

The Church seasons were meant to be movements by which we could greater open ourselves to God's Spirit. They were meant to remind us of all that Jesus experienced.

- **Lent**: Lent is a time of quiet self-examination. During Lent, we ask God's Spirit to come in and reveal all the hidden areas of our hearts that need His cleansing. It is a time when we begin to better understand why Jesus had to die and rise from the grave. Lent culminates with Good Friday and Jesus' death.
- **Easter**: On Easter we celebrate Jesus' resurrection and victory over the grave. We understand that Jesus has defeated humanity's enemies of Satan, sin, and death. Easter is filled with great joy as we share in Christ's victory.
- **Pentecost**: Pentecost is celebrated after Easter to remind us that Holy Spirit came down and not only placed believers in God's family, but also started the church. Pentecost is meant to be understood in terms of evangelism and outreach.

Which one of these church seasons (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost) do you connect with the most? Why?

Is there a season in which you could intentionally focus during the upcoming year in order to grow a deeper relationship with Jesus?

DAY FOUR

Matthew 1:21 "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

The rhythms of Church seasons start with **Advent**. The first week of advent is typically centered on the idea of **hope**. All the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Everything that God has been doing since Genesis 3, and probably Genesis 1, is about to be revealed in a magnificent and surprising way.

"Seasons" in the Scriptures entails the idea of how God's creation will interact with time. The Hebrew word for seasons is *`ed-enæ* and means **appointed times**. The writer of Genesis speaks of how movements in the sky break our time into 24 hour periods, the days (and cycles of the moon) divide into months, the movement/tilting of the earth marks each season, and the circling of the sun defines years. Everything is broken into segments of time, these SEASONS.

All of these "appointed times" are meant to create space, to turn our gaze back to God so we can meet and spend time with Him.

Do you currently have any "appointed times" in your life to spend time with God?

How important do you think those breaks are (even if you don't currently have them?)

DAY FIVE

Matthew 1:22-23 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"
(which means, God with us).

Originally, in the garden, mankind had a relationship with God that enabled us to walk together with Him in the garden. This is a picture of the relationship that God intended for mankind to have with Him--awe and intimacy.

By looking at our world today, it is apparent that mankind didn't stay in the beauty of relationship with God in the garden. Essentially, we wanted our own seasons and the ability to define relationship with God on our own terms. This left us lost, broken, and alone; in response, God moves forward and sets out times and seasons to redeem humanity. *Galatians 4:4-5 "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."*

Why do you think humans want things on their own terms, rather than place trust in God to know what is good?

What current areas in your life demonstrate a lack of trust in God?

DAY SIX

Matthew 1:24-25 "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus."

In almost every religious tradition, the first candle in an **Advent** wreath is called **Hope**, or even **Expectation**, because it was to symbolize all the prophesies of old coming together in the birth of Jesus. What God promised happened as He said it would. All that God proclaimed was intended to draw our attention to Jesus, who is the Christ.

One writer says that all Israel lived with *"the anticipation of the coming of an Anointed One, a Messiah that weaves its way like a golden thread through Old Testament history. As God's people were abused by power hungry kings, led astray by self-centered prophets, and lulled into apathy by half-hearted religious leaders, there arose a longing among some for God to raise up a new king who could show them how to be God's people."*

What they wanted was Immanuel, God with Us, God again in our midst, but the only way that happens is by understanding advent and God's rescue of us. *Galatians 4:4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*

This is about times, seasons, days, years, millennia...God has always moved His plan to rescue His children onward.

What things do you wait for with eager anticipation?

What do you think it would be like to once again walk with God as He originally intended?

REDEMPTION

1. List some favorite family traditions. How can you bring Jesus to the forefront of these traditions?
2. Since the beginning of time, there have been seasons and rhythms to each person and family's life. What are some of the rhythms of your daily life? How can Jesus be brought into each of those rhythms. (ie: most families drive in the car every day. How can Jesus be brought into that time?)
   Students: Your rhythms may be different than others' in your family. How are they different, and how can you invite Jesus into those rhythms.
3. Draw or talk as a family about the feelings that you have as you eagerly anticipate an event such as Christmas. How do you think the people in Jesus' time felt as they eagerly awaited their Messiah?

KNOW: Read Matthew 1:18-25

GROW: Pray that others will see the hope of Jesus in you and your family

SHOW: Choose someone that your family can be a blessing to in your circle, and then BLESS THEM!

ACTION STEPS

DAY SEVEN

- Pray that God would restore hope to others by how you live for Him.
- Ask God to show you how to be more intentional about your relationship with Him during this season.
- Look for someone to bless this week. Identify someone you know who needs hope, and think of a specific way to bring that hope to them this week.

Biblical hope is not wishful thinking or desiring for things to be better. Biblical hope is a confident expectation based on the character and nature of God, which we know through experiencing Him, the truth of scripture, and the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

Our hope in Jesus is more than knowing He came to rescue and redeem us—He is coming again and will complete the work of restoration. All that is broken, hurting, and sinful will be eradicated once and for all. The pain and suffering of our continued sin and failure has an end. Hope is about this broken, human existence finding meaning and purpose through Jesus.

This time of year, we consider the realized promise of the coming Savior in Jesus. We contemplate God's faithfulness to His covenant and promise. We may complain about our present reality at times, which is not yet fully redeemed and restored, but we continue to long for and know that God is faithful to His covenant promise *(Exodus 3:7-8, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18).*

Pray this week for patient hope to live in the tension of the present time. God has broken into history (bringing salvation, rescue, reconciliation, redemption, and restoration), yet we live in a world ravaged by sin. Pray for opportunities and boldness to speak and offer the hope of Christ to those in your community, those who are caught in the despair of this world without Jesus.

This week, we begin our Advent journey together. To mark this shift in seasons, you may want to do something fun as a Community....share a meal (other than the Agape meal you shared last week) or do something festive. This is a new "appointed time" that is worth celebrating! The holidays are a great time to reach out to those outside your Community as well, so remember to be intentional about inviting them into your celebrations.

Our discussion this week centers on the theme of hope. While the Christmas season holds huge significance for believers, it can also result in raised expectations (and therefore stress and disappointment) for some when their hope is placed in an ideal holiday "experience." It's important to understand that not everyone may share the same feelings about Christmas and Advent. **Ask: What do you love about this time of year? What do you hate?**

It's common for people to love the different atmosphere or mood around Christmas (lights/decorations, baking, music, etc.). While it's certainly fine to enjoy and appreciate these things, as they set the season apart from others, it can be easy to misplace our hope. **Ask your group: How can your hope be misplaced during this time of year?** As Gospel communities, we want to remind one another that our ultimate hope is in Jesus alone. **Ask: How can our community redirect you to Jesus throughout the Advent season?**

GOSPEL COMMUNITY WEEK 1 DISCUSSION

Since GCs function as families, it's a good idea to discuss with your group what expectations they have of your GC during this season. **Ask how they envision celebrating Advent with your GC throughout this season...do they expect more/less time with one another? More parties? Any new/old traditions?**

As always, we want to be a people that live life together on mission—intentionally seeking ways to go and bless others. Spend some time discussing the missional opportunities that arise during this time of year, such as:

Who do you personally know that is in need of hope? (Be specific)

How can we bring the message of hope to those around us?

