



God with Us

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

We want you to use this Advent devotional in a way that points your heart toward Christ in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Each week has a Scripture passage, a short devotional, and question for reflection.

Since there are only four reflection questions each week, consider using Sunday to reflect on the morning's sermon, Monday for Scripture reading, Tuesday for the devotion, and Wednesday through Saturday for the reflection questions. Here are some suggestions for how to get the most out of the guide.

SCRIPTURE. On Sunday or Monday, read the Scripture passage for the week. Pray over it and meditate (think about) on the Scripture with your family, friends, or individually.

DEVOTIONAL. On Monday or Tuesday, read the devotional. Rejoice in the truth you read in Scripture and let the devotional encourage you to keep thinking about what God has revealed.

REFLECTION. Each day, Wednesday through Saturday, choose a question to talk about around the dinner table or at a coffee shop with a friend, or meditate on the question individually.



WEEK ONE

THE NAME

Matthew 1:18-23

DEVOTIONAL

by Paul Nystedt, Pastoral Resident for Community

Every one of us experiences a fallen world, corrupted by sin. Suffering and brokenness affect us, and we experience pain as a result. The people of Jesus' day experienced this brokenness too, as they awaited the promised Messiah. They looked forward to the day their King would come, and had lots of questions about what it would look like. Would He come with a thunderous army of horses? Would He conquer pagan Rome? Many hoped so, but that's not how He came.

Instead, God sent the Messiah to fight an enemy bigger than pagan Rome: Satan, evil, and humanity's sinfulness. God sent His Son in the likeness of human flesh to conquer sin, and bring freedom for those who would believe in Him (Romans 8:3-4). Rather than coming with force, God chose to appear in the humblest form imaginable—a baby. Though the world sees this as foolishness, it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Imagine how Joseph must have felt. It's no shock that he planned to divorce Mary quietly, because something like this had never happened before, and would never happen again!

However, as he doubts Mary's faithfulness, an angel appears and tells him that the child she carries didn't come from another man, but from God. Imagine the wonder—the sheer awe Joseph must have experienced! The angel explained that God put His own Son, the incarnate Word, in Mary's womb, and that this Son would be called Jesus, which means savior.

Matthew links the truth of Jesus as savior (v. 21) with the prophetic words of Isaiah in verses 22-23. Notice the clear connections. In Isaiah, the woman "bears a son," and is commanded to call him by a specific name. The name defines who the child would be—Jesus, Immanuel. When translated, Jesus and Immanuel means "Savior, God With Us." This Name gives us hope and joy, because God is with us, and He is our salvation. Amazing! Can you imagine the wonder Joseph must have felt? Do you feel that wonder?

If we look back at Isaiah 9, we see the Christ-child referred to by four distinct titles: **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace**. These names remind us that:

- ▶ The world does not, has not, and never will have a more **wonderful counselor** than Jesus.
- ▶ The world does not, has not, and never will have a **mightier God** than Jesus.
- ▶ The world does not, has not, and never will have a more reliable or trustworthy **Father** than the One Jesus reveals to us. Jesus says, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.”
- ▶ The world does not, has not, and never will have another **ruler** who brings true peace like Jesus does, and will when He returns.

The only hope for us in this broken world is Jesus—the God who is with us and is our Savior. He comforts us in times of trouble, cares for us like no one else can, accomplishes things that seem impossible, and offers true peace regardless of our circumstances. Have you trusted in the only One who can give you hope, joy, and lasting peace? Will you trust the One who is restoring all things?

REFLECTION

1. As Advent begins, reflect on how Jesus has saved you. How does this change the way you interact with others? Why is it good news that Jesus is the savior?
2. Think about ways that Jesus has been, and is, a Wonderful Counselor to you. Why is He called Wonderful Counselor? How does this change the way you deal with struggles?
3. When have you seen Jesus’ might on display? How has it encouraged you? What is encouraging about the fact that Jesus is not only Mighty God, but also one with the Everlasting Father? (Matthew 7:7-11; John 14:9)
4. Our hope is found in Christ alone, and He offers us true peace. What is the significance of Jesus being the Prince of Peace? If Jesus’ kingdom is one of peace, how should we live as citizens of His kingdom? What do we have to look forward to?



WEEK TWO

THE WONDER

Luke 2:1-18

DEVOTIONAL

by Paul Nystedt, Pastoral Resident for Community

Mary didn't give birth to Jesus in a 5-star hotel. Instead, she gave birth in a dusty barn in an over-crowded Bethlehem. It wasn't just that the "nice" places were booked...everything was booked. Sleeping with animals and being born in a barn must be one of the humblest ways to enter the world, right? This entrance pointed to the type of life and death Jesus would have—one of service, humility, and self-sacrifice. The town of Bethlehem didn't host a festival or parade to welcome Jesus, but wonder was both revealed and experienced by some local shepherds.

THE WONDER REVEALED

With Jesus' birth, God revealed the mystery that had been hidden for ages and generations (Colossians 1:26). The hosts of heaven couldn't contain their joy over God's marvelous plan when Jesus was born, and an angel appeared to shepherds watching their flocks. The glory of the Lord shone around them, and their appearance set the stage for an announcement of great importance and heavenly magnitude.

FEAR. An angel appeared and God's glory shone around the shepherds, and they were afraid. Wouldn't you have been afraid, too?! The Lord of the universe sent His messengers to the shepherds. The message they brought would no doubt define the rest of these shepherds' lives, and can change our lives, too!

JOY. The angel spoke and comforted them saying, "Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy." Relief and confusion must have followed. What could the news be, and why should they take joy? The angel continued, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord."

The Messiah had come! The good news was a Savior! God had planned for an Offspring who would crush the head of the serpent from the beginning (Genesis 3:15), and promised a Righteous Branch who would bring justice, peace, and salvation to those who would believe in Him (Isaiah 11:1; Isaiah 53; Jeremiah 23:5; Jeremiah 33:15).

How would the shepherds know the Savior? The angel went on, "And this will be a sign for you, you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

ALL PEOPLE. The good news wasn't just for the shepherds. The angel said it was, "for all the people." Not just some, but for every person in the world. The Word of God came and took on flesh! Jesus, God with us, our Savior, would crush the head of the serpent, and would destroy the curse that destined all people for hell. People of every tribe and nation who believe in Christ could now be reconciled to God and to each other. At this point, a multitude of angels joined in the announcement and rejoiced over the wondrous truth God was making known.

THE WONDER EXPERIENCED

Maybe it wasn't angels appearing in the sky, but all of us have experienced moments of wonder. Can you remember one of those moments? Maybe you were close to a celebrity, a politician, or just had a baby. Truly experiencing the wonder of a moment typically isn't complete until you've both seen and shared the wonder with others.

TO SEE. Luke tells us that once the angels went away, the shepherds "went with haste" to see this glorious reality. Wondrous moments draw us in. We are compelled to seek these moments and truths.

TO SHARE. When the shepherds experienced this reality for themselves, they naturally wanted to share it with others. "They made known to them the saying that had been told them ... all who heard it wondered."

What wonder the announcement of Jesus' birth created!

REFLECTION

1. The moment the shepherds received the Good News, their lives were changed. In the same way, God has given us His word, and we can experience change in our lives. Have you experienced this change? How has the wondrous news of Jesus changed your life? How will it continue to define your life?
2. The joyful news of redemption is for all people, and those who accept it experience peace and joy that surpasses all understanding. How have you experienced this joy and peace? How can you encourage others to live in the joy that God gives?
3. When the wondrous truth of Jesus confronts us, it's only natural to want to see more of it. What can you do to see and savor more of Jesus?
4. Like the shepherds did, it's natural to share your joy with others. Who can you share the Good News with? What does it look like to share it with believers? With unbelievers?



WEEK THREE THE THREAT

Matthew 2:1-21

DEVOTIONAL

by Joel Israel, Pastoral Resident for College Park Fishers

We typically think of the birth of Christ as a joyous occasion, and rightfully so if we have been saved by God's sovereign grace. After all, John 3:16 tells us that through the coming of Christ, God has offered the gift of eternal life to the world! However, Matthew 2:1-21 shows Christ's birth to be more complex than you might think. Matthew tells us about three different responses to Jesus' birth: 1) the wise men, 2) Mary and Joseph, and 3) King Herod.

WISE MEN. In the first verses of the passage we see the wise men's excitement and worship. As verse 2 explains, these men understood, and even announced, the significance of Christ's birth. You can almost feel their anticipation as they approach King Herod in search of their true king. Again, in verse 11, they display their admiration for Christ by falling down to worship Him and giving Him gifts of great value. These men knew that Christ was no mere child. He was the true King, and the wise men's devotion to Him was sincere.