As a group, pray together. You may want to pray...

- That Jesus would fill you with hope this season
- That He would remind you not to place hope in other things
- That He would bring opportunities for you to bless others
- In gratitude that God sent His son to save, redeem, and bless us

SERMON NOTES:

SERMON VERSES:

Luke 1: 26-38
Matthew 1:23
Isaiah 7:14
John 1:1
Acts 20:28
Mark 14:36
John 10:10-11
John 8:58
1 Cor. 15:3-4
Hebrews 4:15
Luke 2:52
2 John 1:7
Philippians 2:5-8
John 1:32
Mark 1:10
Luke 4:1
Luke 4:14
Luke 10:21
Acts 10:38
Romans 1:4
Romans 8: 11-17
Luke 2:52
Luke 4:16
James 1:5
Mark 6:3
Isaiah 53:2

DAY ONE

Luke 1:26-28 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, shared the following as his last words: "The best of all is, God is with us." *Immanuel*. The simple meaning of Christmas is the Creator, King of the universe, has become a human being to seek and save the lost; everything else is secondary. Can you imagine what it would mean to truly live with the fact of "God with us" as the center of our lives?

When we talk about self-respect, community, and peace on earth among people who ordinarily fight, all these ideals should flow out of the understanding of the Gospel; they are all by-products of a Gospel-centered life. The Creator God has become a human being and now, everything has changed. That's the meaning of Christmas.

If someone asked you before today what the meaning of Christmas was/is, what would you have said?

What would you say now?

How does your current understanding impact your life?

DAY TWO

Luke 1:29-30 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

Think about this:

- Jesus is the first person in scripture to call God, "Abba," which is like saying, "Daddy." *Mark 14:36 And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you."* New Testament scholars will tell you that nowhere in all of Judaism did anyone ever use a term like that for God.
- Jesus' ministry was unique because of who Jesus claimed Himself to be. He said in *John 10:10-11 I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.* He said the Kingdom of God was present because HE was present on the earth.

Who do you say Jesus is?

How does that affect how you live?

DAY THREE

Luke 1:31-33 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

In addition to what we saw in yesterday's reading:

- Jesus made unique claims to be God, *John 8:58 Before Abraham was, I am.* "I Am" was the name for God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus applied that to Himself (and got into lots of trouble for it).
- Jesus died a more meaningful death than anyone has or ever will. Paul says in *1 Corinthians 15:3-4 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ* **died for our sins** *in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...*

Eventually Jesus also rose from the grave in order to bring us life and relationship with God--all of this starts with Christmas.

How does the Christmas story tie into the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

DAY FOUR

Luke 1:34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

When we think of how Jesus lived a life without sin, a life that wholly honored God the Father, we may think it was easy for Jesus because He was God. We have a tendency to think Jesus wasn't like us, and in one sense, it is true. However, in another sense, Jesus is just like us.

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. In our day we hear people say, "Jesus was a good teacher, a good example, but not divine." While this line of reasoning seems to be one of our main questions today, the early church had the opposite question. The first heresy the early church faced was not about the divinity of Jesus; it denied the *humanity* of Jesus. This heresy was called **Docetism**. Docetism comes from the Greek *Dokei* which means "to seem." Docetism taught that Jesus wasn't human, He only *seemed* to be human. There is a reason the New Testament writers keep combating the idea that Jesus was only God walking around in disguise and in no way human. He was human in every way we are. Docetism is the reason why the New Testament writers kept reiterating the idea that Jesus was fully God and fully man at the same time.

Is it harder for you to grasp the divinity or the humanity of Jesus? Why?

What does it mean if Jesus is not both fully divine and fully human?

Is there anything you could study that would give you a deeper understanding of Jesus' humanity and divinity?

DAY FIVE

Luke 1:35-37 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Jesus' life and power are to be experienced. Jesus said no to sin and yes to God every day of His life, and He was generous and lived the truth. How did Jesus do it? Through the power of God's Spirit (Holy Spirit). Everything that seems impossible to us IS possible with God.

Jesus wants us to experience the life He had through the power of the Holy Spirit. He shows what it looks like to live a Spirit-empowered and Spirit-led life. At the baptism of Jesus, the whole Trinity was present to illustrate that He was empowered and indwelled by the Holy Spirit. It was a public demonstration so people could see God's work, for our understanding!

We should live a Spirit-filled life, and you know what that looks like? Jesus.

What do you think living by the power of the Spirit looks like for you in a practical sense?

We are told the Spirit will produce love for God and others in us. Is this what is being produced in you?

In which area(s) of your life could you grow in love?

DAY SIX

Luke 1:38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Jesus was hungry, thirsty, and tired at times. He was grieved, troubled, angry, and experienced pain. The Bible says that Jesus grew like we grow, He bled like we bleed, and He died like we die. If, in Jesus, God truly became a man, and if He really surrendered Himself to hardship and human weakness, how did He do it? By the Spirit of God. *Philippians 2:5-8 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

How did Jesus do it? The answer is by His complete, utter dependence, and the surrendering of His will to the Holy Spirit. Jesus became like us. What enabled Jesus to burst the bounds of humanity was not that He was like Superman—it was the Spirit of God at work in Him. When they killed His human body and laid it in the tomb, it was the Spirit of God who raised Him from the dead. That Spirit is the same Spirit available to us today, that lives in us! Jesus trusted the Spirit and was willing to be led and empowered by Him to fulfill the plan of redemption.

How do you empty yourself of your own power and rely on His?

How would your life change if you truly believed the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lived in you?

REDEMPTION

1. What do your kids say is the meaning of Christmas? Students: What do your friends and peers say is the meaning of Christmas? With your family, brainstorm what you will say to incorrect views of the meaning of Christmas?
2. Who is the Holy Spirit? How does the Holy Sprit help us to live a life of obedience to Jesus?
3. Draw a picture of Jesus at your age. Around that picture, sketch your sins. How does it make you feel that Jesus was tempted with the exact same things?
   Students: What sorts of struggles do people in your stage of life encounter? How does knowing that Jesus struggled with some of the same things change your view of your situation? How can you invite Jesus into those struggles?

KNOW: Read Luke 1:26-38.

GROW: Pray that the Holy Spirit would fill you and help you to lead your family.

SHOW: Ask each member of your family how he or she sees the Holy Spirit working in each other.

DAY SEVEN

ACTION STEPS

- Pray that you would understand God's Spirit better, including His personhood, His love, and His power.
- Repent of relying on your own strength and trust in the Spirit's strength to carry you forward and work in you.
- Spend some time remembering what it meant for Jesus to take on human flesh and surrender to it.
- Ask someone close to you if they see you living in the Spirit's strength or in your own strength.

Biblical love is a selfless love; it is based in God's covenant to man, which He alone lives up to and fulfills. The Hebrew word "*hesed*" describes this love that is unrestrained, relentless, unilateral, extravagant, and even scandalous, because it is undeserved and unwarranted. When God chooses to love us, He calls us His own. His steadfast, abounding love is inexhaustible, because it is born from His infinitely gracious character (1 John 4:16-21)

We have been created for love, relationship(s), and community. Everything we do is an expression of our love for someone or something, our worship of some object. This capacity for love is to be used toward God first and others second. Our desire and longing for love was meant to draw us to God.

Tragically, sin leads all of us to turn our backs on the love of God and to give our love to someone or something else. The book of Jeremiah speaks graphically about our unfaithfulness to God. Paul David Tripp says, *"The Bible is the story of a love drama that looked as if it would end in tragedy – but then Jesus came."*

We celebrate Advent as a time to remember God reaching to us in covenant love, faithfully sending His Son to make the ultimate sacrifice of love so that we can become a people who love Him like no other. God's love relentlessly rescues, redeems, and restores us. God's love captures our hearts.

Pray this week that God would reveal to you the things that you have substituted for Him, the things you love more than Jesus. Our misplaced love is called idolatry; it is a spiritual adultery. God wants to reveal to us where we are unfaithful so that He might deliver us from our enslavement. Jesus wants to restore us to Himself, with hearts of undivided love. (Mark 12:30).

Pray that Jesus would work redemptively in your heart, that He would give you an ability to love others as yourself (Mark 12:31). Pray that you would learn to love generously as God has done with you, to love with understanding of how God loves you.

This week of the Advent season focuses on love. Love is a huge concept, and there are many different views of what love is and what it should look like. 1 John 4:8 tell us, "Anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love." We have a model of what true love looks like in the person of Jesus. At Christmas, we celebrate the incarnation of Christ—when He humbled Himself and became fully human in an act of love.

Because people have so many different (and oftentimes, weird) ideas about love, **start your discussion by asking your GC what love means to them. What are some of the most powerful examples of love that they have seen in their lives?**

Read Philippians 2:5-7. It seems easy for Christians to forget how absolutely shocking it is that the Creator of the universe would live within the confines of humanity, and yet love is what drove God to do this very thing. He subjugated himself to a broken physical world and all it entails—sorrow, pain, hunger. He accepted this so that He could be with us forever and that we could be with Him forever.

It can be hard for some to understand and/or accept the idea of God's presence. **Ask your GC if they believe God is present. Whether they do or don't, ask how that feels and what that means for their lives.** The truth is that the presence of God changes everything—every space of life is now sacred, and we can live in joy and confidence that God will never leave us. **Encourage one another with the truth of God's presence by reading Scripture such as Matthew 28:20 and Romans 8:11.**

GOSPEL COMMUNITY WEEK 2 DISCUSSION

Love is what drove Jesus to be born as a baby, it is what drove Him to the cross, and it is what drove him to conquer the grave and offer us life. By offering us eternal life with Him, He also empowers us to know and share love.

Having God's Spirit within us means nothing is impossible, and yet we often find ourselves in situations when it is difficult to love. **Ask your GC about times when they've struggled to love others. Were they depending on the Holy Spirit in that situation? How can you (as a GC) encourage one another to be more Spirit-dependent?**

The world is full of people that don't understand the presence of God, or the great acts of love he's committed toward us. **Ask your GC: How can your life reflect the presence of God?**

As a group, pray together. You may want to pray...

- That God would teach you to rely on His Spirit more and more
- That He would remind you how amazing the Incarnation is
- That you would truly live as if God were always with us (He is!)
- That you would be known by your love

SERMON NOTES:

SERMON VERSES:

Luke 2:8-20
Philippians 4:4
Psalms 16:11
Philippians 4:4
Exodus 4:14
1 Samuel 18:6
2 Chronicles 20:27
Jeremiah 20:15
Psalm 45:8
Proverbs 12:25
Ecclesiastes 11:9
Deuteronomy 24:5
Proverbs 5:18
Habakkuk 3:18
Zechariah 9:9
Matthew 2:10
Luke 1:47
Luke 2:10
Matthew 28:8
Luke 24:52
John 16:16-23
2 Corinthians 8:2
John 5:11
Mark 1:11
John 1:16
John 15:11
Philippians 4:4
Matthew 5:13-16
Matthew 4:3
Matthew 4:5
John 4:34

DAY ONE

Luke 2:8-10 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

The season of Advent has gone through various changes throughout the ages; at one point, it became a 40-day fast in preparation for Christmas. The fast would start after the Feast of St. Martin (he was the Bishop of Tours, in France), and was actually called Saint Martin's Lent until the 5th century.

In the 9th century, the duration of Advent was reduced to four weeks and it became a counterpart to Lent. Advent started to focus much more on joy than reflection, because it anticipated the celebration of Jesus' coming. The spirit of the liturgy all throughout Advent is one of expectation and preparation for the feast of Christmas, as well as for the second coming of Jesus. It symbolizes the joy and gladness of promised redemption.

What do you hope to happen in your life by focusing more on Jesus day by day?

DAY TWO

Luke 2:10-11 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

The third Sunday of Advent is almost always about JOY. It commemorates the visit of the Magi (even though this historically happened after the birth) bringing gifts to Jesus; its focus is on the joy of worshipping the new found King. They even named the third Sunday of Advent the Latin name for "rejoice" and connected it with *Philippians 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.*

As we begin to better understand salvation, we see that JOY becomes a quality of who we are and not simply an emotion. Joy is grounded in God Himself and derived from Him. *Psalms 16:11 You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

What is the difference between happiness and joy?

How does joy become a quality of life and not simply a fleeting emotion?

Do you live as a person of joy?

DAY THREE

Luke 2:12-14 "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

In the Scriptures, people are found rejoicing in the simple events of life:

- when meeting a close relative (Exodus 4:14)
- when their enemies are defeated (1 Samuel 18:6; 2 Chronicles 20:27)
- when a child is born (Jeremiah 20:15)
- at the sound of music (Psalms 45:8)
- when they hear a good word (Proverbs 12:25)
- when teacher of Ecclesiastes urges his students to rejoice in their youth (Ecclesiastes 11:9)
- when men are encouraged to bring both joy to their wives (Deuteronomy. 24:5) and to rejoice in the wife of their youth (Proverbs 5:18)
- upon hearing the "teachings" of God (Psalms 19:8; 119:111).

Habakkuk says that even if the crops fail and there is nothing left to eat, we should find reason for joy in God because He is the only one who can bring salvation. *Habakkuk 3:18 "Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior."*

What brings you joy?

What destroys your joy?

DAY FOUR

Luke 2:15-17 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

When Jesus speaks to His disciples about hope and joy He uses the metaphor of childbirth. *John 16:21 When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.* Some people assume that we will not remember the pain, put Jesus' point is that the joy outweighs the pain in the sense that it makes the pain negligible.

When we look at the world today we may question what this could mean to us. Gandalf, a character in the Lord of the Rings says, *"In this dark world there will be great pain, but there will be great joy. In the end, joy will win, so if joy has not yet won, it is not yet the end."*

How do you keep hope and joy in the midst of overwhelming adversity in your life?

When are you most tempted to distrust Jesus?