MARY AND JOSEPH. What about Mary and Joseph? Their reaction is often overlooked, but they respond with great caution. Matthew 2:22 states that Joseph actually feared returning to Judea while Herod Archelaus was king. The caution and fear that Mary and Joseph had wasn't due to a lack of trust in God, (throughout this story, Mary and Joseph faithfully trust in and obey God's commands (1:24; 2:13-15, 19-21)), but as Jesus' earthly parents, they understood the significance of His birth, and they felt the weight of being His protectors. Jesus was not a normal child! He was the Son of God, given to mankind to bring salvation.

KING HEROD. Maybe the most shocking and drastic response comes from King Herod (The Great), who responds with hate and aggression when he hears about Christ's birth. In an instant, the king's royal ego is crushed, and Matthew 2:2 tell us that he is "troubled" by the thought of Jesus' existence. Herod's response stands in sharp contrast to the wise men and Mary and Joseph. Why? Because Herod saw Jesus as a hindrance, not as a hope. This important reality is directly related to the gospel. Jesus' coming brings joy to the humble, but judgment to the proud.

King Herod's failure wasn't ignorance of Jesus' kingship, but rather the extent of His kingship. Herod felt threatened by Jesus and went so far as to brutally kill children in his kingdom to "protect his throne" from this newfound king of the Jews. Herod's failure was in refusing to repent and humble himself in response to who Jesus was.

The Christmas season, unlike any other time of the year, has a way of bringing people who have an objective knowledge of who Jesus is out of the woodwork. But, simply knowing about Jesus isn't enough. James 2:19 says that even demons have a basic understanding of who God is. Instead of asking yourself and others, "Who is Jesus?" this Christmas, ask, "Who is Jesus to you?" Will Christ be your joy, or will He be your judgment?

REFLECTION

1. Mary and Joseph felt a great burden when caring for and protecting Jesus. Should Christians who carry the gospel today feel a similar burden? Why or why not? What would that look like?
2. Why do you think Herod's response to Jesus' birth was so different than the response from the wise men and Mary and Joseph?
3. Like Herod, how do you sometimes fight against Christ's authority when His commands challenge your sinful desires?
4. What sin in your life is currently bringing Christ's judgment? How can you overcome this sin by finding joy in Christ? What would victory in this area look like?



WEEK FOUR
THE PROMISE *(Christmas Eve)*
John 1:9-14

DEVOTIONAL

by Paul Nystedt, Pastoral Resident for Community

“Good news!” We’ve all thought it, or yelled it to a friend, spouse, or parent at one time or another. Whatever follows is usually a response to something hoped for or needed, or something totally unbelievable. What’s the best news you’ve ever heard? While we hopefully all hear good things often, the best news we’ll ever hear is found in John 1:9-14, specifically in verse 14. Unlike Star Wars or some eastern religions, God is not a distant god or force with whom we must hope or strive to connect with. He became flesh and lived among us as a man. That is the best news!

THE PROBLEM (John 1:9-11).

We’ve sinned against God, and our darkness has both blinded us, and separated us from the living God for eternity. We do not know Him, and mankind is so blind and dead that when Jesus came to His own people, they did not receive Him.

THE GOOD NEWS (John 1:12).

Though we were lost in darkness, “God...even when we were dead in our sins, made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:4-5). God sent His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and offers Him to everyone. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). His Light shines into the darkness of our hearts, and raises us from the dead.

FORGIVENESS (John 1:12-14).

Why? God’s gracious nature and integrity (truthfulness) are directly related to His forgiveness. Grace and mercy are different sides of the same coin. When we experience one, we are often, if not always, experiencing the other. God forgives because He is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Exodus 34:6). He doesn’t want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9), but He cannot ignore sin and still remain just (Romans 3:25), and true to His own character.

How? God gives us the right to become children of God through Jesus, and the ability to receive Him. But, how?

Not through human lineage (v.13b). You do not receive God through your bloodline. In fact, your bloodline is sinful, and the only thing you can inherit by nature is death.

Not through your works (v.13c). Your works cannot pay for your sin against God. Only One can reconcile man to God, and that's Jesus Christ. His substitutionary, atoning sacrifice bridges the gap between man and God.