DAY FIVE

Luke 2:18-19 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

In the Old Testament, joy is constantly associated with "the last days" and the fullness of God's salvation being revealed. Joy is related to the total national and religious life of Israel, and is particularly expressed in terms of noisy, tumultuous excitement at festivals and sacrifices. It was to be expressed in both corporate and individual worship.

In the Gospel accounts there is an emphasis on joy in connection with the proclamation of Jesus and His Kingdom in its varied forms:

- At the Savior's birth (Luke 2:10)
- At the triumphal entry (Mark 11:9.; Luke 19:37)
- After the resurrection (Matthew 28:8)

In John's gospel it is Jesus Himself who communicates this joy (John 15:11; 16:24), and it now becomes the result of a deep fellowship between the church and Jesus.

How do you bring joy into other's lives?

How have you seen Jesus communicate His joy to you?

DAY SIX

Luke 2:20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

When we get to the book of Acts, joy marks the life of the early church. It accompanies the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples (Acts 13:52), the miracles performed in the name of Jesus (8:8), and the fact and report of the conversion of the Gentiles (15:3).

The word for joy is *chara*; Paul uses it in three ways:

- When a believer progresses in the faith, particularly those he has led to Christ
- As the result of suffering and sorrow for Christ's sake (Colossians 1:24; 2 Corinthians 6:10; Hebrews 10:34)
- As a gift from God (being that it is a gift, it can also be interrupted by sin)

Every believer is called to share in the joy of Christ by a daily walk with Him and a daily practice of rejoicing in the knowledge of Him and His salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:16; Philippians 3:1; 4:4; 1 Peter 1:8).

Mother Theresa is quoted as saying, *"Joy is prayer; joy is strength: joy is love; joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls."* Joy is something dynamic and not static.

When is the last time you found joy in the midst of your suffering?

When have you seen your own sin interrupt God's joy in your life and the lives of others?

REDEMPTION

1. What is joy? Talk about the difference between being "joyful" and being "happy." Students: What can you do to make the season of Christmas joyful at home? At school? With your peers?
2. On a sheet of paper compile a list/draw pictures of God's promises. Cut each promise apart and put in a basket or jar. Place the jar in a prominent place in your home. Instruct your family that when a family member is facing something that is stealing joy, to go withdraw one of the slips of paper and read it. Students: How can you share some of the promises with your friends? Discuss with your family situations you encounter and ways that you can share God's promises in those situations.
3. Tell your children and students about times when you experienced the three different types of joy discussed in the devotional this week.

   KNOW: Read Luke 2:8-20.

   GROW: Pray that your family can know (and feel) how the love that Jesus has for you.

   SHOW: Bless someone this week as a family, as Jesus has first blessed you; let that blessing show them your joy as a family who follows Jesus.

DAY SEVEN

ACTION STEPS

- Pray that God would reveal the depth of His love for you and that God's love, in turn, would lead to great joy as you focus more on Him than yourself.
- Look for someone to whom you can bring joy this week.
- When you start to get inwardly focused this week, identify some needs in others and brainstorm ways to meet those needs.
- Smile at 10 people every day this week.

As you know, the reality of human existence is that even God's people suffer and endure hardship. If our joy is based in our circumstances, we will certainly live in disappointment. However, our joy is anchored in the fact that we are loved beyond belief; we are desired and enjoyed beyond what we can imagine by our God. Therefore, our joy should come from Jesus living in and through us, and through the knowledge of who we are and what we now have in Jesus.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope, Romans 15:13.

One of the most beloved Christmas carols, written in 1719 by Isaac Watts is called, "Joy to the World." The third verse should encourage us with the truth:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessing flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as the curse is found.

These are powerful lyrics that speak of a God who will not rest from His redemptive work until all of His creation is made new again.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come
Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room

Prepare room in your heart, get rid of the clutter of disappointment, sorrow, and regret. You are a new creation! Joy can be contagious; it can change the atmosphere in a room. Walk in joy as you spend time with coworkers, family, and friends this Christmas season.

This week of our Advent journey focuses on joy. Joy is often depicted in our culture as an overwhelming emotion, but it is something much greater for followers of Jesus. For the Christian, joy is a permanent state, the result of knowing a loving God that has rescued us. Advent is an especially great season of joy, because we take time to remember the very act of God being born into the world.

Take some time to explore what "joy" means to those in your GC. **You may want to ask them when they last remember feeling joy. Why does joy seem to be missing, or not as great, during other times?**

As a group, **read Psalm 16:11.** As we discussed last week, the reality of the incarnation means God is always with us. If joy is found in God's presence, then we always have reason to be joyful! This may seem easier said than done.... ask your GC: **what things cause us to forget the reason for lasting joy?** Oftentimes, we are simply distracted—by busyness, complacency, or sin. Talk about the things that distract you from joy, as well as how you can remind and encourage one another during such times.

Some in your group may be discouraged, thinking they always need to be in a good mood. Again, underscore that joy is not an emotion, but an awareness and understanding of who God is. You may want to share the Bible's depiction of joy during suffering and adversity (Romans 5:3, James 1:2). There may be

GOSPEL COMMUNITY WEEK 3 DISCUSSION

some in your GC that are currently going through a hard time; this is a perfect opportunity to remind them of the Gospel and speak encouragement into their lives!

Read Luke 2:20. Ask your GC why so many people were joyful at hearing of Jesus' birth. Discuss what the reality of Jesus' birth meant for those hearing the news. Surely, they weren't promised they would never face any more challenges or pain, and yet, they were praising God and giving thanks. Why?

As believers, we should be a people that express our joy often. **Ask your GC how they do this now—both individually and as a group. What are new ways your GC can "practice" joy? How can you share joy with those outside your GC, including those who don't follow Jesus?**

As a group, pray together. You may want to pray...

- In repentance, for any sin, negativity, or complacency that robs you of joy
- That God would increase your joy
- That God would comfort and encourage the hearts of those who are suffering
- That God would teach you to express your joy and share it with others

SERMON NOTES:

SERMON VERSES:

Isaiah 9:6
Luke 1:39-55
John 12:48
Psalm 130:4

Day One

Luke 1:39-42 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"

The fourth week of Advent is usually referred to as the week of Peace. Jesus, our Prince of Peace, has come to restore peace between mankind and God. Typically, during week four, the Magnificat is read; the Magnificat is Mary's praise to God upon meeting Elizabeth (who is pregnant with John the Baptizer).

Timothy Keller says Mary's song is the beginning of Christian understanding. Mary is the first one to hear the message of Christmas (specifically the Christian message about Jesus) and her response is conversion. Mary is the first person to ever hear the actual Christian message that Jesus, the Son of God, was going to descend to earth, be born a human being, take up the Kingdom of the Father, and make everything in this world right.

What is your understanding of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus?

What was your response when you first heard the Gospel?

Does your response reflect your belief?

Day Two

Luke 1:43-45 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

We sing a Christmas song every year that has these two very important lines:

- "Born to raise the sons of earth"
- "Born to give them second birth"

The most frightening thing about singing these Christmas carols every year is that Jesus says, if on the last day we don't believe these things (that we sing every year), the words we sing will rise up and judge us. How we respond to the Gospel is critical.

Christmas is meant to be the culmination of God's promises of the Old Testament Scriptures that He was coming to rescue His people. We, like many of those in Jesus' day, are confused about the promise of God, thinking He is coming so we can win and show others how wrong they were; the truth is, He came to show how wrong we *ALL* were (are) and to show us the glory of His grace.

What are your favorite Christmas songs? Why?

What words in those songs do you forget?

Day Three

Luke 1:46-48 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

Timothy Keller says there are four repsonses to the message of the Gospel and "God with us," we will look at these over the next four days.

Response One: Centrality.

For a Christian, the message of the Gospel is central to our lives—Jesus is central. People respond to Jesus in different ways, John Bunyan, who wrote the book *Pilgrims Progress* became depressed; while Mary (Jesus' mother) went to talk to her friend. What is happening when God starts to grab hold of your soul is an outside power (His name is Jesus) has interrupted your center and is working within you; that is why everything feels different.

Mary does not mention her soul and spirit as two different things; these words are used interchangeably as repetition. It means that she has been moved in the depths of her being. Your soul and spirit are things that do not change in the sense that they last forever. Mary's words remind us that Jesus is the one who made us at the beginning, and is the one who will re-make us again.

How central is Jesus to your life?

What does that look like on a daily basis?

Day Four

Luke 1:49-50 For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

Response Two: Wonder.

Mary, in her song, speaks of the wonder that God has saved her, that He has come for her, that He has noticed her state and done something about it. She is able to examine all of the history of salvation and suddenly realizes the Savior is growing within her womb. There is a note of joy and astonishment in her response. The Scriptures indicate that one of the marks of a Christian is always a note of surprise and wonder…"God came to save ME?"

We do not live in self-centered piousness that says, "Of course He saved me, I'm so wonderful." There are two understandings of Christianity: one is the thought that we find God, and the other thought is that God is the one finding us. If it's you finding God, there is no surprise or wonder in your life because you're to thank; He wasn't looking for you, you were looking for Him. But, if it's God finding you, there is overwhelming joy. Christianity is a relationship of revelation, God revealing Himself to us; Christianity is centered on grace.

Have you ever looked at your life and been amazed that you are where you are?

Have you ever said, "Wow, God actually cares for me?"

What can keep you from experiencing wonder at your salvation?

Day Five

Luke 1:51-53 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

Response Three: Fear.

We misunderstand the word fear because we are afraid of stupid things (the dark, Chihuahuas, spiders), but we are told throughout the Scriptures that God is the only one to be feared. Fear of God is both similar and different than our idea/definition of fear.

Psalm 130:4 But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. Those who have and understand God's mercy are the ones who fear Him rightly. One of the largest differences between a Christian and a religious person is the difference in how the fear of God works:

- A religious person has a fear of God's laws. They would say, *"I'm scared of being hurt by God so that is my motivation to obey."*
- A person who lives in loving relationship with God has an understanding of fear and wants to respect and honor God. They would say, "*I love God so much that I don't want to wound, and/or disappoint Him*."

Tim Keller, *"There are only two ways you can have any motivation to live a righteous life, an honest life, a pure life. One is out of a fear of being hurt, and one is out of a fear of hurting the God who loves you."*

How does the fear of God bring freedom to trust Him? (If you don't know, ask people until you get an answer).

In regard to how you see God working in your life, do you have a fear based out of law or a fear based out of love?

List some of your fears.

Day Six

Luke 1:54-55 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

Response Four: Truth.

Mary, in verse 49, calls God, "The Mighty One," but in verse 50 she calls Him, "The Merciful One." How can God be all-powerful, the righteous judge, demand goodness, and still be compassionate? The answer is who was growing inside Mary: Jesus. Jesus came to live the fulfillment of the law (The Old Testament Covenant) for us, to die the death we should have died, and give us new life and relationship with God again. All of it comes together in Jesus.

For Mary all of these truths flow out of an understanding of the Gospel. The gospel is that the great and righteous God has come, out of love, to pay the debt we owe for our sin against our Creator. In the same way, just as Mary realized the love and the righteousness of God were coming together inside of her, by trusting Jesus as Savior you can "find" the love and the holiness of God being formed in you.

How is Jesus both judge and justifier?

Do you tend to focus more on Jesus as the Mighty One or the Merciful One? Why?

REDEMPTION

1. Choose your favorite Christmas song and talk about what the words really mean.
2. Define "the Gospel" for your family. Have each person define the Gospel using his or her own words. Students: How articulate are you at sharing the Gospel? As a family, practice how you would share the Gospel with the people around you.
3. Grab a piece of paper and write JESUS in the center. Now draw or write activities that your family typically does daily or weekly. How can you connect those activities to Jesus? Students: How have you prioritized your activities and events in light of Jesus' place in our lives? Is Jesus (and time with Jesus) at the top of the list? Make a plan with your family on how you are going to reprioritize if needed.
4. Try this Gospel craft: *ourfamilyforhisglory.com/2013/06/how-to-share-the-gospel-with-our-kids*

KNOW: Read Luke1:39-55.

GROW: Pray that Jesus stays central to your life as a family.

SHOW: Practice with each other how you would share the Gospel with a non-believer.

DAY SEVEN

ACTION STEPS

- Pray this week that God would help you to understand Jesus as both Mighty and Merciful and also for the understanding of the meanings of Christmas and the Resurrection.
- Talk with your family and/or Gospel Community about specific instances in which a merciful view of Jesus would give you more grace toward others.
- Talk with your family and/or Gospel Community about how a view of Jesus as Mighty would cause you to make more godly decisions.

We encounter things on a daily basis that confuse and unsettle us, that may challenge our trust in God. If our sense of peace is secured only when life is going according to our plan and purpose, we will often find ourselves in distress, and scrambling to control everything and everyone. We will spend our lives trying to put things back together when they seem to be disintegrating.

There is so much we don't understand, and if we are honest, our world can be a broken place (because it is). We will never find real peace and rest if we try to figure it out and fix it by our own might; this is why Jesus is setting the world back in order. Jesus is redeeming you and me, restoring what has been marred and ruined through sin and rebellion. Our peace is found in trusting our heavenly Father, trusting in His wisdom and grace; He has it all figured out. He is in control and rules it all for His glory and our good!

The gospel of grace calls us to turn from ourselves while trusting and surrendering to God's sovereign and providential rule over all things. This is truth that we can offer to those anxious, discomforted, distressed, and diseased by this world and their circumstances.

We have peace because we are no longer at war with God; we no longer are under His wrath as sinners bent on our own way. We now experience life in His love, and we can trust in His power and control. We can rest and be at peace knowing our lives are not subject to the whims of chance.

Philippians 4:4-7, Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The 4th week of Advent typically centers on peace. Sunday morning we looked at the Magnificat, Mary's response to hearing the Gospel, as well as other possible responses to the Gospel message (centrality, wonder, fear, and truth). It's crazy to think that Mary was the first person to learn of God's specific plan! This discussion is a great opportunity to refresh your GC on the meaning of the Gospel.

Ask: What is the Gospel?