Not by your intelligence, or a convincing speech (v.13d). You may ask, "What about my own will?" No, not even your own will can save you. Just like a dead person cannot make a decision, neither can you unless God draws you (John 6:44), makes you alive (Ephesians 2:5), calls you by name (John 10:3), and gives you the right (John 1:12).

IDENTITY (JOHN 1:12-14)

If someone is an addict he or she may identify themselves for life by saying, "My name is _____, and I'm an alcoholic." However, if we are in Christ, our past does not define us. Instead, we are new creations, prepared beforehand for good works (Ephesians 2:10). Not only are we new creations, but we're also told not to regard other believers "according to the flesh," but as new creations (2 Corinthians 5:16).

John tells us that if we receive Jesus, we become God's children. We have a new family and a new identity. Regardless of sin, or our past, when we receive Him, Christ defines us. If you believe in Jesus' saving work in your life, you can confidently insert your name into this statement forever:

My name is _____, and I am a new creation—a child of God.

REFLECTION

1. This Christmas Eve, meditate on the glorious reality that Christ humbled Himself and took the form of a man, so that we can be saved and brought from darkness into light. Praise God for His mercy and grace, and for the miracle of redemption.
2. Pray for family and friends who are lost in darkness. Ask God to bring them out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).
3. How can you incorporate more of God's grace and truth into your life in the upcoming year? How will doing so will shape your actions?
4. Discuss with a friend or family member what it means to be a child of God. How does this reality shape your identity? What does being called a "child of God" tell you about your relationship to Him? How can this encourage you in your identity?



WEEK FIVE
THE HOPE *(Christmas Day)*
Luke 2:22-38

DEVOTIONAL

by Joe Bartemus, Pastor of Theological Development

2017 is almost over (or may already be, by the time you read this). Doesn't it seem like the years just fly by? We've come to the last week of our series on "God With Us" and the last days of this year. The passage for this week is one of the most exciting and promising scenes in the early life of Jesus, but it's not one we often see in our Christmas plays and stories.

The main character in this story is Jesus, "God with us," who is probably only eight days old, and the two supporting characters are both really old. Do you trust old people? Maybe they're a bit too fragile, or maybe they're losing their mind. Either way, certainly not able to keep up with the kids. Though our culture sometimes calls those in their late 80's, "way over the hill," I'm sure that the nation of Israel didn't think about age like we do. The Israelites respected old age and cherished the wisdom and views of those with gray heads and years of life.

In this text, we see devout young Jews (Mary and Joseph) coming to the temple to present their son in obedience to the law. Though this birth was a "one of a kind" since Jesus was conceived miraculously (and it's safe to say that most people wouldn't have believed in miraculous conceptions... and neither do I, except for this one occasion), bringing their son to the temple is not unusual.

But, this ordinary event is made special because of the testimony of the two older people in the story. From our modern perspective, these two seem to "take up space" in the temple, and probably weren't real "productive" in their old age. In contrast to our priorities, Luke gives their witness high priority.

SIMEON. Simeon was a man of God who had been promised that he would see the Messiah before he died. Somehow, God revealed to Him that the baby Jesus was the promised Savior and hope for all peoples. He saw the reality of "God with us" in this baby, and knew that Jesus would unite all of God's peoples, both Gentiles and Jews. What a message for all time—"God with us" unites everyone in redemption.

ANNA. Anna had a hard life as a widow but had dedicated her life to the Lord and was in the temple all the time. I'm sure she was glad she didn't take this day off! She saw Jesus and gave thanks and told others of this glorious arrival. That event made her day—actually, it was the greatest day of her life.

These unsung characters give fullness to the Christmas story because they saw and rejoiced over the reality Jesus brought into the world by His birth—true hope for all mankind. As 2017 ends and you anticipate 2018, keep the story of Simeon and Anna in mind.

REFLECTION

1. Do you live this day (today) for that day (when Jesus arrives)? Simeon lived for the day when his Lord would come, and he knew the beauty of waiting. How can you better wait for the Lord? How should that affect how you live in 2018?
2. What does it look like to believe that Jesus came to provide salvation for all the peoples (v. 31)? How should you act toward people that are different than you both at home and abroad?
3. Anna was not young, but she was active. What can we take away from Anna's life to incorporate into our own in the new year?
4. Anna was not silent. She gave thanks and spoke of Jesus to everyone. Who can you tell about the reality of "God with us"?



college park church
yourchurch.com