Spend some time discussing with your GC how they might have responded if they were in Mary's shoes. What was their initial response to actually hearing the Gospel? Is their attitude different today? If there has been a change in how they perceive the Gospel, discuss why (maturity, unbelief, etc.).

Of the four responses in the sermon/devotionals this week, which one do they resemble most?

It's important to understand why the birth of Jesus (and the entire Gospel message) brings peace...ask your GC why does the Gospel bring peace? If your group needs more direction or clarity, discuss some of the reasons why we can have peace. A few examples are:

- In Jesus, we are no longer enemies of God (Romans 5:10, Colossians 1:21-22).
- We can have peace knowing the world will be restored to its natural order through Christ's victory (John 16:33).

GOSPEL COMMUNITY WEEK 4 DISCUSSION

- God has empowered us to love others and bring peace (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

What are some other reasons we can have peace through Jesus' birth?

Ask those in your GC if the Gospel has brought them peace. How?

Ask your GC if there are any areas in their lives in need of peace. How could the Gospel be applied to those situations?

Because true peace is found in Jesus alone, we as believers have a unique opportunity to demonstrate peace to the world. **Ask your GC how they can do a better job of this.**

As a group, pray together. You may want to pray...

- In repentance, for any sin, negativity, or complacence that robs you of joy
- That God would increase your joy
- That God would comfort and encourage the hearts of those who are suffering
- That God would teach you to express your joy and share it with others

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.

Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart

Born thy people to deliver
Born a child and yet a King
Born to reign forever
Now thy gracious Kingdom bring

By thine own eternal spirit,
Rule in all our hearts alone.
By thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to thy glorious throne

COME THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS
Charles Wesley, 1707-1788

WEEK 5
JESUS!

SERMON VERSES:

Job 3:3-8
Genesis 1:1
Genesis 1:21
Isaiah 51:9
Psalm 74:13
Ephesians 5:14
Genesis 1:2-3
John 1:14
Matthew 1:21-23

SERMON NOTES:

Day One

Galatians 4:4-6 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

The word **Advent** has Latin roots that mean "the coming" or even more accurately "coming toward," and that God has come toward a lost and broken people in desperate need. Advent is celebrated like the moment before the moment of God's coming (the moment all creation was waiting for). Today we live on the other side of the "moment," but we celebrate the anticipation of the moment at Advent.

At Christmas we celebrate the "moment" of God's coming to seek and save in the person of Jesus with great joy and fervor.

What are your plans for Christmas Day?

How can you make the remembrance of Jesus part of your celebration?

How do you plan to celebrate with great joy?

Day Two

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

Our great calling is to glorify God by making our world, our church, and our hearts a sacred place where God lives. But there is this problem: there is pain, death, suffering, and violence. This chaos is not because of some superstitious force "out there"; the chaos resides within the human heart.

After all that God created, after all He revealed Himself to be, mankind still rebelled. We decided we knew what would be right for us, and broke relationship with God and others. Now we all face the chaos of regret, abuse, betrayal, loneliness, divorce, guilt... but the amazing thing is the King came once again in a manger. *John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among...*

What does it mean that God is with us?

Do you live your life as if God is with you every day?

Day Three

John 1:4-5 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The issue is not just that Jesus *claimed* to be God, the issue is His followers *believed* it. This is one of the most important proofs that Jesus really was who He said He was. The Jews weren't pantheists or polytheists; they believed in the God of the Bible, one God, from creation (God with us from Genesis). The God of the Bible was an uncreated Creator without beginning, infinitely transcending the universe, infinitely greater than the universe, to whom the universe is just a speck of dust...the *last* people who would ever believe any human being who could be God was a Jew. Yet, that is what they did...

This great God, with all of His majesty, infinitely greater than the universe, has put Himself into a form of "with-ness." He has come alongside. He has entered into an intimate personal relationship with us. He is God with us.

How do you reconcile the God of the Old Testament and Jesus?

Do you view Jesus as "transcending the universe?"

Day Four

John 1:9-10 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

Up until the time Jesus was born, to enter into the presence of God was terrifying. He was seen as a smoking furnace, a pillar of fire, a tornado. When Moses asked to see the face of God, we are told Moses only saw God's hind parts (the place where God just was). Even in that, Moses' face was so bright, that when he came down the mountain, he had to put a veil over his face until the glory went away. The people of God could not look at the face of Moses because it was too radiant, and he had only witnessed the "hind parts," or the heels of God.

Can you imagine if Moses were here and he heard the message of Christmas? John 1:14 "And the Word was made flesh, and [tabernacled] among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) ..." "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." Or if he heard the message of Christmas in *2 Corinthians 3-4, "Moses had to put a veil over his face, but Christ has removed the veil because '... God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'"*

What do you think Moses would have said had he gotten to see the birth of Jesus?

What would he have said about the death and resurrection of Jesus?

A little child,
a shining star.
A stable rude,
the door ajar.

Yet in that place,
so crude, forlorn,
the Hope of all
The world was born.

Day Five

John 1:11-13 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

From the very first poem in the book of Genesis the Scriptures set the scene for the arrival of Jesus. We are told over and over again metaphorically, and in plain language, that God is the wisest, most omniscient, and most powerful being; therefore, you do not have to be afraid. The most common command in the Bible is *"Do not be afraid."* It happens 366 times (that's one for every day of the year including a leap year)!

"Don't be afraid because…I am with you." That is God with us!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, *"For Christians the beginning of the day should not be burdened and oppressed with besetting concerns for the day's work. At the threshold of [each] new day stands the Lord who made it. All the darkness and distraction of the dreams of night retreat before the clear light of Jesus Christ and his wakening Word. All unrest, all impurity, all care and anxiety flee before him. Therefore, at the beginning of the day, let all distraction and empty talk be silenced and let the first thought and the first word belong to him to whom our whole life belongs."*

When you woke up today what was your first thought?

What could you change to make your first thought more centered on Jesus?

Day Six

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Timothy Keller says the following in regard to God With Us….

- **If He's God with us, we have to take off the limitations we have made for Him in our lives.**

If He's God, if He's the One who invented the universe, our lives are no match for Him.

- **Christmas is about the nearness of Jesus.**

The meaning of Christmas is that He came from heaven to earth to redeem and BE with us.

- **If we believe Jesus is God with us, then any lukewarm response to Him is not rational.**

John Stott: *"Anybody who ever met Jesus Christ only ever had three responses to him. They either were terrified and wanted to run away, or they hated him and wanted to kill him and stone him to death, or they worshiped him and got down on their knees and gave him everything."* Because of who He claimed to be, Jesus will not allow us a lukewarm response. He's God with us.

What would it cost you to begin to give up your comfort and live in/on mission with and for Him?
How has your response to the message of Christmas been lukewarm in the past?
How can you, your family, and/or your Gospel Community live with the truth of "God With Us" on your hearts?

REDEMPTION

1. What are your plans on Christmas Day? Brainstorm as a family about how you can make Jesus a part of that.
2. What does it mean to say, "God is with us"?
   Students: Do you live your everyday life at school and with friends knowing that God is with you?
3. How would you change your life as a family if you actually lived like God is "with" you? What would that look like?

KNOW: Read John 1:1-14.

GROW: Pray before you open gifts this year, thanking God for the gift of His son Jesus.

SHOW: Give a gift to someone who either doesn't deserve it, or wouldn't expect it from you. Talk about how we were given the gift of Jesus when we don't deserve it.

DAY SEVEN

ACTION STEPS

- Pray for each other, that God would remove the luke-warmness of personal comfort and replace it with a heart's desire for God's mission.
- When you give or receive gifts, take a moment to remember the gift God gave to you in Jesus.
- Look for someone you can specifically live in/on mission toward during this coming year. Who needs to hear the message that Jesus is God With Us and what that means for them? How can you be intentional this coming year, walking alongside them and showing them the Kingdom of God?
- Carve out some time to thank God in a tangible way for Christmas.

In Matthew 16, when Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Through Jesus, God our Father, and the Holy Spirit, we have been delivered from the dominion of darkness and transferred to the Kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col 1:13). We have been adopted as sons through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:5). We are now called children of God (1 John 3:1-2);

We are new creations; the old has passed away and the new has come (2 Cor 5:17). We have been radically changed, with a new identity! God has completely removed our sin and canceled our debt; as if that wasn't enough, He has invited us to come and live with Him, bestowing on us full rights as His children!

All too often, we live and act as if God's grace were not true; we forget or don't gratefully receive what has been accomplished for us through Jesus... Believing and living in our new identity requires walking in some tension, like that of God's rule and presence now but not fully yet. We must not forget that we are sinners of the worst kind, but also saved by the amazing mercy and grace of our God expressed in Jesus.

When we forget who we are, we give way to fear and doubt. When we live in the reality of empowerment by the Holy Spirit, we have boldness and hope. When we live in the hope of redemption, we live in wisdom and knowledge from above, with skills and gifts that we were created for. We understand we are forever loved and accepted, valued beyond worth, and given His righteousness.

This is the gift of Christmas; this is what we've received and yet still anxiously await in the consummation of all things. Today, as we trust Jesus, we can unwrap the gift. We can experience the hope, love, joy, peace, in the incarnate presence of Jesus now, and we can portray that to the rest of the world. We get to display hope to those in desperate need of rescue; we can show where true help comes from and what Jesus has made available to us. We get to offer **hope** and **love** in our expression of **joy** as we invite others into the **peace** of God. We have the great honor of sharing Jesus with those in our community, turning community into gospel community.

When you do not "feel" the faith of your new identity, look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). Our lives are all about Him.

This week wraps up our Advent journey, so it is a great opportunity to reflect on the past few weeks as a GC. People often have mixed reactions about the end of the holiday season and the approaching New Year, so it's a good idea to check in with one another.

To start your discussion, you may want to **ask your GC how Christmas was for them.** Was it good/bad? Chaotic/peaceful? Did it feel Christ-centered? **Follow up and ask everyone how they feel now that Christmas is over.** Some might be sad, while others may be relieved and excited about the new year.

Our hope is that this journey led your GC to appreciate and celebrate Christmas in a much deeper way. **Ask your group: Has your understanding of Christmas changed in any way? If so, how?**

As we often discussed throughout this season, the reality of Christ's coming means He is always with us. Remind your group that moving forward, this truth never changes. We still have reason to experience hope, love, joy, and peace during any time of the year because God is with us. Because it's easy to forget this truth during other seasons, **ask your GC how they can be more aware of God's presence in all aspects of life. What have they learned from this Advent journey that they can apply during other seasons?** Be sure to celebrate the things you have learned as a group and the ways you have grown deeper together.

GOSPEL COMMUNITY WEEK 5 DISCUSSION

While not everyone makes New Year's resolutions, the end of a year can be a good time to stand back and assess where we are and what future goals we have. **Ask your GC: What are your hopes for your relationship with God this coming year? How can our group encourage you in your growth?**

As a people called to God's mission, we are called to share the Christmas message (the Gospel) with the world. **Ask those in your GC if they encountered anyone over the Advent season they felt led to pursue. How do they plan to do that? How can your Gospel Community come alongside them to help?**

As a group, pray together. You may want to pray...

- In thanks for the journey you have been able to take together
- In thanks for any growth in your understanding of who He is
- That God would keep these truths fresh in your heart throughout the year
- That you would be a people known by your hope, love, joy, and peace
- That you would continue to reach out to those around you and share the Gospel

WHAT'S YOUR elf name?

The first letter of your name:

A–Adventurous
B–Bouncy
C–Cuddly
D–Dainty
E–Energetic
F–Fearless
G–Graceful
H–Humble
I–Innocent
J–Jumpy
K–Kindhearted
L–Lively
M–Mighty
N–Nimble
O–Outgoing
P–Playful
Q–Quick
R–Rosy
S–Sweet
T–Thoughtful
U–Unique
V–Very Nice
W–Wiggly
X–Xtra Special
Y–Youthful
Z–Zesty

The month you were born:

Jan.–Sugar Plum
Feb.–Jingle Bells
March–Giggle Pants
April–Candy Cane
May–Sparkle Pants
June–Merry Dancer
July–Twinkle Toes
Aug.–Happy Feet
Sept.–Peppermint Patty
Oct.–Gingerbread Breath
Nov.–Silly Giggles
Dec.–Jolly Jingles

PEPPERMINT BARK

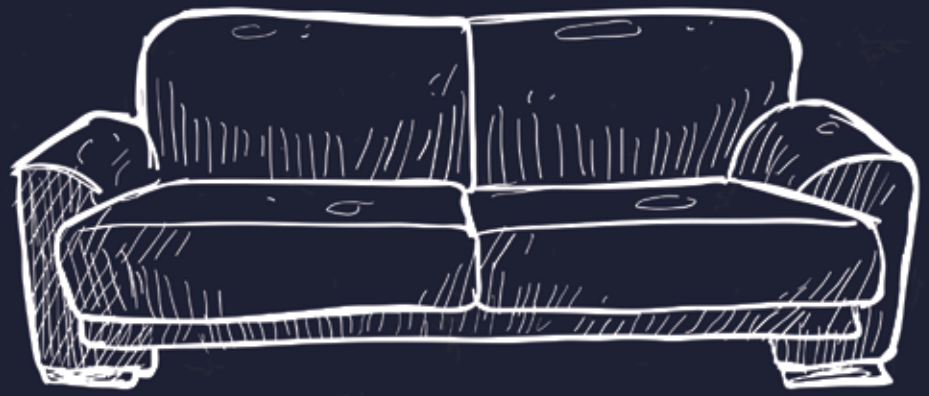
This recipe is very easy, making it doable for the most intimidated or inexperienced baker. It's also great for kids that want to help. This recipe yields about 2 pounds of candy—enough to enjoy, and enough to bless someone with!

INGREDIENTS

- Crushed candy canes, to yield 1 cup
- 2 pounds white chocolate *(you can also use another kind of chocolate or mix different kinds!)*
- Peppermint flavorings, optional

DIRECTIONS

1. Place candy canes in a plastic bag and hammer into 1/4-inch chunks or smaller.
2. Melt the chocolate *(microwave, stovetop, etc.)*
3. Combine candy cane chunks with chocolate *(add peppermint flavoring at this point if desired.)*
4. Pour mixture onto a cookie sheet layered with parchment or waxed paper and place in the refrigerator for 45 minutes or until firm.
5. Remove from cookie sheet and break into pieces.



DEFINING HOSPITALITY

What do you think of when you hear the word: "hospitality?"

Is it inviting your friends over for meals? Fun and games with strangers? Awkward potlucks with people you don't know? Our culture has a whole industry built around hospitality that includes hotels, restaurants, and even cruise ships—all trying to create atmospheres that welcome anyone (with money to afford them).

Churches often have hospitality teams with greeters, snack people, and coffee people making Sunday mornings feel welcoming. We view hospitality as something we do when we have extra time and energy; it's not something we typically see as a calling by God or even as part of our mission. In truth, hospitality is part of our spiritual obligation.

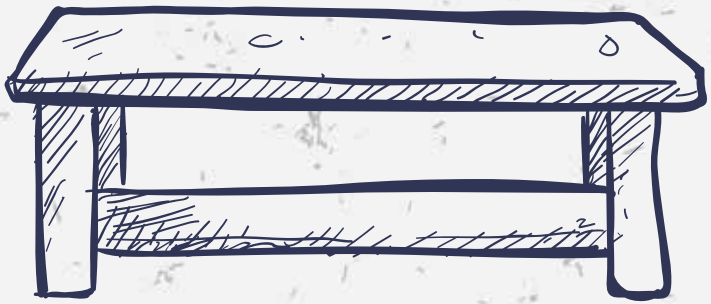
In the book Missional Essentials, Brad Brisco and Lance Ford point out that the Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia*, "which is a combination of two words: love (*phileo*), and the word for stranger (*xenos*). It literally means 'love of stranger.'" This doesn't mean that we

can't have meals and fun with friends, but living out biblical hospitality means we are also reaching out to the neglected and those who cannot give anything back.

Hospitality is about inviting others into our lives and our network of friends. As we do so, we also enter their lives. When we welcome people, we invite them in as part of God's created humanity. Hospitality brings about inclusion of people into our network of friendships. Missional Essentials says, "Biblical hospitality, when rightly understood and pursued, has the power to break the bonds of exclusion and isolation."

By showing us in the Scriptures what hospitality entails (Mt 25:35), God places a higher calling on our lives than mere consumption and productivity; he calls us to include others as He has included us. John Stott, when discussing hospitality in *Romans 12:13, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality,"* says the phrase, "seek to show" should be translated as "pursue." It is not something we simply practice; it is something we are meant to chase. This means that we, as God's people, are obligated to show hospitality.

Hospitality is risky at times, but being blessed first by God means we are willing to endure that risk for the sake of the Gospel. There are blessings and difficulties that will only be found as we pursue hospitality as God intended. This is how we are to love our neighbor.



PRACTICAL WAYS TO LIVE HOSPITALITY:

Invite others into your home – meals, BBQs, movie/game nights, etc.

Set aside an appointed day a week (or month) when you will purposefully invite someone out to lunch or over for a meal.

Make a list of people who could be encouraged by you reaching out them, and then reach out to them.

Look for single parents, new parents, or someone recovering from surgery and offer to give some assistance.

Create a safe place for kids in your neighborhood to hang out and play with your kids.

Offer to host a GC in your home.

EPIPHANY

Rejoice in the Lord always
Shout out his name
For God is with us
Our God is with us
The God of our salvation
In whom alone we trust.
Rejoice in the Lord always
Shout out his name
For God is our Father
He draws us home
By streams of living water
Where we shall thirst no more.
Rejoice in the Lord always
Shout out his name
He knows our thoughts
Understands our hearts
And enables us to become
The people we were meant to be. Amen
(Author unknown)

SUNDAY DECEMBER 27th

You may be thinking, after going through all of Advent, "What now?" Typically in the church calendar Advent is followed by a season known as Epiphany. Epiphany developed because the Eastern Church wanted a feast to commemorate the time the three kings visited the home of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and recognized Jesus for who He was and is: the promised King (Messiah).

Now that we have been through Advent, it is time for us to live in a way that we recognize Jesus in our lives as the living, eternal, King of the whole universe. We will do this over the next three weeks as we have messages from the pulpit that reflect the three most widely accepted parts of Epiphany:

- **The three wise men** visiting the home of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus when He was an infant. This message will focus upon the gifts the wise-men (traditionally named Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar) laid before Jesus. Gold (which reflected not just the worth of Christ, but also very needed funds as the family had to flee to Egypt for a time to survive), Frankincense (a fragrant incense that resembles the fragrant aroma of our prayers that rise before God), and Myrrh (which was also used as an embalming fluid foreshadowing Christ's death). *You can read Matthew 2:1-23 with your family/friends and discuss it.*
- **Jesus as a twelve-year-old boy** at the temple. This is when Jesus showed who He was by the questions and answers He gave at the temple; it was here He continued to reveal that God was His father in heaven. This section also clearly reminds us of the truth of the incarnation, that Jesus didn't have the veneer of a man, He truly became a man to save us. *You can read Luke 2:41-52 with your family/friends and discuss it.*
- **Jesus' first public miracle** of turning water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. At this wedding feast Jesus reveals Himself as the one who brings true wine, that He can change our hearts, and that He stands over and above every authority people have in their lives. Jesus came to glorify God and bring His people much joy. He shows us that when we glorify God we find much joy in Him. *You can read John 2:1-12 with your family/friends and discuss it.*

We would encourage you to take a physical copy of the sermon notes and continue discussion with your family/friends you have (hopefully) been having over during Advent. We pray that you have been strengthened in your faith and commitment to Jesus during the last five weeks, and that your growth continues for the rest of your life into eternity.

Aaron

The advent of our God
with eager prayers we greet,
and singing haste upon his road
his glorious gift to meet.

The everlasting Son scorns
not a Virgin's womb;
that we from bondage may be won
he bears a bondsman's doom.

Daughter of Zion,
rise to meet thy lowly King,
let not thy stubborn heart despise
the peace he deigns to bring.

In clouds of awful light,
as judge he comes again,
his scattered people to unite
with them in heaven to reign.

Let evil flee away
ere that dread hour shall dawn,
let this old Adam day by day
God's image still put on.

Praise to the Incarnate Son,
who comes to set us free,
with God the Father, ever One,
to all eternity.

Charles Coffin 1736

Christmas for Kids

INVEST IN A CHILD

We want to reach out to children in our relational networks of friends and neighbors who may not have a Christmas without our support. This isn't just about purchasing gifts, but about offering relationship, building trust, and demonstrating Jesus' love to hurting families or those who may not know Him.

Please consider what children in your life need your time, prayers, service and love. Pray about who you can partner with to effectively care for them over the next year.

We understand that as a whole we are all very busy, but if every person can do acts of kindness for their designated child throughout 2016, we can make a difference in his/her life.

LEARN MORE AT:
ourelement.org/cfk